

Michele Scott

Saddled With Trouble
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MICHAELA BANCROFT DIDN'T HEAR HER SWORN enemy walking up behind her until it was too late.

"Working overtime?" Kirsten Redmond said.

Michaela whipped around in her desk chair, where she'd been sitting for thirty minutes going over finances. She immediately stood up. "What do you want, Kirsten?"

"I know you received some very important papers early this afternoon from our attorney, and I'd like them signed, sealed, and delivered as soon as possible, so that Brad and I can get on with our lives."

Michaela brushed a patch of dirt off her Wrangler Jeans. She'd been working with the horses and out in the barn all day and knew that her appearance wasn't remotely close to Miss Glamour Puss's here. The thought caused a flutter of discomfort. "You amaze me. What, do you have your little hair-sprayed, fake-bake, plastic Barbie doll-looking friends spying on me? Because it truly is a wonder how you know every little detail of my life. Or maybe you're screwing the mailman, too. Does his wife know? What, did he give you a call as soon as he delivered the papers?" She hated sounding so bitchy. God, why couldn't she just turn her back and ignore Kirsten?

"You're such a bitch."

That was why. Not that she was a bitch, but Kirsten and Brad had sort of pushed her into that category and she was living up to it, at least at that moment. "Yeah, well, it takes one to know one. Now, be a good girl and run along and play dress up or paint-your-nails with your girlfriends. Okay?"

"At least I have friends."

"Oh, that hurt. And, you probably have some real quality conversations with them. You know, about important subjects like what color hat and boots you'll wear to this year's Miss Rodeo Pageant. C'mon, Kirsten, give up the dream. You're a bit too old for the crown and from what I know of rodeo queens, they have a lot more class, know how to ride a horse, and have a brain. Oh yeah, and they're what, usually about five years younger than you are?"

Kirsten frowned. "I was Miss Rodeo of Indio, you know."

"Yeah, five years ago. I think I do remember. Wasn't there some article about the Coachilla Valley being desperate for entrants?" Michaela smiled sweetly, knowing she was getting the best of Kirsten.

Kirsten stomped her foot. "At least I've got Brad and you don't, and as soon as you get those papers taken care of we can start planning our future and I can start thinking about what color to paint our nursery. We want lots of children."

"I feel sorry for those kids." Michaela's stomach tightened and she clenched her fists.

"Just sign the papers."

"Just go away. Bye, bye." She waved at her. "Some of us have important things to do."

Kirsten stood her ground, planting her light pink Justin boots into the dirt. Her long blonde hair hung loose down her back, and her overly made-up face caused her to look aged and brittle for someone who couldn't be over twenty-five. She shoved her hands into her plastered-on jeans, belted in by a bright silver belt buckle— her Miss Rodeo Indio silver belt buckle.

“Listen. I’ve asked you to leave nicely. I don’t have time for your games. Trust me, I don’t want Brad within fifty feet of me. Why you feel the need to annoy me like this is very confusing. I’ve moved on.”

“Great, so you’ll sign the papers?”

Michaela sighed and forced a smile. “The papers. Yeah, well see, those divorce papers aren’t your concern. It’s really between Brad and me.”

“Not really. We want to get married. Brad just got a new truck. A Ford F-350. It has a backseat. We got the backseat for when we start having babies. And, trust me, it won’t be long.”

Anger rose from Michaela’s gut and rushed straight to her brain. “As I told you, I don’t want Brad back at all. Here’s the problem, though: Brad owes me a lot of money from debts incurred by him, and I want that money. When I get it, I will sign the papers. Maybe he should think about returning the truck.”

“I bought the truck. And, Brad would be able to pay you off on your debt if your uncle hadn’t fired him.”

“That debt is our debt, not just mine. And, as for my uncle Lou firing Brad, that was cut and dry: Brad wasn’t showing up for work even before Lou discovered what was going on between you two, but once he did and showed me the proof, Brad never even phoned Lou. I don’t think my uncle had much of a choice, other than to let him go.”

“Whatever. You are so gonna be s.o.l. if you don’t make a move quick and sign the paperwork.” Kirsten did the hair flick thing, a sign of her disdain for Michaela.

All it did was make Michaela want to laugh. “Let me give it to you in simple speak. Brad is an adulterer, so I will sue him to my heart’s content until he pays me back every dime, and something tells me that the judge is going to be on my side. Or, how about this? I just won’t sign the papers ever and all those babies you’re talking about having will automatically have a stepmommy.”

“You can’t do that!” Kirsten whined.

“Watch me.” Michaela was aware that she really couldn’t. After all, it was California, and she knew she only had thirty days to sign the papers or contest the decree before she defaulted. She was banking on Little Miss Hot Pants not being exactly well-versed in California state divorce law. But, surely Brad’s lawyer was, and no matter how Michaela tried to play it, she’d likely be forced to sign those papers. She also knew that she would probably have to sue Brad for what he owed her in medical bills, and rumor had it he was going to file bankruptcy, which meant that she wouldn’t ever see a penny from him. The lawyer fees alone in taking Brad to court would put her out of business. She knew Brad was living off Kirsten, so why not sign the papers and be free of him, her, and the whole mess? Because they’d stuck it to her and she wasn’t about to let them get the best of her. Not yet, anyway.

