MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

To Tame a Bride

SUSAN FOX

Susan Fox

To Tame a Bride

«HarperCollins»

Fox S.

To Tame a Bride / S. Fox — «HarperCollins»,

REBEL BridesTwo rebellious cousins–and the men who tame them!Maddie St. John knows that Lincoln Coryell has dismissed her as a spoiled, glamorous socialite. He seems alternately amused and annoyed by her, which infuriates Maddie, as she badly needs his help! Only, pride won't let her admit it–or that she finds his rugged good looks irresistible….Lincoln Coryell knows he's the first man to stand up to Maddie. He can't believe his bad luck when he's stranded alone with her! Only, to his surprise, this disaster reveals a different side to Maddie. Linc sees the vulnerability beneath her prickly pride and realizes he could be the man to tame her!

© Fox S.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

To Tame a Bride 7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 23

Letter to Reader Title Page Dedication CHAPTER ONE CHAPTER TWO CHAPTER THREE CHAPTER FOUR CHAPTER FIVE CHAPTER SIX CHAPTER SEVEN CHAPTER EIGHT CHAPTER NINE CHAPTER TEN EPILOGUE Copyright

Two rebellious cousins—and
the men who tame them!
Meet Caitlin and Maddie: two beautiful,
spirited cousins seeking to overcome family
secrets and betrayal....
Neither cousin is looking for marriage—these Texas
women have proud, rebellious hearts, and it would
take two very powerful men to tame them.
But look out, Caitlin and Maddie—two tough,
gorgeous guys are about to try to sweep you up the
aisle...and they won't take no for an answer!
These two rebel brides are about to
meet their match at last.
Last month we met Caitlin in
To Claim a Wife (#3556)
This month enjoy Maddie's story in
To Tame a Bride (#3560)
Dear Reader,

I grew up watching Roy Rogers movies. Dale Evans, his costar who later became his wife, often played a spirited, sometimes spoiled heroine who started out being a trial to this noble Western hero before he won her over and she fell in love with him. A little like Unc and Maddie in my story.

Roy Rogers was my first crush. My lifelong admiration for this kind, gentle man, who was the same man of honor in real life that he played on the screen, has strongly influenced the ranch stories I love to write.

I hope you enjoy Linc and Maddie's story. I had a ball writing about these two.

Happy trails to the King of the Cowboys; and to Dale, God bless you and keep you with us. For the rest of you, I I hope your lives are filled with happily-ever-afters.

To Tame a Bride
Susan Fox

www.millsandboon.co.uk

For my mother, Marvel Terry. The sweetest, most loving mother on planet Earth, and the gentlest, classiest, most honorable woman I know. I love you with all my heart. I can't find adequate words to express how much you mean to me. God bless you.

CHAPTER ONE

THAT FRIDAY MORNING, Madison St. John almost missed her mother's phone call.

She'd been on her way out the door for a shopping trip when she heard the phone ring. Because the maid would answer and take a message, Madison ignored it and walked on to her car.

Few people made personal calls to Madison St. John. She had no family besides her absent mother and a cousin, Caitlin Bodine. She and Caitlin hadn't spoken in five years, and her mother only contacted her on the rare occasion that she recalled she had a daughter.

Infrequent Christmas and birthday gifts were Madison's only proof that her mother gave a thought to her at all. Gifts which often arrived in the wrong month, indicating both a conscience that ran on delay and an uncertainty of just which month her mother had given birth. Judging by the age-appropriateness of the gifts, Rosalind St. John was also behind in her calculation of the year her only child had been born.

Madison didn't know if her devil-may-care father had survived the European racing circuit or his bohemian lifestyle. She'd been twelve years old the last time she'd heard from him. He'd sent her a postcard from some obscure village in France, but that was eleven years ago now. She had no idea if her mother had been in more recent contact with the jet-setting playboy she'd been married to so briefly once upon a time, or if he was even alive. Whatever had become of him, it wasn't something Madison would likely ever know, unless she bothered to hire an investigator.

Madison suppressed the dismal thoughts. She'd lived most of her life without her mother and father, and she could go on doing so. She'd learned to need no one, and there were times when she was glad of it. Life was so much less painful if you didn't care about anyone.

The chauffeur had just opened the back door of her Cadillac when the maid bustled out of the mansion and rushed down the sidewalk toward her.

"Miss St. John!"

Madison turned her head, annoyed by the delay. The little maid was in the kind of haste Madison considered undignified, and the faint scowl she gave the woman was meant to convey that. This maid had only worked for her three months, but by now she should have learned how Madison expected her to conduct herself.

The maid's excited, "Miss St. John—you have a call—your mother!" betrayed a knowledge of things the woman shouldn't have been privy to.

Though Madison rarely discussed her background with anyone—and never with her staff—this sign that the maid knew precisely how rare and significant such a call would be was evidence that

Madison's employees, like everyone else in Coulter City, Texas, gossiped about her behind her back. She arched a brow and stared coolly until the little maid's eyes veered guiltily from hers.

Her stiff, "Thank you, Charlene," was rigidly composed, as was her ladylike stride as she stepped away from her car and walked back to the mansion.

Her heart did a little flip as the news of her mother's call began to impact her more deeply. Memories of her childhood flashed strongly through her mind. She'd been devoted to her glamorous mother, doing anything she could to please her. Because her handsome, dashing father was around so infrequently, her mother was often sad and at loose ends.

Madison had desperately wanted her mother to be happy. Rosalind could be so bright and cheery and fun that her gloomy moods were frightening for her small daughter. Hadn't Madison known, even then, that she would lose her mother if she couldn't cure Rosalind's unhappiness?

She'd tried so hard to please her distracted parent. She'd been her mother's slave and her shadow, fetching things for her, never causing problems, keeping her own little dresses clean and her hair neat. It had terrified Madison to discover that she was an ugly duckling, but she'd heard her mommy complain about it to her friends, so it had to be true. The tone of her mother's voice when she'd said the words had made her feel sick to her stomach. She'd realized then how lucky she was that anyone bothered with her at all; she also learned that her value to the people she loved and needed most rested almost completely on her looks.

Each night she'd asked God to make her beautiful so her mother could love her. If God made her beautiful, perhaps her handsome father would come home, or he'd send them plane tickets so they could fly to France and watch him race his cars.

Every morning she'd gotten up and dashed to the mirror to see if her prayers had been answered. Every morning she'd had to face the same homely little features and dishwater-blond hair that she'd gone to bed with the night before.

