

Chapter One

Travis smelled her perfume nearly a full minute before she sailed into his office. It crossed his mind that adding a shot of the whiskey he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk to his morning coffee might be appropriate; but he discarded the idea just as quickly. Instead he folded his hands on top of his desk and waited.

He didn't rise when she came into the room, they'd known each other much too long and too well for that kind of formality. There was also the notable fact that Claire Wellington, the widow of his best friend, invariably caused an embarrassing reaction in the lower half of his body.

Travis spent a good deal of his life wanting to either fuck her or spank the hell out of her and that urge had only escalated since the death of her husband two years ago.

"Travis, I think I'm in trouble," she said with a pretty pout as she gracefully dropped onto the chair in front of his large desk. Her auburn hair glistened, the short silky blunt cut nearly hiding her dark eyes peeping up at him.

"Of course you are," he replied with a sigh.

"It's not my fault, really. Everything is just so much more expensive than I realized when George was paying the bills." She sniffed sadly.

"I see. Like that trip to Belize with your 'boy toy?'"

"He's not a boy toy," she said indignantly. "He's just a friend I took along so I wouldn't be lonely."

"No wealthy girlfriends wanted to tag along?" he asked, studying her and noting the telltale blush.

"There was no one else available when I wanted to go," she snapped, obviously forgetting she was there to schmooze him into giving her more money.

"Did you have a good time?" he drawled.

"Oh, it was fabulous," she gushed, "the sand, the surf, the food and of course the glorious nights. I'd love to go back and..."

It was not her best moment and she apparently caught on rather quickly.

"Of course it was very expensive," she admitted.

"I know," he replied, reaching into his drawer and slapping a stack of bills on top of his desk.

"Yes, well, you know how I am with money, Travis. That's why George left you in charge of my funds and business matters. I'll try to do better in the future, but, in the meantime, if you could just write me a check to see me through until the end of the month I'd appreciate it."

He was honest enough to admit there was a small part of him that was enjoying this as he watched her fidget nervously. Beautifully manicured fingernails dug into the leather arms of the chair she was perched on. Her legs were crossed and the toe of her lemon yellow designer shoe was popping up and down.

Claire Wellington had been a lovely, free-spirited and generous girl in college and Travis fell hard, just as hard as George Wellington. They battled for her in a civilized way, as only good friends can, but George, with his easy-going manner and prominent social standing won her.

From the moment George slipped the three karat diamond solitaire on her finger, he proceeded to spoil and pamper her outrageously until she became a vain, manipulative shell of her former self. George was happy; he was the husband of a beautiful, satisfied wife who wallowed in

luxury. Claire was happy as the recipient of George's generosity and devotion. Even now Travis wasn't sure why it bothered him so much, apart from the fact that he'd genuinely loved the young woman she'd been. Now there were times he wasn't sure he even liked the woman before him, despite being part of her life for nearly twenty years.

"Okay, Travis. You've made me sweat suitably, done your best to shame me, now write the damn check. I have things to do," she hissed, glaring at him.

"No."

"No?" she asked, stunned.

"That's what I said, Claire. I will not write you a check. You receive a more than adequate monthly allowance to maintain your lifestyle and yet like clockwork you present yourself in my office each month asking for more. It's going to stop, and I mean right now," he informed her firmly.

"But it's my money," she stammered, her eyes wide and somewhat confused.

"Oh Claire," Travis sighed. "You're such a child at times," he continued, shaking his head. "Yes, it is your money, but in what I consider one of the smartest things your husband ever did, he put it in trust for you.

"George adored you, but he wasn't entirely blind to your faults, thank God." Travis explained for the umpteenth time. "A trust means the money is safe, protected and doled out over time so you don't find yourself in a situation where you can't afford to live. He appointed me the trustee for two reasons. One, I could be trusted and two, you wouldn't be able to sway or manipulate me away from my duties."

"But you've given me extra money lots of times," she exclaimed.

"Yes I have. You were grieving, honey, and I cut you some slack. I see now, after this trip," he informed her, picking up the stack of bills, "that you are no longer the heartbroken widow and I'll be damned if I let some loser take advantage of you."

"It's none of your business what I do with my money," she cried, rising and stomping one foot.

"Unfortunately, it is, I write the checks," he said, unable to hide his smile. Lord she was pissed. He watched her struggle to rein in her temper and then sidle around the desk. Pushing his large executive chair back, she plopped down on his lap.

"Please don't be nasty to me, Travis," she pleaded. Claire ran her fingers through the touch of silver at his temples. "George trusted you to take care of me," she pouted, resting her head on his shoulder.

"And that's exactly what I'm going to do," he assured her, wishing she'd stop wiggling her bottom. "Claire, if I let you continue unchecked, you'll be broke within ten years. You can't spend money like water and expect it to last forever. I won't allow you to fall victim to some guy looking for a cougar."

"A cougar," she cried, bolting upright on his knees. "You think I'm old? That someone will only want me for my money?"

"I think you're perfectly lovely and always have, but you're almost forty, Claire. It's time to grow up, baby."

"I am grown up, and I know my rights," she insisted angrily, her dark eyes flashing. "I'll have you replaced as my trustee."

