

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Heaven's Price*

SANDRA
BROWN



HAWK
O'TOOLE'S
HOSTAGE

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Dear Reader,

You have my wholehearted thanks for the interest and enthusiasm you've shown for my Loveswept romances over the past decade. I'm enormously pleased that the enjoyment I derived from writing them was contagious. Obviously you share my fondness for love stories that always end happily and leave us with a warm, inner glow.

Nothing quite equals the excitement one experiences when falling in love. In each romance, I tried to capture that excitement. The settings and characters and plots changed, but that was the recurring theme.

Something in all of us delights in lovers and their uneven pursuit of mutual fulfillment and happiness. Indeed, the pursuit is half the fun! I became involved with each pair of lovers and their unique story. As though paying a visit to old friends for whom I played matchmaker, I often reread their stories myself.

I hope you enjoy this encore edition of one of my personal favorites.

 SANDRA BROWN

One



They certainly looked like authentic train robbers. From the dusty brims of their hats to the jingling spurs on their boots, they looked as real to Miranda as Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid.

To avoid crashing into the temporary barricade of timber piled up on the tracks, the engine had belched a cloud of steam and the train had screeched to a stop. The actors, playing their roles to the hilt, had thundered out of the dense forest lining both sides of the track. The pounding hooves of their horses had plowed up the turf before they reared to a halt beside the tracks. While the well-trained



mounts stood at attention, the masked "robbers," with pistols drawn, boarded the train.

"I don't remember reading anything about this in the brochure," a woman passenger remarked uneasily.

" 'Course not, honey. That'd spoil the surprise," her husband said around a chuckle. "Helluva show, isn't it?"

Miranda Price thought so. A helluva show. Worth every penny of the cost of the excursion ticket. The staged holdup had all the passengers enthralled, and none more than Miranda's six-year-old son, Scott. He was sitting beside her on the seat, thoroughly engrossed in the realistic performance. His bright eyes were fixed on the leader of the outlaw band, who was slowly making his way down the narrow aisle of the train while the other bandits stood guard at each end of the car.

"Everybody be calm, stay in your seats, and nobody will get hurt."

He was probably a temporarily unemployed Hollywood actor, or perhaps a stuntman, who had taken this summer job to supplement his fluctuating income. Whatever they were paying him for this job wasn't enough, Miranda thought. He was perfectly suited to the role.

A bandanna covered the lower half of his face, muffling his voice but allowing it to reach every person in the antique railroad car. He was convincingly costumed, wearing a black hat pulled low over his brows, a long white duster, and around his hips a tooled leather gun belt with a thong strapping the holster to his thigh. The holster

was empty because he was holding a Colt pistol in his gloved right hand as he moved down the row of seats, carefully scanning each face. His spurs jangled musically with every step.

"Is he really gonna rob us, Mommy?" Scott whispered.

Miranda shook her head no, but didn't take her eyes off the train robber. "It's just make-believe. There's nothing to be afraid of."

But even as she said so, she wasn't certain. Because in that instant the actor's eyes came to rest on her. Sharply, she sucked in her breath. His eyes, white hot and laser bright, pierced straight through her. They were a startling shade of blue, but that alone hadn't taken her breath. If the hostile intensity behind his eyes were part of the act, then his thespian talents were being wasted on this tourist train.

That smoldering gaze remained on Miranda until the man sitting in front of her asked the bandit, "Want us to empty our pockets, gunman?" He was the same man who had reassured his wife earlier.

The robber jerked his stare away from Miranda and looked down at the man. He gave a laconic shrug. "Sure."

Laughing, the tourist stood up and dug into the pockets of his plaid Bermuda shorts. He withdrew a credit card and waved it in front of the masked face. "Never leave home without it," he said in a booming voice, then laughed.

The other tourists on the train laughed with him. Miranda did not. She was looking at the robber. His eyes

reflected no humor. "Sit down, please," he said in a whispery voice.

"Aw, say, don't get upset. I've got another pocket." The tourist produced a handful of cash and thrust it at the robber. Without juggling the pistol, he caught the money with his left hand. "There." Smiling broadly, the vacationer looked around for approval and got it from the other passengers. All applauded; some whistled.

The bandit stuffed the cash into the pocket of his duster. "Thanks."

The man sat back down beside his wife, who looked both ill at ease and embarrassed. The man patted her hand. "It's all a gag. Play along, honey."

The robber dismissed them and looked down at Scott, who was sitting between Miranda and the window. He was staring up at the masked man with awe. "Hello."

"Hello," the boy replied.

"You want to help me make my getaway?"

Innocent eyes opened wider. He flashed the robber a gap-toothed smile. "Sure!"

"Sweetheart," Miranda said cautiously to her son. "I—"

"He'll be all right." The hard stare above the bandanna did nothing to alleviate Miranda's apprehension. If anything it increased it. The cold expression belied the bandit's reassuring words.

He extended his hand to Scott. The boy eagerly and trustingly grasped it. He clambered over his mother's legs and out into the aisle. With Scott preceding the man, they

started walking toward the front of the railroad car. Other youngsters aboard the train gave Scott envious looks, while the grown-ups cheered him on.