Though it had broken her heart, she'd understood how unfair it was that a woman as beautiful as her mother had been left alone to raise a homely little girl. She'd worried about how embarrassing it must be for Rosalind to be seen with her, and to have to present such an ugly child to her glamorous friends—whose own children were so pretty and handsome... and cruel.

Her worst fears came true the summer she turned eight. She'd known then that it was too late; her mother had waited long enough for her ugly duckling to show some sign of becoming a swan. Rosalind St. John had taken Madison to her grandmother, Clara Chandler, introduced her to the elderly woman whom she'd never met, then abandoned her to her grandmother's dour mercies.

As an adult, Madison understood how crippling her childhood had been, how desolate and misguided. Living with her grandmother had been a new little hell of its own. But through her grandmother, she'd gotten to meet her country cousin, Caitlin Bodine. Though dark-haired Caitlin was as beautiful as a little angel, she'd never seemed to notice that Madison was homely. She never made fun of her face or her hair, never was mean to her in any way.

Caitlin's mother had just died and her father didn't care about her either. With so much in common, they'd bonded to each other instantly. Madison had been so grateful for Caitlin's unconditional friendship that she'd cried herself to sleep with happiness every night that first week.

Madison blinked away the sentimental sting. Caitlin... The painful moral dilemma she'd been wrestling with for weeks sent another wave of chaos through her heart. Could she truly forgive her cousin and dearest friend for what she'd done? Only the distraction of her mother's phone call could have quieted that chaos and given her a strong enough focus to ignore it.

She walked into the library and paused to close the door. The moment she was certain she was alone, she dashed across to the big desk and snatched up the telephone receiver. She hesitated before she spoke, squeezing her eyes closed, trying to moderate her excited breaths to sound completely normal and composed. Her pulse rate accelerated until her heart battered her chest.

Her quiet, “Madison St. John,” was as unaffected as she could make it. She gripped the phone receiver so tightly that her fingers ached.

“Hello, Maddie! My goodness, you sound so grown-up—how are you, dear?”

Rosalind’s question was a practised social opener, not one she seriously wanted an answer to. Madison forced a smile into her voice and came right back with a saccharine, “How are you, Mother? You sound wonderful.”

“I’ve remarried,” Rosalind burst out, as if she were too happy to contain herself.

Madison lowered herself slowly to the swivel chair behind the desk and bit her lower lip viciously as she listened to her mother’s excited voice.

Rosalind had remarried. How many husbands did that make now? Her new husband, Roz said, was a very rich older man who showered her with attention and fun and the most exquisite gifts. His grown children adored her, and she was now a grandmother.

“Stepgrandmother, of course,” Rosalind chirped on. “Of course, no one can believe that I’m old enough to be a grandmother—” She paused to laugh at that. “I get so tired of everyone constantly remarking that I look too young to be a grandma. I’m thinking of simply claiming that I’m their mommy. Oh, they’re such little dears—three of them now—two precious, precious little girls, and one very handsome little boy...”

Madison bowed her head, hurt beyond words. The “little dears” must have had the good fortune to be born beautiful. And God, three of them!

“Hastings is eager to meet you, dear,” her mother went on, oblivious to the painful silence on Madison’s end of the line. “He wants you to come up to Aspen for the weekend. All the children will be here—”

Madison lifted her head as an agony of hope and excitement stormed through her. She’d never ever been invited anywhere by her mother. She was acutely aware of how long it had been since she’d even seen Rosalind, because some part of her heart had kept constant track. Twelve years, three months, a few odd weeks, a handful of days...

The reminder sent a flash of outrage through her as the truth dawned. The new husband—Hastings?—must have asked more questions than any of Roz’s other men had had the sense to. Rosalind probably felt compelled to summon her ugly duckling daughter to her side. Had she somehow found out that Madison had at long last grown into a swan? Maddie knew instantly that she would be expected to parade herself before Roz’s new husband and stepfamily to provide her errant mother with some sort of legitimacy and standing with them.

Hastings must be a billionaire.

The cynical thought came naturally to Madison. Her mind darted between the only two options she had, yes or no.

Yes, I’ll come today... No, you never wanted me...

Yes to the glimmer of hope? No to the nightmare of pretense. The pain and resentment of a lifetime gave her pride a hard nudge.

“I—I don’t know when I can get away,” she made herself say.

“Oh dear, we’ll only be here until Sunday afternoon!” The coaxing whine Madison had forgotten stirred up more old anger and made her grit her teeth.

“I’ll see what I can do, mother. It’s so hard to get away on such short notice.”

Rosalind was oblivious to the little dig. “Oh, sweetheart, do please try. Hastings and the children will be so disappointed. I’ll be just devastated if you can’t come up...” She let her voice trail away as if she’d become too emotional to go on.

Someone on Rosalind’s end of the line must have been close enough to eavesdrop, which accounted for her Oscar-worthy performance. Madison was suddenly and profoundly sick to her stomach.

“I’ll try, Mother,” she finally got out.

"Oh, that's my darling." Roz's tone switched so quickly to business that she confirmed Madison's suspicion that Roz's pleading just seconds ago was a puton because she had an audience she wanted to impress.

Roz prattled off a series of directions to the Aspen residence—one of Hastings's five homes in the U.S. Madison didn't bother to write them down. Because they were her mother's words, she'd remember each one as if they'd been carved on her heart with a dull knife.

Clearly confident that Madison would rush to Aspen, Roz ended the brief conversation and hung up.

Madison sat stiffly, dazed, her heart still beating wildly, her stomach still heavy with nausea. The dial tone droned unnoticed for several moments. Finally, she realized she was still pressing the receiver to her ear. She pulled it away and reached over to set it in its cradle. Her hand was shaking violently.

Madison retreated to her room and spent most of Friday pacing. How could Rosalind expect her to fall all over herself to get to Colorado? How could she possibly stay away? The dilemma tied her in knots that seemed to be spiked with thousands of sharp little pins.

She wrestled with the choice, reliving the pain of a lifetime, so wary of opening herself for more that she was literally unable to reach a decision that didn't make her feel ill. By the time she went to bed that night, her head was pounding. She managed to sleep only because she'd worn herself out.

By morning, she convinced herself that she had to go to Colorado, and called the airlines in San Antonio to book a flight. She soon discovered that the world had conspired to keep her in Texas at least another day.

At first, she was merely annoyed that every flight with connections to Colorado was booked. By midmoming, she was desperate. She'd tried to hire a private flight out of Coulter City, but there were no local pilots available that day, no matter how much money she offered.

Just as she was about to pack and drive to San Antonio to wait on standby or hire a private flight from there, someone from the local airport called her to report that a private pilot had a cancellation and might be available for hire.

Madison rushed upstairs to her room where a maid was hastily packing her clothes.

