



SIGNS OF LOVE by Chanta Rand

Vaughn stared at Sloane Young. He decided right then and there, he didn't like her. Upon first glance she seemed just like the female version of Pete Rhodes - poised and professional. But within five minutes of her opening her little heart-shaped mouth, he'd learned she was a far cry from Pete. Pete was smooth and tactful. This woman was a barracuda in dress. And not even a fashionable one at that. Too conservative for his tastes. She wore a cream colored suit with a crimson colored silk blouse that buttoned at the base of her throat. *No wiggle room for even the slightest peek of skin.*

And whereas Pete was fair skinned and blue-eyed, Sloane was graced with dark mysterious eyes and flawless skin the color of a candied yam. A redbone. Her hair looked professionally styled, but he couldn't be sure of the length, since the bronze and gold strands were held prisoner by the tight bun she wore. She reminded him of a librarian. All she needed was a pair of those fancy reading glasses with a delicate chain dangling from the hinges. Earlier, he'd watched as her eyes thoroughly examined him, her probing gaze near the point of being insulting, visually turning him inside out and analyzing every inch of him from head to toe. Then the deep, intelligent orbs darted quickly back and forth, scanning every detail of the room. It was scary how her eyes changed shape as she absorbed each new detail. One minute, they were wide and exotic. The next, they narrowed with bias.

She had put on just the right amount of makeup. Not too show-girly. Not too Laura Ingalls-like. She had an understated prettiness about her, but her attitude definitely rubbed him the wrong way. Her tone indicated that she was used to bossing people around and used to being obeyed. Sitting there all prim and proper with her calculator and her concrete demeanor. She was probably hell on wheels, the kind of woman who would have a man drawn and quartered just for putting a staple on the wrong side of the page. Well, if she thought she could control him, she had another thing coming.

Vaughn's gaze never wavered from hers as he spoke. "Like I said, I'm sorry to hear about Pete. And I *will* be sending him flowers."

"Mr. Jackson, you are in no position to be sending flowers." Sloane flipped through her paperwork until she landed on a page with a red circle at the bottom. She tapped the number in the circle. He noticed she wore her nails short with flesh-colored polish. "You are several hundred thousand dollars in debt. Expenses like that won't help."

"I don't consider that an expense. I consider it basic human kindness."

She ignored his glare and studied her figures again. “Thankfully, I’m here to consider all expenses for you. I’ll divide them into necessary and unnecessary items. And by the looks of things, there are a lot more that fall into the latter category.”

Vaughn was astounded. Apparently, this woman either had not heard him or didn’t give a damn what he said. He turned to Duke for support, but his friend and manager suddenly seemed obsessed with studying the pattern of the carpet. It seemed that Sloane had whipped Duke into submission with her sharp tongue. Since Vaughn had no backup, he’d have to do this on his own.

“Look, Missus Young—”

“It’s Miss.”

No surprise there. “I’m not some irresponsible thug running from his financial obligations. I don’t need you telling me what’s necessary and unnecessary.”

“That’s debatable. You’re spending money like it’s growing on trees, and in the process, you’re digging yourself deeper and deeper into a hole that you can’t get out of. Now that Willie is gone, you’ll need to learn how to manage your finances correctly. It’s not so hard. I can teach you.”

“Hold up.” He stood and walked to her chair, towering over her. He clasped his hands behind his back so they wouldn’t *accidentally* find their way around her pretty neck. “I know how to handle my finances. That was Willie snorting powder up his nose, not me. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be in this *hole* as you put it.”

Undaunted, Sloane looked down at his feet. “How much did those loafers cost?”

He cocked his head to the side. “I don’t know. Around fifteen hundred. Why?” He watched as she used a red pencil to write the figure in her notes, then immediately realized he probably shouldn’t have told her. He could already see where she was headed. “But I don’t normally dress like this,” he backtracked. “Like I said, it’s causal around here. I just dressed for our meeting.”

She cracked a sarcastic sneer. “I’m touched.” Before he could retort, she was off and running again. “And the Bonsai plants?”

Vaughn folded his arms over his chest. “They were gifts.”

“The kimonos?”

“A souvenir from my trip to Japan.”

“I see.” She scribbled furiously.

“It was seven years ago, for my thirtieth birthday,” he defiantly offered. What was wrong with this woman? Didn’t she have any fun at all? The way she was writing in that tablet, she was going to give herself carpal tunnel. He didn’t know what she was jotting down, but from the sound of her tone, he knew it couldn’t be good.

“What about the art in the lobby?” she asked. “It must have cost thousands.”

Duke finally spoke up. “Miss Young, you gotta spend money to make money.”

She smirked. “Too bad you aren’t making any.”

Sloane turned back to Vaughn. “All of these expenses are crippling you.” She handed him a sheet of ledger paper. “I’ve taken the liberty of red-lining all the expenditures you should eliminate immediately. Doing so will instantly give you a ten percent decrease in operating costs.”

Vaughn glanced at the list. “Why did you circle all these names?”

“You have too many people on the payroll. I recommend firing the names I circled. I don’t see their relevance to Jackson Enterprises.”

He shook his head. "Each of these people performs a valuable function in my organization."

"What about this guy Ignacio?" She sorted through her paperwork as if searching for more information. "Ignacio... Ignacio... Apparently, he has no last name."

"He does odd jobs for me."

"You pay him one thousand dollars a week for odd jobs? I find that *odd*."

"To me, his services are priceless. He stays."

