

Libby pulled into the Hilton parking lot at 11:55 on the nose and hurried to the huge double doors that led to the lobby. When she stepped through them she felt like she'd walked into a Japanese garden. There were small ponds of water spread throughout the lobby, surrounded by stone walls, lush greenery, and huge pillars that looked like enormous Asian-inspired paper lamps were staggered throughout the room. Wooden-slatted walls surrounded the sitting areas and Libby imagined how much prettier a space it would be if it weren't inside a hotel, but outside, with a touch of Elena's prowess with flowers.

It was warm in the lobby with the sun shining down through the glass ceiling and Libby unbuttoned her coat and hung it over one arm, revealing the short sleeved purple silky blouse that she had picked out with Elena's help. She smoothed her hand over the buttons and thin ruffles that trailed down the middle. Flipping her hair out from her collar, she glanced around the lobby, trying to spot someone who might be trying to spot her.

She was startled when his voice came from behind her. "Libby?"

She spun on her heel, a greeting on her lips, but she faltered as soon as she saw the face that matched the voice. She stumbled forward slightly, trying to recover. Jason reached his hand out and steadied her with a smile.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you!"

"Oh, no! I – that's fine! I, uh –." She stumbled over her words while trying to recover her thoughts. Elena's instincts had been spot on. He was gorgeous. Much more handsome than she'd imagined, that one time she'd let her curiosity take her mind on a rabbit trail.

His olive complexion and dark brown eyes told her he had to be of some eastern descent. Filipino? Asian? European? She wasn't sure, but she didn't mind staring while she tried to figure it out. His jet black hair was cut short and looked as though he'd simply run his fingers through it once or twice when he woke up in the morning. His eyes were kind,

but also searching – oh right. She'd been speaking, hadn't she?

“Um, sorry.” Libby set her shoulders and held out her hand. “I’m Libby Abbott.” She smiled while her mind played cruel tricks on her. Jason’s hand slipped into hers and she had to physically stop herself from inhaling sharply.

“Jason Randall. It’s great to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said breathlessly. “So, where to?”

“Ah, well, if I can just have my hand back,” Jason chuckled and indicated that she hadn’t let go yet.

Cheeks burning, Libby pulled her hand away abruptly and apologized again. Jason gestured past the Japanese garden.

“There is actually a really nice restaurant here at the hotel. When I booked the room, I thought I’d be closer to downtown, but the concierge said that with traffic on 35, it takes a while to get over there.”

“It’s true. I think Dallas has the worst traffic of anywhere. Except New York of course.” She refrained from rolling her eyes at herself.

He smiled graciously. “Well, then is it alright if we try the place here?”

“Absolutely. Lead the way.” Libby stepped aside and hung back a few steps as Jason moved ahead of her. His dark blue button down shirt fit him perfectly, it only bloused a little at his waistline and his straight-legged slacks smoothed across his backside –

Libby swore at herself silently. What was that she’d been defending to Elena? Her need to heal, her need for time, the fact that she most definitely did not want any distractions; well, it wasn’t a crime to admire the goods . . . was it?

Oh, good grief, Libby. Snap out of it, she thought. She shook thoughts from her head, averted her eyes and hurried to catch up with Jason.

A hostess led them to a booth by the window and handed them each a menu. Jason set his down and clasped his fingers together. Libby smiled nervously.

They sat in an awkward silence, staring at each other for a moment before Jason picked his menu up again and said, "Let's order and then get down to business."

"Okay," Libby nodded and exhaled slowly, her heart pounding.

"Are you nervous?" Jason chuckled as he turned the menu over.

"Uh, yes. A little," she laughed.

"No need to be. I'm the one that's here to woo you."

"Woo me?" Libby asked in surprise.

"Well, yeah. Basically."

The waiter arrived then and took their drink orders. They each turned back to their menus and when their drinks were delivered, they ordered their food.

"So, tell me how you plan to woo me," Libby grinned, leaning forward to take a sip from her soda.

"I'm going to wine you and dine you and show you a world you've never dreamed of." Jason said without cracking a smile.

Libby's eyes doubled in size. What did he mean by that?

"Oh wow," he laughed. "You should see your face!"