"Not the gray silk, Charlene," Madison said irritably as she snatched the delicate blouse from the garment bag and tossed it aside.

Her nerves were ragged and her tone was sharper than she'd meant, but she ignored the impulse to apologize and paced the room for a few moments while she supervised the packing. It was better not to become too approachable. She didn't want to encourage a personal relationship with any member of her staff. She'd made that mistake in the past and had lived to regret it.

Growing more restless by the moment, she stalked to the bathroom to gather her toiletries for herself—she never trusted a maid with the task of ensuring that every one of her makeup and hair care items were packed.

Finally, she changed her clothes. She selected a red cotton blouse and a pair of khaki bush pants. The lowheeled hiking boots she chose were made of finegrained leather and lightweight suede. Ankle high, the boots had been chosen more for their chic, outdoorsy look than any true practicality, but they went well with the outfit.

Insecurity made her freshen her makeup, check her polished nails and carefully brush her hair before she scrutinized her image in the mirror. Would her mother even recognize her? Madison turned her head this way and that, searching critically for a glimmer of the homely child she'd been.

Her frequent trips to San Antonio to have her dull blond hair tinted a bright shade just short of platinum was well worth her time and money. She was fanatical about frequent touch-ups and trims. The sleek, collar-length pageboy cut, with the back trimmed slightly shorter than the sides, was simple, elegant and easy to maintain.

Her complexion was clear and the array of skin care products she used kept it flawless. Her delicate features had evened out, her teeth were pearly white and perfectly straight after years of braces, and her slim figure was femininely curved and rigidly maintained by a careful diet. Only the deep blue of her eyes was the same.

Thrilled that the image in the mirror would surely exceed anything her mother could have hoped for, Madison grabbed her handbag and small case, then rushed from the bathroom. Her luggage had already been taken down to the car.

Her heart was pounding with excitement and dread by the time she settled on the backseat of her Cadillac and the chauffeur closed the gleaming black door. In seconds, they were speeding through Coulter City to the small airport past the edge of town, and Madison was so nervous that she felt light-headed.

"What do you mean, you can't fly me to Aspen?"

Though the cultured feminine voice wasn't loud or shrill, it carried from the tarmac on the airstrip side of the hangar to where Lincoln Coryell had parked his Jeep. He instantly recognized the cool, acid-edged tone and felt his good mood sour.

Madison St. John, the reigning queen of Coulter City, was obviously struggling to comprehend the word no. A grim smile slanted his lips as he lifted his gear out of the Jeep and shut the door.

Beautiful, elegant, and filthy rich, Ms. St. John should have been one of the most sought-after heiresses in Texas. Instead, men avoided the razortongued shrew as diligently as they would a hill of fire ants. Any man with sense found out right off that no amount of money was adequate compensation for the hell he'd have to endure to tangle with her. A fortune hunter or two had been brave enough to try, but she had the ability to send any man foolish enough to get near her running for the nearest mesquite patch.

She couldn't be much older than twenty-three, but she viewed the world with the cynicism and arrogance of an embittered woman twice her age. Her grandmother, Clara Chandler, had been the same way, though age and meanness had made her far worse.

Madison hadn't always been the way she was now. Linc had worked on the ranch her grandmother had owned years ago. He remembered Maddie St. John as an awkward, stick-thin adolescent with straggly hair and a mouth full of hardware. She'd been a sweet kid then, shy, soft-spoken, and polite to everyone.

But that sweet, shy girl had grown up into a spoiled, self-indulgent beauty, so changed that there was no sign that the child she'd been had ever existed.

As he walked past the corner of the hangar to where his small plane was parked, he could finally see Madison with the pilot, Tom Grant.

"You agreed to fly me to Colorado, Mr. Grant," she went on in that imperious tone that worked like sandpaper on the nerves.

"It's a long flight, Miz St. John, and—"

"You want more money." It wasn't a question. Her soft voice had dropped lower and brought to mind the warning growl of a cat.

"No, ma'am," Tom said, shaking his head as if he were anxious to correct her impression. "Just that the wife decided she hadn't seen much of me this week and won't stand to have me gone most of the weekend after those other folks canceled. Said she wanted me home."

"How sweet." Madison's soft remark was poisonous, and Tom shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Line could imagine the look she was giving the man, though he could only see her profile as he passed several feet away from where they stood.

Tom caught sight of him then and gave a quick wave to get his attention. "Linc Coryell's right over there, Miz St. John. Heard he was flyin' to Aspen—hey, Linc!"

Madison turned to look in the direction Tom Grant indicated. The pilot broke into a trot and rushed to intercept Lincoln Coryell. As she watched, Tom jerked a thumb in her direction, said something too low for her to hear, then turned to hurry toward the airstrip office.

Incensed that the pilot had distracted her and neatly escaped, she stiffened when she felt Linc level his gaze on her. He was wearing a pair of mirrored sunglasses. The shade of his black Stetson would have made it impossible to read the expression in his dark eyes from this distance, but the sunglasses projected an aloofness that made him appear unapproachable.

She saw his mouth tighten before he glanced away and walked on. Unwilling to let this opportunity go by, she started after him. Her boots thumped smartly on the concrete as she tried to catch up.

Though she had an aversion to men like Lincoln Coryell—blunt, macho and uncivilized—she could endure a few hours of his presence if he could get her to Aspen. Instinct rather than past experience told her he was one of the few men in this part of Texas who was completely unimpressed by either her name or her wealth.

But then, Lincoln Coryell wasn't a man to show deference to many. He was too hard and rough-edged and rich to be intimidated, and though the former cowboy was probably more wealthy than she was, his lack of education—she'd heard he hadn't finished high school—and his ranch hand background excluded him from being a close member of the small society of elites in and around Coulter City.

She suspected a man like him could never be bought or finessed, and the only intimidation that would come into play with him was the strange intimidation she felt suddenly.

She pasted a faint smile on her face to signal the friendliness she needed to project, but the necessity of doing so made her grit her teeth. She could find another flight, but probably not until tomorrow. It was only because tomorrow might be too late that she even considered using charm.

"Mr. Coryell?" she said as she finally caught up with him, "I understand you're flying to Colorado."

Those mirrored sunglasses flashed toward her briefly as they walked along. She forced herself to smile a bit wider while he was looking down at her, but the effort felt more like an awkward twitch. The sunglasses flashed again with a dismissive turn of his head.

Nettled, she walked faster to keep up with his long stride. "I'm more than willing to pay," she added, struggling to keep her voice reasonable and pleasant. She felt the snub when he didn't respond. Surprise made her slow her steps. When he continued on, she hesitated, then hurried after him, appalled by the indignity of having to pursue him.

