

\*\*\*Excerpt from Wishful Thinking by Sandra Sookoo\*\*\*

**Wishful Thinking**

Silver Slippers

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## Chapter One

Jovie Andrews cast a glance around the conference room table. Her stomach pitched when her gaze landed on her boss, Dan Forth. Tall, thin and bearing the beady-eyed, furtive look of a used car salesman, the man in charge of Romantic Escapes was the last person anyone would expect to see at the helm of a conference facility. Especially one that mainly dealt in hosting wedding receptions.

And now he'd summoned all thirteen staffers together.

Thirteen. A very unlucky number on any given day, but today felt even more off kilter. She could almost see Dan rub his hands together with glee ala silent movie villain style. What would he say? They were all being laid off? It would make sense because when the economy tanked, their bookings had gone down over the last year.

Ignoring the nervous buzz of conversation, Jovie combed the fingers of one hand through her tumbled honey-gold curls, drawing out stray strands while she bit the inside of her lower lip. What was he waiting for? Dan's drawing out the reason was about to kill her, and she didn't need the added stress. As the junior account rep, technically she was still under the six month probationary period and could be let go without an excuse. But she'd built up a respectable client list of recurring business people and other executives that conducted monthly staff meetings at the Romantic Escapes facility so she shouldn't be worried.

What she really coveted was a promotion to senior account representative, which would allow her to work with more of the clients, especially the ones with weddings to plan. That's where the real money was. That's where she needed to be in order to move into a better apartment, ditch her pot-smoking roommate and buy a car. God, just thinking about not riding the bus to work anymore made her lips lift in a smile.

Her paycheck now was adequate, but depending on commission-only money had played havoc with her checking account. Her savings had depleted. It was imperative she impress the weasel-like Dan.

Another man swept into the conference room. Jovie stifled a groan. Of all her coworkers, she disliked him the most. Clinton Mosby. The epitome of slick, salesman charm and charisma, he wore a tailored gray suit, expensive dress shirt and kept his hair cut short and sexy. An overpowering cloud of designer cologne followed him in and settled oppressively throughout the room.

With the cocky attitude he owned like a second skin, Clinton dropped into the empty leather chair next to hers and shot her an oily grin. "Hey, blue eyes. Land any new clients?"

She shook her head, scooting her chair back a few inches. It was really too bad he was her "mentor" and his word could make or break her future with the company. "Not today. The ones you've dumped on me have taken too much of my time." Clinton's idea of work meant tossing off the customers he deemed not important enough.

Jovie didn't mind because she gained experience from it, except it didn't leave her nearly enough time at the week's end to work on gaining her own clients.

"Don't worry, kid. You'll get there." He patted her leg then moved his hand beneath her flirty beige skirt and squeezed her knee. "I'm happy to help with after-hours lessons."

"Pass." She removed his hand like she'd done so many other times before. The guy didn't get the hint she wasn't interested—in him, not the chance at sex. Her love life may be experiencing a drought, but she refused to dip into crazy just to scratch that itch. After all, curvy girls weren't desperate, despite what most people thought.

"You're a frigid bitch, Jovie, and wound tighter than a clock. One of these days you're gonna get sprung and I'll be the man that does it." He leaned toward her, stirring the citrusy cologne-laden air and whispered, "If you let me do you, I can guarantee that promotion you're lusting after."

She recoiled as far as she could into her padded chair. "I want it on my own merits—not from being in your bed."

"Wrong answer. You don't want to mess with me, little girl. I can make or break you. The only way up the ladder is through me." Clinton wheeled his chair away. "And you just made a bad choice."

Her breath whooshed out in a rush of relief. She'd rather die than have sex with him. Not opposed to a good romp, the idea of being intimate with Clinton made her want to wretch. Thankfully, Dan cleared his throat at the head of the table and called the room to order.

"Romantic Escapes is barely holding its own in the marketplace. That being said, if you account reps want to keep your jobs and not find yourselves reporting for duty at the unemployment office, you'll need to turn in six new leads a week. Period. I'm in the business of making money. I can't do that if you're not pulling your weight."

When grumbles met the announcement, Dan shrugged. "If you don't want to work, I don't need you on the staff. Your job is to make me money. Bottom line. Now unless you've got another sure-win idea, get back to work."

The bulk of the occupants of the room stood. Jovie followed suit and accidentally met Clinton's dark gaze. A chill raced down her spine and prickled her skin beneath her business suit. She'd seen that look before and it meant no good.

"Actually, Dan, I think I've got the best idea yet, one that will bring pure profit with no effort on your part." Clinton pushed himself slowly to his feet with a predatory grin parting his lips.

"Oh? Then I'm all ears."

"I thought you would be."

Jovie attempted to edge around him but Clinton clamped a hand around the upper part of her left arm. "I need to return to my clients."

"I'm sure you do, since you're the hardest working junior rep we have." His grip tightened until she winced. "Please stay. This new thought concerns you."

She wrenched away. "Get on with it. I'd rather not lose my job because of some asinine idea. I'm already doing enough of your work as it is." She heard the snark in her voice but didn't care. Already, too much time had been wasted by the stupid meeting.

The last member of the staff cleared the doorway. No one would run interference for her.

"You won't get far in this field with that attitude." Clinton's eyes bore into hers. "Remember, you brought this on yourself." He turned to Dan. "Our little Jovie is worth her weight in gold."

"Is that right? Well, it's certainly not showing in her work. She should have three more contracts than she does now."