Kirsten turned on her heel in a huff and marched out. Michaela walked out of her office and peered outside the breezeway, watching Kirsten roar away in her red convertible Mustang GT, kicking up dust all the way along Michaela’s drive. Talk about trouble. Michaela shook her head and let out a long sigh. What she’d ever seen in Brad Warren was beyond her, because anyone who could fall for a tramp like Kirsten was not a man she would ever want to be involved with. But she had been, and as Mom always liked to spout the age-old adage, “You made your bed,” now she’d have to lie in it.

She turned and headed back to the barn to say her good-nights to all the horses down the row. She stopped at the end— at Leo’s stall. Her ten-month-old colt glanced out, then returned to his

dinner. Michaela had big plans for the little guy. She'd nurtured him from the night he'd been born last March and for a time it had been touch and go. She hadn't known if he'd make it . . .

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THE EARLY SPRING NIGHT STILL HAD A CHILL IN the air. Michaela held a thermos of coffee in her hand as she curled up on a cot inside her office, checking on her mare every hour or so and listening intently for any sounds that might echo down the breezeway, alerting her that the time had come. Cocoa, her brown Lab, lay at her feet, snoring. Michaela had put a blanket over the aging dog. Usually by this time of night the two of them would be sound asleep in the house.

Her mother, after calling earlier, stopped by and brought her some homemade chicken noodle soup and coffee, aware that Michaela would be keeping vigil into the wee hours. It didn't matter how many foals Michaela had seen born in her thirty-two years. It never ceased to amaze her.

Around 1 A.M., as she drifted off to sleep, a thud woke her. She hurried into the stall. The mare eyed her from her straw bed.

Michaela went inside and knelt down beside her, stroking her face. "I know, girl. It's okay. You're all right. You're all right."

Little Bit let out a groan and lifted her head, groaned again, and laid it back down.

"Easy, easy. You're doing good. Good girl."

The mare's water broke and wet her underside. This was it. Michaela went around to Little Bit's backside. The front hooves came first, and then the long spindly legs, revealing black legs like Little Bit's. Next, a tiny face with a small star on it poked through, and with one final push the foal slid out, slippery and covered in the birthing sac, which with Michaela's assistance came right off. She took a hand towel from her jacket pocket and wiped the foal's nostrils and eyes. The foal struggled, laid back down and struggled again. Michaela wiped the tears from her face. The miracle of life.

Little Bit groaned again and Michaela noticed that she was having a hard time lifting her head to look at her baby. She watched for seconds before she realized what was happening with her mare. A lot of blood— everywhere. Oh God. Wait! This was all wrong. Oh God, no! She was hemorrhaging. Somehow she'd been torn inside during the birth. Michaela pulled her cell from her coat pocket and called Ethan Slater, her vet— and longtime friend. Growing up around horses and being a rancher's daughter, she knew that there wasn't a whole lot she could do, and it was unlikely the vet could either. She was losing too much blood, too fast to get her into surgery, and Michaela cried as she gently stroked Little Bit's face, willing her to live and in some way hoping she was alleviating any pain the old girl felt.

Ethan pulled in fifteen minutes later. But it was too late. Little Bit had died, quietly bleeding out as Michaela held her and whispered to her. When he opened the stall door, he reached his hand out to Michaela and she took it. He pulled her up and hugged her. "I'm sorry, kid. I'm really sorry." He let go after a minute and looked at her with his intense green eyes. "We've got work to do now. She's gone, but he has a chance. C'mon. Go to the truck and in the right side of my vet box are packages of Fosalac. You'll find a bottle there, too. Get them out and follow the mixing directions. I'm going to move him, so you don't have to see her like this. Okay? Now, go unlock one of the open stalls and slide the door for me."

Michaela knew that the timeline they had to get the colt to feed was about one to two hours, but the sooner they could get a grip on things the better, just in case there were further complications where he was concerned. She was so grateful for Ethan's no-nonsense, methodical

ways. She wanted to fall apart. She loved that mare. Hell. Thank god, Ethan knew exactly how to handle the situation and her.

She nodded and followed his orders, leaving the stall as he went to pick up the colt, who weighed about seventy pounds. Michaela had lost animals before, but the pain was always just as intense. But she'd never lost a mare this way, and of all her horses, she'd had a real connection with Little Bit. She had an inside joke with herself about how she'd wished for years she was more like her mare, who had no problem at all getting pregnant.

She took the supplemental food and mixed it as Ethan tended to the colt. She brought it back in the large bottle he'd told her to grab. Ethan asked her to set it to the side. "Let's get him up to drink. We don't want him choking." Together they helped the colt get to his feet. Michaela grabbed the bottle and handed it to Ethan, who took it from her and stuck it into the colt's mouth, teasing him a bit at first with it, allowing him to get used to the feeling of the rubber nipple. The baby gummed it, but soon his pink fleshy tongue wrapped around it, and as sucking noises escaped from his mouth, Michaela felt her body relax. She stood on the other side of the colt in case he lost his balance on still-wobbly legs. That night, she resolved to see him through, to see him grow strong and healthy. She'd named him Peppy Leo after his great-grandsire Mr. San Peppy and great-great-grandsire Leo San, both of whom had been huge cutting horse champions, and because her colt was as strong as a lion. And he had survived.

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"GOOD NIGHT, CHAMP," MICHAELA SAID TO HIM. She turned out the breezeway lights and headed toward the house, knowing that in a little more than two years her colt would indeed be a champion. As resolved as she'd been to save him that night ten months earlier, she was just as committed to her vision for him— and herself— now. Kirsten might have taken Brad from her, and the bank might come after her, and who knew what else might happen, but no one could steal her dream from her— the dream she knew would become a reality.