"I need to get to Colorado by evening, Mr. Coryell," she called, her frustration mounting higher as she was forced to practically chase the man. Feeling her cheeks heat with embarrassment, she sent a swift glance toward the office and hangar to see if anyone was watching.

In the next moment, she crashed into Linc's back. He'd slowed when she wasn't looking and she'd blundered into him. She gasped and jumped back as if she'd been burned.

And she had been. The heat of his big body and his sun-warmed clothes had scorched her somehow and it was all she could do not to check herself for damage. But he'd turned toward her and his handsome mouth was set in a no-nonsense line that warned her he was irritated.

Knowing she had to be polite if she had any hope of persuading him to fly her to Colorado, she forced another smile that felt as twitchy and unnatural as the other one had. "Pardon me, Mr. Coryell. I didn't expect you to slow down so... abruptly."

Her apology automatically implied that he was in the wrong for stopping, which he was. But he didn't take blame well. She could tell by the hardening of his firm jaw.

Compelled to recover from her faux pas, she was forced to add, "I wasn't watching where I was going for a moment." She hesitated, giving herself a moment to conceal her aversion to apologizing twice. "Pardon me."

She hadn't realized how tall and broad-shouldered Lincoln Coryell was until she was standing two feet in front of him. The top of her head barely came to his shoulder. The mirrored lenses of his sunglasses were aimed down at her, and seeing twin reflections of herself made her feel even smaller.

That she also felt more fragile and feminine than she'd ever felt in her life was a small shock. But then, she'd just run into his hard body, and the impression of his solid masculinity was still quaking through her.

He didn't speak, just stared down at her from his superior height as if neither of her apologies had been enough. Frustrated by his taciturn manner and uncertain how to deal effectively with him, she took advantage of his undivided attention.

"I have a very serious reason to get to Colorado—to Aspen—by tonight, Mr. Coryell." Stung when he still didn't respond, she gritted her teeth and made herself go on. "It's not quite life or death, but close. I'm willing to pay you for your time and inconvenience—double the fare the other pilot asked."

Finally, he reacted. But the cynical slant of his handsome mouth was insultingly superior. No one looked down their nose at Madison St. John, yet the impression she had that Lincoln Coryell was doing just that jolted her.

"I don't hire out, Miz St. John." With that, he turned and walked away.

Maddie's frustration spiked so high that she felt dizzy with it. She had to get to Colorado. Though she could drive to San Antonio and try to catch a flight from there, she had no guarantee of success. Lincoln Coryell was flying to Colorado now. Besides, she'd compromised her dignity too far with him to take no for an answer. His resistance to her—though she was straining to be pleasant to him—was offensive. Demeaning .

The picture that flashed in her mind—of her mother's reaction when she finally set eyes on the ugly duckling daughter who'd grown into a swan—sharpened her determination.

Perhaps Roz would regret the years of neglect. A secret part of Madison's heart hoped her mother would be sorry for abandoning her, but without Lincoln Coryell's help, it might never happen. If she didn't get to Colorado today or by afternoon tomorrow, God only knew when—or if—her mother would contact her again.

She started after him, forced to set an unladylike pace to catch up.

"Mr. Coryell!" The hint of ire that simmered beneath her soft tone had worked with scores of others. In the end, she knew of only one sure way to assert her will over his and make him take her to Colorado. "As I said, it's very important that I get to Aspen by tonight," she insisted as she caught up and fell into step beside him.

Linc's long strides didn't alter. "So you said," he drawled. "Not quite life or death, but close," he quoted as they reached his small plane. He stopped and tossed his duffel bag out of the way near the tail of the aircraft, then turned toward her. The mirrored sunglasses flashed down at her and again framed her image.

"But not close enough to life or death for you to consider using a word as ordinary and humbling as the word please."

Linc watched Maddie's lips part, saw the spasm of shock in her eyes that blanked the arrogance from her stiff expression. Clearly, words like "please" and maybe even "thank you" weren't a regular part of her vocabulary.

He stared down at her frozen expression, a little surprised at himself for giving her even a small chance to wreck what had started out to be a good day.

On the other hand, there was something challenging about a gorgeous, sharp-tongued shrew who intimidated the hell out of most men. Normally, he wanted no part of a female as self-centered and highmaintenance as Maddie St. John. Her flawless appearance hinted at excessive vanity, and it was an easy bet that she'd never warmed enough to any man to tolerate getting a little disheveled.

What would it take to get a woman like her to mellow? Was her legendary bitchiness born of meanness, or had she spoiled and overindulged herself on her inheritance? Was there any real passion behind her cool, blond beauty, or was she an ice cube through and through?

Her father and mother had abandoned her to a grandmother who'd bullied her mercilessly. Line knew she hadn't had an easy life. He hadn't either, but he'd overcome it and made several fortunes by seeing the potential in losing propositions and by taking big risks.

And for all her stunning beauty and wealth, Madison St. John was a losing proposition. Maybe there wasn't anything about her worth having, but if there was, it might be entertaining to find it. The only thing he'd truly risk was a few hours cooped up with her in a small plane.

Still, he'd leave her right there on the tarmac if she couldn't lower her haughty attitude far enough to frame a proper request that included the word "please." She'd had so much trouble with "pardon me" that "please" might be more than she could handle.

He waited as the seconds stretched, watched as the flush in her cheeks darkened and rose higher. Just when he was about to grab his gear and stow it in the plane, her gaze wavered and fell from his.

He saw her chin lift slightly in defiance of the small defeat. She didn't look him in the eye; probably afraid she'd see a hint of triumph. If the situation were reversed and she'd been the one who'd got the upper hand, it was a sure bet he would have seen triumph in hers.

"It's very important that I get to Aspen by tonight, Mr. Coryell." The careful words and her neutral tone were obviously straining her. "Would...would you please consider allowing me to fly to Colorado with you?"

The way she'd looked when she said the words—as if she'd just been forced to consent to the most hideous, immoral act in the history of man—startled a chuckle out of him.

Those blue, blue eyes leaped to make the connection with his, and he saw the conflagration that burst up in their vivid depths. She was furious, but to her credit, she didn't turn it loose on him. Instead, she pressed her lips together so tightly that they were little more than a colorless seam.

"Go get your luggage and haul it over by mine while I do my preflight."

The new flash of outrage in her eyes told him the order had heaped a new indignity on her injured pride. He hadn't used the word "please" himself, but he'd meant to leave it out. He could tell she knew it.