"I'm sorry, but that's not possible. George's will was very explicit for just that reason. The only way you'll get a new trustee is if I die."

"Don't tempt me," she retorted, taking hold of his tie and pulling.

“Careful, Claire, or you’ll find yourself facing the other way over my knees,” he warned, locking his gaze on her.

“You wouldn’t,” she insisted.

“Don’t count on that, honey. I’ve wanted to blister your ass since the night of yours and George’s first anniversary party when you tossed your drink at him over some silly little remark.”

“I was drunk. That shouldn’t count,” she whispered in protest.

“On the contrary, that was no excuse and I would have spanked you for overindulging too.”

Slowly she began to scooch off his lap and for a moment he grasped her hip, holding her in place before allowing her to escape. When she was safely on the opposite side of his desk, she leaned forward, planting her hands palms down on the cool dark wood.

“I always knew there was something different about you,” she sputtered, “something... unyielding. That’s why I picked George, even though I loved you both. George was so...”

“Manageable?” he drawled sarcastically.

“Yes, exactly! And don’t say it like it’s some kind of flaw,” she barked out.

“George was a great guy; fun, loving, easy-going. I miss him,” Travis admitted sadly, “but he didn’t do you any favors.”

“How can you say that?” she demanded. “He did everything for me.”

“Yes, and now you can’t seem to do anything for yourself; even manage your finances so you don’t have to come in here every month asking for more money. He left you well off. You should be grateful.”

“I would be, if you’d let me have enough money to have some fun once in a while.”

“Claire, this discussion is over,” Travis snapped, rising. “You can expect your monthly allowance in your account on the first, but you’re not getting another dime before that. Have I made myself clear?” he asked sternly.

“Abundantly,” she shot back, picking up her purse. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I have plenty of things I can sell outright, including my apartment,” she sneered, “although I hardly think that’s what George had in mind.”

“Claire, don’t you dare sell that apartment,” he ordered, rounding the desk.

“You may control the trust, Travis, but you can’t stop me from doing what I want with the rest of my things. Maybe if I’m homeless a judge will overrule you and give me my inheritance in a lump sum,” she called over her shoulder as she walked to the door.

“I’m warning you, Claire,” he growled. “Your attitude is not acceptable. Come back here!”

“Sorry, the cougar has left the building,” she cooed just before slamming the door behind her.

Travis took the whiskey out of his desk and poured a healthy shot into his coffee. Watching her walk away from him with her cheeks jiggling beneath the fitted yellow dress was nearly more than he could bear, especially when all he wanted to do was drag her back into his office and spank some sense into her.

He hoped she was bluffing. It was the first time she’d threatened him with anything so outrageous, although each month she became more and more demanding. George’s will was ironclad. No judge in the world would give her access to that money given her mismanagement of her income, especially if she sold off all her assets to have a good time.

Legally there was nothing he could do to stop her, morally he felt he owed it to George to try and dissuade her. Right now she didn’t seem particularly inclined to heed his advice. At this point, all he could do was wait around to pick up the pieces.

Walking to the glass wall of his office, he watched until he saw her get into a small red sports car and roar away. She wasn't driving. "A fine way for a grown woman to behave," he snorted.

In college they'd been the best of friends, a threesome of sorts with he and George working hard to impress the beautiful young girl from the Midwest. Both men were handsome, athletic and intelligent. While Travis was considered middle class, George was definitely far wealthier. In the end, it was that and George's easy-going manner that tipped the scales in his favor. Claire Tracey was a small town girl on a full scholarship and in the big city for the first time. She was not hard to win over. The bright lights, glamour, and clubbing were new to her and she jumped in with a splash.

Travis stuck it out for over a year, but backed off when he realized he couldn't compete on George's level. He also noticed small changes in Claire that had begun to annoy him. She picked up a habit of tossing her hair in a snobbish sort of way; her sweet mid-western twang was replaced by big city lingo that didn't suit her, and she frequently insisted on getting her way.

George would laugh and give in; Travis wanted to pull her over his knee. There was one particular thing Travis approved of; George made her complete her degree before he would marry her. Even though she sported that diamond ring, and both men graduated two years before her, he would not relent, insisting she may need it someday. At the time, Claire had been furious but George cajoled until she agreed. It may have had something to do with the shiny new car he bought her.

The ink was hardly dry on her diploma when they married in a lavish ceremony, honeymooned in Europe and returned to a new home in The Hamptons. Claire seemed to fit right in with her posh neighbors and, for the next ten years if there were problems in their marriage, no one knew it. They entertained frequently, always including Travis, although he did not often attend. He still played racquetball with George each week and they met downtown for lunch whenever their schedules allowed.

Travis had women in his life, but no one he wanted to make permanent. In some ways, he was still in love with the sweet young girl from Nebraska, though she no longer existed. With a mind of its own, his body lusted after Claire's, something he would never act on, so he limited contact. Forced to make an appearance on special occasions, he arrived on time and left early if at all possible.

George knew, of course. Had always known how Travis felt about Claire and accepted it as a strange fact of life. They never discussed it, not once in all those years until the day George called him and requested a meeting. It was a day Travis would never forget.