Sloane marched on. "I see you spent five thousand dollars on liquor this month. I'm surprised you're not an alcoholic."

"That's an entertainment expense for my posse."

An annoyed look passed over her petite features. "Your posse? Mr. Jackson, you are a thirty-seven year old man. You're not a marshal in the old west. The people you surround yourself with are a bunch of hangers-on who are leeching off you."

Heat crept up the back of his neck. Who the hell did she think she was coming in here and tearing up his life like a rock star trashing a hotel room? "You're acting like a Nazi."

She eyeballed him. Her plush lips thinning into a hard line. "Calling me names won't help."

"That's a matter of opinion." Vaughn heard Duke's discreet cough, but he wasn't backing down. Obviously, neither was Sloane.

"Acting immature was the last thing I expected from a man with four Grammys," she said.

Vaughn crumpled up the paper she'd given him, dropped it on the floor, and walked back to his desk. Then he calmly sat down. "How's that for immature? I want Pete back," he scowled.

Duke stood up and retrieved the paper. "Aw, c'mon, Vaughn. Don't be like that."

Vaughn eyed Sloane with a mixture of irritation and anger. *Yeah, what now, baby? I bet that rattled you to your core!*

But to his amazement, Sloane wasn't even flustered. An announcement like that would have reduced most women to tears. He scrutinized her impassive face. There was no sign of trembling lips or the glassy look that came just before women turned on the waterworks. A pair of intense, dark eyes looked out over high cheekbones. He had to admit, she was tough. And she might be pretty - if she weren't such a hard ass.

Sloane placed her hands in her lap but made no move to leave. "If you prefer to deal with Pete instead of me, that's your prerogative. However, I've known him for years and I can assure you that he'll tell you the same thing." She blinked, batting her long lashes at him. But he didn't take it as a flirtatious move. He wasn't sure Sloane Young was even capable of flirting. She was just a cold number-cruncher who probably had to remind herself to blink every few minutes so she would appear human.

Duke appealed to Vaughn. "Just listen to her man. Nobody ever said this was gonna be easy."

Vaughn sat back and took a deep breath. He had to calm himself down. No woman had ever gotten him bent this far out of joint. He knew part of what Sloane was saying was true. He just didn't like her delivery method. He tried another approach. "I know we have a lot of work to do, but you just can't go slicing people off lists with the magic stroke of your red pencil. We're dealing with folks' livelihoods here. These people are depending on me. Most of them were with me when I started, when I had nothing."

Sloane came back with a rebuttal of her own. "If you're not careful, you'll be back there again - to having nothing." She closed her briefcase and stood. "I'm sorry, but you need to drop

some of this dead weight. I suggest giving everyone on that list a two-week notice. If you can't stomach it, I can do it for you."

"The hell you will," Vaughn retorted.

She visibly flinched at his words and he immediately felt contrite. He wasn't rude by nature, but Miss Young brought out the worst in him.

"Goodbye, Gentlemen. I'll be calling in a few days to give you the rest of my report."

Vaughn watched her leave. He was surprised the heat from his glare didn't burn two holes into the wall next to her head.

"Well," Duke prompted, "it seems the woman may have a heart after all."

Vaughn turned his glower on his manager and best friend. "What makes you say that?"

Duke handed him the battered ledger paper. Now unfolded, it resembled a paper honeycomb. "She recommended firing everyone except four people."

Vaughn quickly scanned the list again. Sloane had circled all the names except Duke Grier, KiKi Evans, Syerra Martinez, and Elsa Jackson. Syerra was his personal assistant. Anyone who called him went through her. But Sloane had to have done some research to determine that Elsa was his elderly grandmother. Grams required round-the-clock care. Vaughn was spending a pretty penny to keep her in style in an exclusive assisted living community. Elsa was worth every dollar. She had made major sacrifices to raise him. She was the reason he'd become the man he was today. Now that she was suffering from Alzheimer's, she didn't always remember all those sacrifices. But Vaughn would never forget.

He snorted. "No Duke. It's not that Sloane has a heart. She has a brain. She probably knows if she dared to bring that up, I would have gone ballistic."

"Yeah, and a lot of good that attitude of yours did. Instead of approaching her like an adult, you pouted like a punk ass kid the whole time."

"Well, she pissed me off! And I didn't see you jumping in to help."

Duke shook his head. "That's cuz I was analyzing her. Every time you jumped mean, she jumped right back. I can tell she's not like other women. She ain't backing down, Vaughn. So, if you wanna get her on your side, you gotta change tactics."

Vaughn stood up and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his Bonobos. "Why would I want to get her on my side? The woman's a financial piranha. She's out for my blood."

"No. She just takes pride in her work and she plays by the rules. Sloane can be your best friend or your worst enemy. You want her on your side so she can keep the IRS off your ass."

"And how do you propose I get her on my side?"

"Well, for one, stop insulting her. Be kind. Pretend like she's a fan in the front row and lay the charm on thick. I guarantee her whole attitude will change."

Vaughn was always up for a challenge. If he wasn't sharp enough to crack a tough nut like Sloane Young, what kind of a man was he?

Duke egged him on. "Man, I remember when women used to melt at your feet. No conquest was too hard for you." He pulled a crisp hundred dollar bill from his wallet. "I bet you a C-note you can have her eating out of your hand within a week."

Vaughn grinned, his buried sense of competition rising from the dead. "Man, this is like taking candy from a baby. The next time we meet, Sloane Young won't know what hit her."