Her face flushed with the temper they both knew she didn't dare vent on him, Madison turned and stalked back to the collection of monogrammed luggage near the hangar. Line spared a few moments to watch her go, admiring the faint sway of hips that her rigid stride didn't quite repress.

CHAPTER TWO

MADISON SAT STIFFLY beside him, her posture so straight that it should have snapped her spine. Her hauteur amused him. Madison St. John was too full of herself; money had ruined the sweet kid she'd been. She was living proof that it wasn't healthy to get everything you wanted. A body had to have something meaningful to look forward to, some reason to dream.

He thought again about how much she'd changed. Madison and her cousin, Caitlin Bodine, had been close once. But as far as he knew, they hadn't spoken to each other for years. It was no secret that Madison blamed Caitlin for the death of the boy she'd been in love with in high school.

Beau Duvall had been a rounder, spoiled by his mother and stepfather, and destined for trouble, but shy, plain little Maddie had been crazy about him. When Beau was killed, she'd been devastated and, like everyone else, she'd blamed Caitlin.

It was only in the past few months, after Caitlin had returned to Texas, that the whole truth about Beau's death had been made public. Caitlin had not only been accepted back into everyone's good graces, she'd married Beau Duvall's older brother, Reno. Madison was the only person who couldn't accept what had really happened when Beau was killed.

Her reason for being the only holdout was probably nothing he'd ever know. He'd rarely had personal contact with her. The moment they got to Colorado and went their separate ways, he wouldn't

have cause to have contact with her again. Though they both lived in the same part of Texas and were both wealthy, their lifestyles were too different for anything more than a distant acquaintance.

Madison couldn't relax. Her choler had faded, displaced by the agonizing fear she had of small planes. Because she confided in no one these days, no one would ever guess the magnitude of what she was willing to go through to see her mother.

The large Cessna seemed so cramped and fragile. It bumped and wallowed over every little pocket of air. The constant motion made her queasy, and the longer they flew, the heavier the queasiness became. Hours into the flight, she was so nauseous that she could barely sit upright. She'd wilted back against the seat, so miserable she was shaking.

"Your face is a pretty shade of green, Miz St. John."

Linc's calm observation gave her a vicious start.

"You need a bucket?"

The crude question put a sickening image in her mind. Grappling for the distraction of sarcasm, she said through gritted teeth, "Your lap should do well enough, Mr. Coryell."

The sudden dip of the plane almost pushed her queasy stomach over the edge. She squeezed her eyes closed and panted sickly as the plane began to descend. She was aware of Linc reaching for the radio mike, but she couldn't follow what he said into it.

Her attention had fixed on the low, calm sound of his voice. The unexpected comfort of his masculine drawl slid along her ragged nerves and steadied them somehow. The strange reaction set off a small shock wave that made her turn her head weakly against the seat back to look at him.

Lincoln Coryell was handsome, ruggedly so. His broad-shouldered, six-foot-four frame seemed to fill the cabin of the small plane, making it seem even more crowded. His arm and side were inches away, but she felt the heat of him from where she sat. Pleasant heat. Male heat.

The pang of guilt she felt surprised her until she let herself acknowledge its source.

Beau Duvall. She'd loved Beau deeply. She still loved him. He'd been handsome, so beautifully handsome. Love of life had blazed so painfully bright in his blue eyes, in his tanned face, in everything he said and did and wanted in life. He'd been so much fun, teasing, irreverent and daring.

Maddie had been so repressed, so unloved, so unlovely back then that when such a handsome, vitally alive and exciting young man had paid the slightest attention to her, she'd fallen wildly and hopelessly in love, dismally aware that handsome Beau Duvall could never love her.

But then he had. The miracle of it still awed her, still gave her hungry heart some vital bit of sustenance, though Beau was long dead now. Beau's affection for her had been like a fairy tale come true. He'd made her feel wanted, special; he'd made her feel beautiful, somehow bringing about her astonishing transformation from duckling to swan...

Line turned his head to look at her. Though she was remembering Beau, she'd been staring at Line. He said something and her blurry gaze fell to his lips. They were so well-defined, with a masculine sort of ruthlessness that made her heart flutter lightly despite her misery.

Linc's face was tanned and harshly chiseled, but brutally attractive in the way of rugged Western men who spent their days in the elements working with dangerous animals.

Dangerous. Yes, she realized, her mind still fuzzy. Dangerous was the word for the way Lincoln Coryell looked. Tough was also part of the package, but he was one hundred percent domineering Texas male, from the crown of his Stetson to the underslung heels of his Western boots.

Nothing at all like the much less harsh, far more gentle and sweet Beau. Never like Beau.

So why this peculiar stirring with Line, why this sudden fascination with a man too hard-edged and blatantly male for her refined tastes?

Madison turned her head so she wouldn't have to look at him. She felt so horribly ill. Surely these wild impressions and startling reactions were part of being in such utter physical misery.

The abrupt jolt of the small plane setting down made her jerk with surprise. Relief flooded her as she realized they'd landed, and Line was taxiing off the runway to the tarmac next to a hangar. Her

head was still swimming after he brought the plane to a halt and switched off the engine. She was so nauseous that she didn't dare move. Her eyelids sagged closed as she waited for her stomach to settle.

"Did you eat something today?"

The gruff question sent a sting of irritation across her jittery nerves. The nausea surged up for a moment before it began to recede.

Her soft, "Of course," was a lie. Admitting that she'd been too nervous to eat would reveal a weakness to him that she considered far worse than being airsick.

"You can get a sandwich at the café over there. I'll meet you when the plane's refueled."

Maddie didn't respond until he touched her arm. The earthquake he set off shook her. She roused herself and sat up straighter.

"Come on, Princess. Let's get you outta here."

The gruff words were her only warning before she found herself forcibly ejected from her seat. Panicked, she grabbed her handbag and tried to get out of the plane under her own power. But her arms and legs were clumsy, and her head was whirling.

Linc took over as if she weighed no more than an awkward piece of luggage. He was like some gigantic warm wave, sweeping her small body along ahead of his until he set her on her feet behind the plane's wing.

The bones in her legs were as substantial as cooked noodles, and she swayed against him, clinging to his lean waist as best she could while she tried to recover her strength. The feel of Linc's hard, well-defined masculinity sobered her, but a new kind of weakness spread through her and slowed her recovery.

"Should I get out the smelling salts...or are you makin' a pass at me?"

It took a moment for Linc's drawled words to penetrate.

Or are you makin' a pass at me? The idea appalled her. It was amazing how suddenly her legs steadied and she was able to push him away.

"God forbid." The caustic words slipped out before she considered how sharply they might land on a male ego. Most male egos were pathetically fragile. Normally, she didn't care whether she trampled one or not, but she needed Linc's goodwill.

