

Michele Scott

**Tacked to Death
ONE**

MICHAELA BANCROFT SMILED AS SHE PLACED A hand over Genevieve Pellegrino's smaller one. Together they brushed the horse. Michaela spoke in calm hushed tones as the little girl's father, Joe, Michaela's good friend from childhood, had directed her. At first Michaela had been apprehensive about working with Gen. Until she started giving Gen riding lessons, Joe had never told her that Gen was autistic. She'd thought that maybe she was just quiet and a bit slow. Michaela hadn't been around Joe's family much after high school. Although they had always remained good friends, life seemed to get in the way. It was her uncle Lou's murder the previous year that had brought them back together.

"That's good. See how clean he's getting?" Michaela said. "What a good job you're doing, Gen. Look at how pretty you're making Booger. He likes that a lot." Working with the little girl was as therapeutic for Michaela as it was for Gen. Maybe even more so.

Once Booger had the saddle on him and Michaela slid a headstall over his ears, she kept him on a lead line and put Gen up, leading him to the arena. Over the course of half an hour she watched as the child relaxed into the saddle and seemed to almost become one with the horse, a smile appearing on her face as she asked him to trot. Booger performed his version, which was more of a very fast walk, semijog. But Gen didn't seem to care that Booger was lazy. An easy calm came over the little girl's face and she truly looked happy on the horse.

"Okay, Gen. It's time to get off now and we'll give him a brushdown. Are you ready?"

Gen nodded. Michaela helped her dismount. With a slight movement of the hand, Michaela pushed aside the strands of curly black hair that had fallen out from under Gen's helmet and into the girl's eyes. "You did a great job today. I am so proud of you." She removed the school saddle from Booger's back and set it inside the tack room, which was in serious need of an overhaul. She'd have to get on her assistant trainer, Dwayne, about that. He knew better than to keep things in such disarray.

She brought a soft bristle horse brush back to Gen and placed it into her hands. She knew to keep the barn quiet when the girl was there. No country western on the radio blaring through the breezeway, and she'd asked Dwayne to wait to turn any of the horses out. He also knew to keep his distance when Gen was there. She figured at this time, midmorning, he was likely making a feed run. They were getting low on grass hay.

As Gen slowly brushed Booger, Michaela stood back and watched her, knowing it gave the girl a sense of peace and accomplishment. There was a connection being forged between horse and child that could only benefit both of them. "Why don't we give him a treat?" she asked in a soothing tone.

She didn't get a response other than a slight glance from Gen. It was important though, she'd learned from Joe, that Gen be apprised of all that was going on. It helped her stay focused without overwhelming her. Gen handed her back the brush and followed her into the feed room; the smell of molasses and fresh-cut alfalfa perfumed the air. Michaela grabbed a blue bucket off one of the post nails and scooped it into a trashcan filled with oats. "Okay. I think he'll like this. What do you think?"

"Yes. I think so."

They gave the horse his oats, and after a good brushdown put him back in his stall. Taking him to the wash rack and bathing him would be too much for the child. She'd wait and let Katie, her afternoon student, wash him when she was finished riding.

After putting Booger away, Michaela was startled by the sound of a car horn. Oh no. She looked at Gen's face, which suddenly turned ashen. The car pulled to a stop outside the breezeway and Michaela heard Katie's voice. "Michaela, Michaela, my dad brought me early. I wanted to come help." The nine-year-old bounded down the breezeway.

Michaela started to bring a finger up to her lips to quiet the enthusiastic girl, but it was too late. Gen let out a horrible, almost primal scream. Her eyes widened with fear.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Katie yelled out, only exacerbating the problem.

Michaela was stuck between the two children and for a moment stood paralyzed, looking from one sobbing girl to the next. Regaining her wits, she went to Gen, wrapped her arms tightly around her, and in a low voice started reassuring the girl. "It's okay. It's okay. No one can hurt you. I'm here. You're safe. You're safe."

"Michaela?" Jude Davis appeared in the doorway. Katie got behind her father and peered around him, looking terrified.

"Call her parents, please, Joe and Marianne Pellegrino. Their number is on the schedule list in my office. I'm going to take her to the house." He nodded and Michaela picked Gen up, continuing to talk to her as the child began to calm down.

"Can I help you?" Jude asked.

"No, just please call her dad and ask him to come over."

Gen was a tiny girl for her age, but not so small that Michaela didn't feel her fifty-some-odd pounds in her lower back. Going through the back door, she took the girl into her family room, where she closed all of the curtains and sat the child down on the couch. Gen had stopped twisting around and now fell quiet. Ah, better; but Michaela felt horrible.

Minutes later, Joe and Marianne came through the door. "I am sorry," Michaela said.

Joe waved a beefy hand at her. "Happens." He looked like an Italian Pillsbury Doughboy, concern furrowing his bushy eyebrows. "I'm sorry we ran out on you like that." Rather than stay to watch her lesson as they usually did, Joe and Marianne had instead dropped Gen off earlier because they'd had some errands to run.

Michaela felt responsible because she'd insisted they go on ahead and take care of what they needed to with their other four kids. She'd assured them she could handle Gen. What had she been thinking?