Clinton threw an arm about her shoulders. "I have recently discovered Jovie has a hidden talent." The oily chumminess in his sent bile into her throat.

"Oh?" Dan's beady eyes roved over her body. "What would that be? She's too much on the fleshy side for *that* type of activity."

Heat swept through her cheeks at his implication. Before she could object, Clinton interjected.

"I wouldn't know. She rejects all my attempts." A trace of bitterness echoed in his statement. "However, you're not even in the ballpark, sir." His wolfish grin widened. "She has the ability to turn old contracts into gold. And not just any gold. Gold bars." He held up a hand, palm outward, when both she and Dan scoffed at the idea. "I know you're thinking I'm insane, and that Jovie would have to be a magician to attempt something like this."

Jovie jerked from under his arm. "You're an ass, Clinton."

"I agree. Time is money." Dan retrieved a yellow note pad and pen from the polished wood table. "Get to the real point instead of this hormonal nonsense between you two."

"Oh, this is the truth, sir. I don't know how she does it, but our girl has been holding back. Think about it. Wouldn't a few gold bars patch the hole in this doomed company? You can say we're solvent all you want, but we both know the end is coming."

"Proceed."

Clinton threw an evil look over his shoulder before turning his attention back to Dan. "In fact, I'd bet a month's commission that if you brought in a copy paper box full of outdated and

cancelled contracts, Jovie could turn them into a stack of gold bricks before the morning. Just think of how much cash that could translate into with today's prices."

"That's ridiculous!" Jovie marched forward and yanked on Clinton's arm. "What kind of crap are you trying to pull here? I can't turn contracts into gold any more than I can turn this conference table into a chariot with six horses." She mentally berated herself for thinking of fairy tales at a time like this when what she really needed was a level head.

"I agree with Jovie on this one, Clinton." Dan's face reflected his doubt. "I don't know how you're trying to get your rocks off, but this is a stupid idea." He turned toward the doorway.

"Are you sure?" Clinton followed their boss and laid a congenial hand on his shoulder. "What do we know about her? She's worked here for six months and hasn't made many friends among the staff. She rejects every effort we've made to take her out for drinks. She's secretive. If you let her walk out of here, how do you know she won't quit overnight and lend her unique talent to another company?"

Speechless with outrage, Jovie could almost see the wheels turning in Dan's brain.

*Stupid, greedy man! I can't believe he's considering this!* She curled her fingers into fists, biting her bottom lip when her fingernails bit into the flesh of her palms.

Clinton's smirk widened. "Imagine if what I say is true? A pile of gold bricks could keep this company afloat for a long time and give you the cash you need to woo bigger clients, perhaps open up a second location. Hell, you could close this white elephant and retire to some tropical location and play golf the rest of your life."

"Oh, please." Jovie swallowed heavily when the light of materialism sprang into Dan's eyes. "Sir, you have to know how stupid this sounds! Turning anything into gold. What an idiotic idea. He's making this stuff up."

As one, both the men assessed her. Dan cleared his throat. "Stupid or not, I have no choice except to see if what Clinton says is true." He rubbed bony fingers over an equally bony chin. A Cheshire grin played about his thin-lipped mouth. "Clinton, escort Jovie into the small conference room at the end of the hall. The one without windows so she won't be distracted. Jovie, I'll bring all of last year's contracts to the room and let you have a go at it."

Horror swept through her stomach and left it in knots. "Are you people out of your minds?" Jovie made a move to shove past the men. Clinton grabbed one of her arms while Dan led the procession along the hall. "Let me go! You can't hold me against my will. This isn't the Middle Ages!" Fear rose in her throat and tightened her chest as sweat dampened her back, causing her lavender silk shirt to stick to her skin.

Dan waved off her protests. "It won't be against your will. You'll work in the conference room. If you don't *do* the job, you won't *have* the job anymore. Your choice."

Her mouth fell open.

“You listen to me.” Clinton pulled her closer, moving his mouth to her ear. The smell of beer on his breath made her gag. “We both know you can’t change anything into gold. Only a moron would think so, which, lucky for me, Dan is. So you have two choices. Stay here and try to do the impossible. Or sleep with me and I’ll convince him I was playing a joke.” He angled his lips toward hers. “Depending on how you perform for me, I’ll tell him you deserve to keep your job, or if you’re really good, that promotion.”

“You’re crazy.” She pushed him away, blinking back tears of rage. Why had she left her purse at her desk? She had no access to her cell phone to call for help. Attempting to tug away, she soon realized her limited strength was no match for the two determined men. For the moment, she had no choice but to try and appease them. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“You make me that gold.” Clinton’s eyes glittered with greed. “Hell, I’ll even give you that promotion. If you don’t, you’re fired. I’ll destroy your reputation in this industry.”

Before she knew it, they shoved her in the conference room and flipped on the light.

Clinton patted her down in an extremely invasive way, but since she didn’t have anything on her person, he came away empty handed. Dan retrieved the phone from a small side table by the door, yanking the cord from the wall.

“Wait!”

Ignoring her, they slammed the door and were gone.

She was alone with nothing but her racing thoughts to keep her company. Damn it, no matter how ridiculous the idea sounded, what if they weren’t talking literal gold? What if they really wanted her to call the old clients and find out if they wanted to book a future event? That way, money would come into the company and be considered “modern” gold. “Get a grip, girl. The pricks removed the phone.” She took a deep, shuddering breath and blew it out. Fine. No reason to panic. *I’ll just work throughout the night, do the best I can and hope for a miracle.*