Her gaze shot up to gauge his reaction, but his sunglasses blocked the sight. What she could see of his face indicated total immunity to the jab.

Of course. A man who'd achieved as much wealth and power as Lincoln Coryell couldn't have a fragile ego. Pride maybe. Excessive pride. But there was nothing fragile about the tower of masculinity before her.

"Order me some coffee while you're at it," he said, then turned and walked toward the hangar without a backward glance.

Madison managed to eat a good portion of the salad and dry toast she'd ordered before Linc joined her at the café. After little more than an hour on the ground, they were taking off. Madison felt worlds better, but she couldn't get over her nervousness in the small plane. Though she didn't feel much safer in an airliner, small planes always gave her. the sensation of hurtling through space in a soda can.

She and Linc didn't speak, and eventually she dozed as the stress of the day caught up with her and the drone of the engine lulled her to sleep.

It was the odd sound of the engine that woke her later. At first, she thought they were landing. But the staccato sound of an engine failing and the irregular vibration that shook the plane registered. Terror brought her fully awake. She jerked her head in Linc's direction.

"What's wrong?" Linc's sunglasses were off and his lean jaw was clenched so hard that she knew the answer before he spoke.

"Tighten that seat belt and hang on."

The grim order made her face forward to see out the windshield. Mountains. They were over the Rockies. The deep, heavy green of forest that mantled everything below the highest peaks and seemed to fill every valley between was breathtaking. The realization that they were about to fall into all those trees—and would probably be killed in a fiery crash—was so vivid suddenly that she couldn't breathe. Every wild beat of her heart thundered in her ears as she watched the mountains and all that green come closer and closer.

Her body went so rigid with tension that she was in literal pain. Terror left her dry-mouthed and mute. But when the plane suddenly lurched to the left, her stomach lurched with it and startled a gurgling shriek out of her.

Her shock-rounded eyes flew to Linc and she saw him grappling with the controls. It took her a moment to register the fact that he'd turned the plane on purpose. Though it was out of control, he'd managed to force it to do something.

"What are you doing?" Her demand didn't convey any of her insight, but it was as close as she dared to the question she really wanted to have answered: Are we going to die?

A cowardice she'd never suspected of herself gripped her insides. They were about to die and she wasn't ready!

The plane dipped crazily and suddenly she could see the treetops loom so close she felt as if she could put out her hand and touch them. She could see the individual leaves on the branches and instinctively pressed her feet against the floor in an irrational attempt to push herself higher.

"Cover your face!"

Madison was too frozen to move. The last thing she glimpsed before the nose of the plane came up and blocked her view was a space of open meadow.

And then the terrible sound of treetops scraping metal filled the plane. She leaned forward and covered her face with her arms. She must have fainted then because she never felt the crash.

Linc wiped impatiently at the trickle of sweat that slid down between his eyebrows, not surprised that his fingers came away bloody. His head hurt like hell, but he was alive. He wasn't sure how long he'd been unconscious, but it couldn't have been long. The sun—what he could tell about its position with trees blocking its light—hadn't moved too far. But he'd been out long enough that the smell of leaking fuel was strong.

He glanced over at his passenger. Maddie finally looked disheveled. Her chin rested on her chest, and she looked as limp as a rag doll. She didn't seem to have a mark on her, so he reached over to touch her arm and give her a small shake. She stirred then, lifted her head, and let out a small moan.

Madison felt as if every joint in her body had been dislocated. Consciousness ebbed back and with it the memory of falling through the trees. She jerked fully awake and glanced around wildly. Outside the missing windows of the cockpit, tree trunks and branches were everywhere. The tip of a branch had speared through a window space far enough that it was only six inches from her face.

"You all right?" The brusque question startled her, but when she turned her head to look over at Linc, her neck was stiff with pain. The terror and disorientation she felt eased at the comforting sight of him.

He was no longer wearing his Stetson. A cut near his hairline glistened with blood, but other than the cut, he looked as rugged and domineering as ever. His skin was a little gray beneath his tan, but he looked wonderfully, gloriously unharmed.

He gave her arm a small shake that made her aware he was speaking to her. "Are you all right?"

The question sounded a little kinder this time, and for some reason, her eyes began to smart with tears. Appalled, she forced them back and focused on mentally checking herself for injuries. Other than a stiff neck and a body that ached everywhere, she felt remarkably unharmed.

The realization that she was alive sent a gust of pure euphoria through her. "I seem to be...fine."

Linc didn't look as euphoric as she felt. In fact, his expression was so grim that she felt a surge of anxiety.

"Then we'd better get out. Carefully," he added, "since we've got a fuel leak."

Madison smelled it now, and it was strong. She automatically reached for her handbag, then had to rummage on the floor for it. Thankfully, it had been securely zipped so its contents hadn't been scattered.

Linc bustled her out of the plane as quickly and forcefully as he had at the airport, but they had to fight their way through the broken branches and underbrush that jammed the space around the right wing.

Once they were on the ground, Madison stumbled through the brush, using her handbag to cover her face until they were past the tail of the plane. The meadow she'd glimpsed before the crash was just a few feet away.

Line had obviously not had enough room to land before he ran out of clearing and smashed into the trees. When Madison turned and saw that the nose and body of the plane had speared neatly into a narrow gap between the tree trunks, she couldn't help being impressed with his aim.

But because the plane had gone into the trees, the crash wouldn't be easy to spot from the sky. It dawned on her that the hidden crash made it next to impossible for a quick rescue. Linc's next words confirmed it.

"I'll get as much gear and luggage as I can. When I throw it out, drag it to the clearing."

Madison glanced toward the meadow, then back at the plane. The smell of fuel was still strong. "W-will it blow up?"

Linc ignored her question and started toward the wreck. She seized his arm and held him back, terrified of an explosion.

"We need what's in the plane, if we can get it."

Madison let go of his arm. Of course they needed what was in the plane. The clothing she'd brought, her makeup and toiletries, were necessities. But not if the plane was about to explode.

She was terrified again, this time for Linc. If the plane blew up, he'd be killed or seriously injured, and they were too far from help. All she'd seen from the air had been miles of trees and mountains. Anxious for Linc's safety, Madison followed, but hovered a safe distance from the wreck.

The first things Linc tossed her way must have been his. A packaged blanket, a rope, a bundled piece of plastic, and his duffel bag. Finally, he got to her luggage and hefted out her small suitcase to send it tumbling toward her. She winced when it hit the ground sharply. Panicked, she grabbed it and gave it a careful shake. The sound of small bottles clacking against one another made her hurry through the brush to the clearing to check the fragile contents.