"See?" the man sitting in front of Miranda said to his wife. "Didn't I tell you it was all a game? They even get the kids involved."

When the outlaw and her son had gone halfway up the aisle, Miranda scrambled out of her seat and started after them. "Wait! Where are you taking him? I'd rather he not get off the train."

The robber spun around and, again, pierced her with his fierce blue eyes. "I told you that he would be all right."

"Where are you going?"

"On a horseback ride."

"Not without my permission, you're not."

"Please, Mommy?"

"Come on, lady, give the kid a break," the obnoxious tourist said. "It's part of the fun. Your kid'll love it."

She ignored him and started up the aisle behind the masked robber, who by now was propelling Scott through the opening at the front of the car. Miranda speeded up. "I asked you not to—"

"Sit down, madam, and keep quiet!"

Stunned by the harsh tone of voice, she spun around. The two robbers who had been guarding the rear entrance of the railroad car had closed in behind her. Above their masks their eyes were wary, nervous, almost fearful, as though she were about to foil a well-orchestrated plan. It

was in that instant that Miranda knew this wasn't a game. Not by any means.

Whirling around, she ran up the aisle and launched herself through the door and onto the platform between the passenger car and the engine. Two men, already mounted, were anxiously surveying the area. The robber was hoisting Scott up onto the saddle of his horse.

Scott clutched the horse's thick mane and chattered excitedly, "Gee, he's a big horse. We're up so high."

"Hold on, Scott, and don't let go. That's very important," the bandit instructed him.

Scott!

He knew her son's name.

Acting from the pure maternal instinct to protect her child, Miranda threw herself down the steps. She landed on her hands and knees in the gravel railroad bed, scraping them painfully. The two robbers were beside her in an instant. They grabbed her arms and held her back when she would have run toward Scott.

"Leave her alone," their leader barked. "Mount up. We're getting the hell out of here." The two released her and ran toward their waiting horses. Holding the reins of his horse in one hand and the pistol in the other, the leader said to Miranda, "Get back on the train." He made a jutting motion with his chin.

"Take my son off that horse."

"I told you, he won't be hurt. But you might be if you don't do as I say and get back aboard the train."



"Do what he says, lady."

Miranda turned in the direction of the terrified voice. The engineer of the train was lying facedown in the gravel beside the track. His hands were stacked atop his head. Another of the robbers was keeping him there at gunpoint.

Miranda cried out with fear and anxiety. She ran toward her son, arms outstretched. "Scott, get down!"

"Why, Mommy?"

"Get down this instant!"

"I can't," he wailed. His mother's anxiety had been transmitted to him. His six-year-old mind had suddenly figured out that this was no longer playacting. The small fingers clutching the horse's mane tightened their grip. "Mommy!" he screamed.

The leader hissed a vile curse just as Miranda threw herself against his chest. "Stop anybody who steps off that train," he shouted to his men.

The other passengers, who were by now filling every window on that side of the train, were beginning to panic. Some were shouting advice to Miranda. Others were screaming in fear. Some were too shocked and afraid to say or do anything. Parents were gathering their own children close and holding on to them for dear life.

Miranda fought like a wildcat. Her carefully tended nails became talons, which she would have used to claw the robber's face had she been able to reach it. As it was, his fingers had locked around her wrists like handcuffs. She was no match for his superior strength. She kicked his shins,

aimed for his crotch with her knee, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain and surprise when it landed close.

"Let my son go!"

The man in the mask gave her a mighty push that sent her reeling backward. She landed hard on her bottom, but sprang up immediately and tackled him while he had one boot in the stirrup. Catching him off balance, she dug her shoulder into his ribs. She reached for Scott. Scott dived toward her and landed against her chest hard enough to knock the breath out of her. But she held on to him and turned, running blindly. The other bandits were all mounted. Their horses had been made nervous by the shouting. They were prancing around, kicking up clouds of dust that obscured Miranda's vision and clogged her nose and throat.

A thousand pinpricks stabbed her scalp when the robber caught her by the hair and brought her to an abrupt standstill. "Damn you," he cursed behind his mask. "This could have been so easy." She risked letting go of Scott to reach for the bandit's mask. He caught her hand in midair and issued an order in a language she didn't understand. One of his men immediately materialized out of the clouds of swirling dust. "Take the boy. Let him ride with you."

"No!"

Scott was wrestled from Miranda's clutching hands. When the bandit's arm closed around her middle like pincers and he dragged her backward, she fought harder than

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ever. Digging her heels into the earth, she tried to keep sight of Scott, who was wailing in terror.

"I'll kill you if you hurt my son."

The bandit seemed unfazed by her threat as he mounted his horse and yanked her up with him. She was still dangling half on, half off the saddle when he spurred the horse. It danced in a tight circle before streaking off through the dense forest. The other riders followed.

The horses' hooves thundered through the otherwise serene woods. They sped through the thick pine forest so fast that Miranda became more afraid of falling off and being trampled than she was of the kidnapper. She clutched his waist in fear that he might let go of her as they began to climb.