The catch had jammed and she crouched down beside Linc's things to set her case on the ground and force it open. She was so absorbed in the task and so worried that the contents had been damaged, that she forgot to go back to the plane to help with the rest of her luggage.

"Thanks much, Princess."

The sound of the suitcase and garment bag hitting the ground next to her made her jump. Madison frowned at the luggage he'd dropped, then jerked her head up to glare at him. He'd located his Stetson and it cast an appealing shadow over his handsome face.

"How dare you throw my belongings around?"

One corner of his handsome mouth quirked. "Didn't exactly throw them. Unless you'd like me to demonstrate what that would look like, so you can tell the difference."

Something about the way his dark eyes shifted to her large suitcase made her reach toward it protectively.

But Line stepped over it to get to his duffel bag. Madison watched him mistrustfully until he unzipped the bag before she went back to the stubborn catch on her small case.

"Go through your things and pick out a few essentials," he told her as he sorted through his bag, discarding one thing after another.

Madison ignored the order. He might have packed things he didn't consider essential, but she hadn't. She needed everything she'd brought.

Especially the contents of the small case. The catch remained stubbornly closed. She reached for her handbag to find something she could use to pry it open. The Cadillac key on her key ring was sturdier than her metal fingernail file, so she used it. But the key was too thick for the thin crack of the case.

"Get busy with that luggage."

Linc's terse words brought her head up. He was hunkered down, balancing himself on the balls of his booted feet with a forearm resting on a bowed thigh. He'd finished going through his duffel bag and was watching her expectantly. She could see he'd packed the roll of plastic and the rope. The blanket must have been packed in the deeper part of the bag. A pile of clothing sat on the ground next to him.

"I am busy with my luggage," she shot back irritably. "And you did throw this case. You damaged the catch."

"Hand it here and start on the rest of your things."

Maddie looked over at him a moment, reluctant. Did she really trust him with it? What if he managed to open the latch and saw the contents—looked through the contents? Her makeup and toiletries—her feminine hygiene products—were things she considered too personal for male eyes. Certainly too personal for Lincoln Coryell's eyes.

Eyes that were so brown they were almost black, she noticed, and so intense that they seemed to miss nothing. She suddenly had the feeling that they were probing deep into her brain, as if he could read her next thought before she knew it herself.

No one had ever looked at her like that; she'd never have allowed it. She wouldn't have allowed Linc to do so now except she couldn't seem to look away. She couldn't seem to keep from noticing how attractive his dark eyes were, and how frightening and wonderful it was to feel the odd power of them stroking so deep, so—

The small case slid from her fingers, startling her. She grabbed for it reflexively, but wasn't quick enough to snatch it. A tug of war would have been undignified, so she pulled back and clenched her fists.

"Sort through that luggage." The order was low, but this time, it carried a burr of steel that chafed her pride. "Pick the essentials."

Her firm, "Everything I packed is essential," brought his dark gaze homing in on hers like an arrow on a target.

"Humor me, Princess. I'm having a bad day."

The harsh set of his mouth was surprisingly intimidating. And effective. Madison hesitated a moment before reaching for the suitcase. When she did, those dark eyes fell away to focus on the small case.

Madison opened the large suitcase, gave everything a token perusal, then snapped it shut. She went through the garment bag just as swiftly.

"Valium?"

The gruff question got her attention and Madison glanced Linc's way. He'd got the small case open and she automatically reached for it before the grim look on his face registered. He was holding a prescription bottle between two callused fingers.

"You addicted to these things?" His obvious disapproval made her give a quick, "Of course not." He ignored her outstretched hand.

"How often do you take them?"

She leaned forward to claim the bottle from him, but he closed his hand and held it just out of reach.

"How often?" The no-nonsense look he was giving her warned he meant business.

Madison's temper shot high and hot. "None of your business. Give them to me."

Instead, he glanced down at the bottle to read the label. "Looks like a big dose for a beginner."

She felt her face flush. "Are you suggesting I'm an addict?"

He leveled a hard look on her and studied her face a moment. "What's a woman like you got to be nervous about?"

The low question hit her like a slap. Line Coryell had not only gone over the line, he'd managed to strike deep into painful places. The emotion that surged up caught her by surprise and her eyes were suddenly stinging.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she shot back, dismayed that her voice was choked. And that made her angry. "Give me the bottle."

Linc slipped it into his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket flap. The action sent her temper skyrocketing.

"How dare you?" Her voice shook with outrage.

"You keep asking that, Miz Maddie," he said calmly, his gaze unwavering. "I dare a lot, and I'll dare a damn sight more in the next few days. But I'd rather walk out of here with a neurotic sissy on my hands than a neurotic stoned sissy." He nodded in the direction of her luggage. "Now let's get that out of the way."

The quick shift of subject and his smooth move to reach for the large suitcase caught her off guard.

He had it open in a moment and began to sort through everything. The sight of his big hands rifling carelessly through her personal belongings offended her.

"I need everything there," she repeated, then reached over to close the lid of the suitcase. Before she could, Line seized her wrist. Her gaze flew to his.

"Look around, Maddie."

The solemn order sent a spear of terror through her that made her forget her luggage. The utter grimness on Linc's face was unmistakable. A picture of dense green forest and high mountains flashed in her mind. But the endless forest she'd glimpsed from the sky would look even more awesome and terrible from the ground. The weird sensation she had—that the wilderness was closing in around them—sent her terror bounding higher. In spite of Linc's order, she couldn't look around, couldn't make herself.

CHAPTER THREE

LINC SAW THE TERROR in her eyes. He could also see that she was in shock. Madison St. John might be vain and obsessed with her looks, but she wasn't stupid. She had at least enough common sense to know they couldn't carry everything out of the mountains with them. Her fixation on her luggage was a denial of what lay ahead for them both: a long and probably dangerous hike through the wilderness. And certainly the worst hardship imaginable for a pampered little aristocrat like her.

He felt the weight of the valium bottle in his pocket. If she couldn't cope with life's little jiggles without sedation, she'd never get through this. Instinct warned him not to coddle her. If he did, she'd go to pieces. If he could tap into her legendary temper and distract her, they'd both be better off.

He released her. He ignored the way she rubbed the wrist he'd touched, almost as if she was trying to soothe away pain. There shouldn't have been any pain for her to soothe.

He hesitated a moment more to study her pale face. She wasn't looking at him now; she was staring to the left of the suitcase into the grass. Her slim, perfectly manicured fingers still circled her wrist, but the soothing motion she made was an absent one. Clearly, her mind was on other things—and from the stark look of vulnerability about her—she was about to fall apart.