Eventually the trees thinned out, but they continued to ride without breaking their speed. The terrain became more rocky. Horseshoes clattered on the rocks, which formed shelves over which they rode. Behind her she could hear Scott crying. If she, an adult, were afraid, what terror must her child be suffering?

After about half an hour they crested a peak, and the band of riders had to reduce their pace to begin their descent of the other side of the mountain. When they reached the first copse of pine along the timberline, the leader slowed his mount to a walk, then came to a full stop. He pressed Miranda's waist with his arm.

"Tell your son to stop crying."

"Go to hell."



"I swear, lady, I'll leave you here for the coyotes to eat," he said in a raspy voice. "You'll never be heard from again."

"I'm not afraid of you."

"You'll never see your son again."

Above the mask, his eyes were icy. Hating them, Miranda reached up and yanked down the bandanna. She had intended to disarm him, but it was she who took a gasping breath.

The rest of his face was as startling as his eyes. The angles were precise, as though each feature had been lined up with a ruler. His cheekbones were high and as sharp as blades, his jaw perfectly square. His lips were narrow and wide. Above them he had a long, straight nose. He continued to stare at her with open contempt.

"Tell your son to stop crying," he repeated.

The resolve in his voice, in his eyes, chilled her. She would fight him when it was possible to win. Now, her efforts would be futile. She wasn't a coward, but she wasn't a fool either. Swallowing her fear and her pride, she called out shakily, "Scott." When his crying didn't subside, she cleared her throat and tried again, louder this time. "Scott!"

"Mommy?" Scott lowered his grimy hands from his red, weeping eyes and searched her out.

"Don't cry anymore, okay, darling? These . . . these men aren't going to hurt us."

"I wanna go home now."

"I know. So do I. And we will. Shortly. But right now, don't cry, okay?"



The small fists wiped away the remaining tears. He hiccupped a sob. "Okay. But can I ride with you? I'm scared."

She glanced up at her captor. "May he—"

"No." The blunt reply was made before she even finished voicing the question. Ignoring her baleful stare, he addressed his men, giving them orders so that when they urged their mounts forward again, the horse Scott was on was second in the procession. Before nudging his horse, their captor asked her curtly, "Can you ride astride?"

"Who are you? What do you want with us? Why did you take Scott off that train?"

"Throw your right leg over. It'll be safer and more comfortable."

"You know who Scott is. I heard you call him by name. What do you—Oh!"

He slid his hand between her thighs and lifted the right one over the saddle. The leather was warm against her bare skin, but that sensation was mild compared to the feel of his gloved hand on her inner thigh. Before she could recover from that, he lifted her over the pommel and wedged her between it and his open thighs. He flattened his hand against her lower body and pulled her back even farther, until she was snugly pressed against him.

"Stop manhandling me."

"I'm only making it safer for you to ride."

"I don't want to ride."

"You can get down and walk anytime, madam. It wasn't in my plan to bring you along, so if you don't like the

traveling accommodations, you've no one to blame but yourself."

"Did you think I would let you take off with my son without putting up a fight?"

His austere face revealed no emotion. "I didn't think about you at all, Mrs. Price."

He flexed his knees and the horse started forward, trailing the others by several yards. Miranda was stunned into silence, not only by the fact that he knew her name, but because while one of his hands was loosely holding the reins of the horse, the other was riding lightly on her hipbone.

"You know me?" She tried not to reveal her anxiety through her voice.

"I know who you are."

"Then you have me at a distinct disadvantage."

"That's right. I do."

She had hoped to weasel out his name, but he lapsed into stoic silence as the horse carefully picked its way down the steep incline. As hazardous as the race up the mountainside had been, traveling down the other side was more so. Miranda expected the horse's forelegs to buckle at any second and pitch them forward. They wouldn't stop rolling until they hit bottom several miles below. She was afraid for Scott. He was still crying, though not hysterically as before.

"That man my son is riding with, does he know how to ride well?"

"Ernie was practically born on a horse. He won't

let anything happen to the boy. He's got several sons of his own."

"Then he must understand how I feel!" she cried. "Why have you taken us?"

"You'll know soon enough."

The ensuing silence was rife with hostility. She decided she would say nothing more, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of refusing to answer her.

Suddenly the horse lost its footing. Rocks began to shake loose around them. The frightened animal sought traction, but couldn't find it. He began to skid down the incline. Miranda almost somersaulted over his neck. To prevent that, she clutched the pommel with her left hand. Her right squeezed her captor's thigh. His arm formed a bar as hard as steel across her midriff while, with his other hand, he gradually pulled up on the reins. The muscles in his thighs bunched with the strain of keeping both of them in the saddle until, after what seemed like forever, the horse regained its footing.

Miranda could barely release her pent-up breath for the arm across her diaphragm. He didn't relax his hold until the animal was well under control again. She slumped forward, as if with relief, but all her senses were alert.

When she had reflexively laid her hand on his thigh, she had inadvertently touched his holster. The pistol was within her grasp! All she had to do was play it cool. If she could catch him off guard, she had a chance of whipping the pistol out of the holster and turning it on him. She could