Linc glanced into the suitcase. He spied a small, neatly folded stack of frilly panties and grabbed them. They were the first things he sent sailing into the grass, making sure they landed in the exact spot her eyes were focused on. A flimsy scrap of bra followed before he got down to business with the contents of her suitcase and silently counted the seconds.

Two...three...

"How dare you?"

She'd used that low cat growl again. He pretended to ignore her as he lifted out a sky-blue satin robe and stripped the tie belt from its loops. He discarded the robe beside the suitcase, but tossed the belt toward the duffel bag. He added two rolls of thick white socks to the satin belt, and a stack of packaged panty hose. Next, a fold of netting got his attention and he pulled it out. It was a bag, probably for dirty clothes, and it was a good size. He gripped the netting in his hands and gave it a stout yank to test its strength before he tossed it to the pile on top of the duffel bag.

Madison looked on, appalled at his rough treatment of her belongings. It was clear that he only meant to select a few odds and ends from her suitcase before he forced her to leave everything else behind. She clutched the wad of panties and bra to herself. My God she couldn't go anywhere without clean underwear! The fact that he'd thrown her most intimate apparel into the grass with bugs and chiggers infuriated her.

Wary of him because he was so rough with her things, Madison cautiously reached for the satin robe and bundled her underwear in it. She retrieved the net bag from the top of his duffel and stuffed the rolled robe into it.

Linc got out her shoebag next and rummaged through it, selecting the athletic shoes she'd had packed. He tossed them in her direction and they fell to the ground at her feet.

"Put those on and take the laces out of the boots you're wearing."

Madison stared down at the shoes, then at the lightweight boots. "These are hiking boots," she said, struggling to keep her voice steady while she defied the order. She'd accidentally glimpsed the dense wall of trees on the other side of the high meadow. The sensation of wilderness creeping closer was strong again. Arguing with Linc was the only thing she could think of to distract herself from mindless terror.

"Fakes," he said bluntly. "The leather's like paper compared to the other pair."

Madison stared down at the white athletic shoes, her thoughts racing. The very fact that he'd ordered her to switch her faux hiking boots for sturdy athletic shoes suggested that he anticipated an ordeal far more lengthy and arduous than a short hike in the woods. And he was right about the boots. The leather was flimsy compared to the Nikes.

"Change the damned shoes, Princess. We've only got so much daylight."

The terse order brought her eyes to his face, but he wasn't looking at her. He grabbed the things he'd discarded and crammed them back into her suitcase before he closed the lid and pressed down on the latches. Then he unzipped her garment bag to paw through the carefully pressed clothing in there. He added another belt to the pile, then two crisply pressed pairs of jeans and two cotton blouses.

Madison quickly grabbed the jeans and blouses and packed them into the net bag. Thank goodness she wouldn't have to fight with him about extra clothes. At least she'd have something clean to wear later.

Later.

How much later? How many hours would it take to walk back to civilization?

Her next thought—that she might not get to Aspen in time to catch her mother—set off an explosion of panic.

"How long will it take to get to Aspen?"

Linc looked at her then, his mouth shifting into a sarcastic slant as he harshly surveyed her from head to foot. "The way you're movin', about a month." He swiftly zipped the garment bag and shoved it toward the suitcase before he stood.

Madison couldn't seem to move as the implication of not getting to Aspen in time began to impact her. If she embarrassed her mother with her new husband by not showing up, she'd never hear from Roz again. She'd forever lose the chance to be close to her. Roz would never know she'd

outgrown her homeliness. She'd never know a moment's sorrow for giving up on her only child and abandoning her.

"Get busy, sweetheart."

The order snapped her out of her thoughts. The way he'd said the word "sweetheart" was no endearment. She-hated the male condescension in his low drawl. And she loathed the pet name, "Princess".

Her gaze narrowed with sudden inspiration.

"Right away...Ace," she answered, the stiff stretch of lips she gave him hinting at an acid smile. She had the satisfaction of seeing a glint of reaction in his dark eyes, and let her lips stretch a fraction wider to signal how much she savored the little dig.

Feeling she'd avenged herself in some small way, she stepped over to sit on her large suitcase to change her shoes. By the time she'd worked the laces from the hiking boots, Line had packed everything but her net bag of clothing into his duffel bag.

Having second thoughts about the hiking boots—she hated being limited to one pair of shoes—she slipped them into the net bag.

And then Linc was walking away from her toward the trees on the other side of the meadow, his long stride rapidly putting distance between them.

In her rush to gather her purse and the net bag to catch up with him, Madison almost missed getting the small case that held her cosmetics and toiletries. She slung her purse strap over one shoulder, the cord of the net bag over the other, then picked up the small case to hurry after Linc.

She'd gone half a dozen steps before she managed to trip on a thick tuft of meadow grass and fall flat.

Line set a pace he knew was brutal for Madison. He wasn't doing it to be cruel, but to hurry her along so fast that she'd pay more attention to keeping up with him than on the predicament they were in.

And he knew enough about her poison-pill personality to guess that her little "Ace" dig was the prelude to a major tirade on the subject of the crash. She had the potential to harangue him every step of the way if he gave her an opportunity.

He assumed the fastest course out of the mountains was to keep walking downhill. They needed to find a stream and a safe place to camp before dark. Once the sun dropped behind the western peaks they'd lose the light. Her Highness wouldn't take that well at all.

At least they'd be able to start a fire. He had matches and a lighter, but they'd need water. They could miss a few meals, but they could only go so long without water. Finding a stream might also mean that they could catch some fish and solve the problem of food.

He glanced over his shoulder at Madison. She was still carrying that damned little suitcase. She'd crisscrossed her purse strap and the cord from the net bag over her chest to free her hands, but she carried the little suitcase as if it contained a bottle of nitroglycerin.

Maybe it did. It held enough cosmetics and grooming items to rival a makeup counter, as well as a small drugstore of over-the-counter medications. He'd seen women's toiletries and personal care collections before, but Maddie's put them all to shame. Who had time to use everything she carried with her?

And for what? Madison St. John was a natural beauty. She should have been able to wash her face, comb her hair and walk out of her mansion looking like a million bucks. Instead, she painted over her natural good looks as if she were trying to smuggle a troll out of the house.

He hadn't made a fuss about her bringing the small case because he'd recognized that at least a few of the things in her collection might come in handy if they couldn't find their way to civilization soon. He hoped for a ranger's station, a private cabin or a hunting lodge with a telephone, but the chance of that was slim at best. He couldn't guess at how many square miles of wilderness lay around them. Finding anyone else in so vast a place by accident would be impossible.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.