She exhaled slowly again. "I'm sorry. I just – wow. My friends were kind of teasing me about meeting with you today and well, to be honest I just didn't expect you to be so good looking and I'm just not really in the space to –" Libby clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Oh my gosh," she mumbled through her fingers, feeling the warmth spreading on her cheeks.

Jason let out a loud roar of laughter and Libby cursed herself in her head and covered her whole face with her hands.

Jason was laughing so hard that he snorted and Libby's head snapped up and she stared at him wide-eyed, slowly moving her hands from her face. "Did you just . . . snort?" she began to laugh with him and soon they were both near tears from laughing so hard.

Jason gripped the table with both hands trying to recover his poise and Libby wiped at her eyes furiously.

"Oh gosh. How is that for a first impression?" she sighed breathlessly.

"It was perfection," he grinned.

"So embarrassing." Libby shook her head at herself.

"I think mine was worse. But if it makes you feel any better," Jason's expression sobered, "I think you are stunningly beautiful."

Libby's breath caught in her throat and she clasped her hands together in her lap.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Back to business?" he asked.

Libby nodded eagerly. "Please." She couldn't help thinking that when he smiled, he looked just a little bit like that actor from that old Sandra Bullock movie. She couldn't place the name or the title just then, though.

"Alright. Here's the deal. I've already seen that you have talent, so you're getting the best end of the stick here because you're skipping the part that most authors hate."

"Pitching and querying?" Libby said knowingly.

"Yes! You've done your research!"

"Actually I've avoided it like the plague. That's why I was so surprised when you called."

“So you haven’t pitched at all before?”

Libby shook her head. “I’ve only ever submitted my short stories. The plan was to get some street cred with magazines or online publications and then have something to brag about. But then life kind of got in the way,” she said, her voice trailing off.

He nodded in understanding. “It’s unusual for an agent to reach out like this, I admit it. But it’s not unheard of. When raw talent hits you in the face, you don’t turn away from it.”

Libby’s cheeks flushed with the compliment.

“I’ve actually already pitched your short story to a publisher.” Jason announced, watching her expression carefully.

“You what?” Her widened and she sat forward intently.

Jason nodded. “He wants to see the manuscript, at least what you sent me last night, which I almost finished on the plane yesterday. The guy beside me couldn’t take a clue and kept talking to me about this girl he was about to marry that he’d met online a month ago.”

“And?” Libby’s eyes grew guarded.

“He proposed over skype and was on his way to meet her in person for the first time!” Jason rolled his eyes.

“I meant what did you think about my manuscript?” Libby giggled nervously.

“Oh!” he laughed. “Right. Well, I had already read enough to know that you were incredibly talented, but the chapters I read last night were just proof positive that you were created to write. Like I said, raw talent. You write beautifully, and it’s no wonder that American Woman has kept you such a secret. You have a following already, did you know that?”

She stared at him blankly. “Huh?”

“Have you ever searched for yourself on the internet? Or gone onto the American Woman website and seen the comments about your story?”

Libby shook her head. “I mean, I did at first for like a week, but there wasn’t much to look at.”

Jason grinned and pulled an Ipad out on to the table. “There’s a lot now.” He powered up the tablet and passed it over to her, pointing to the screen. “Scroll to the bottom and read the comments.”

“It says there are almost a thousand comments. That can’t be right . . . can it?”

“Read them,” Jason urged gently.

Libby read out loud. “Elizabeth Abbott is my new favorite author. Is she going to publish anytime soon?” Her jaw dropped open and she looked up at Jason in shock then kept reading. “My only complaint was that this was a short story. Is there more to it? I need more!” she continued. “Jeremy is so hot. I wish he would come herd my cattle!” Libby laughed incredulously.

“There are a lot more well thought out comments, but Libby, you already have a hungry audience. You need to capitalize on this now. The publisher wants your book in editing by October and because of a stroke of luck, he thinks they’ll have it on the shelf within a year.

Libby choked on a drink of her soda. “Seriously? October?”

“Do you think you can do that?”

“I’m in the middle of a divorce!”

“I know, and I explained that there were some extenuating circumstances, but they still want to try.”

Libby nodded and turned her eyes to the ceiling, breathing deeply.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just overwhelmed.”

Jason leaned forward and put his hand out, palm up. She looked warily at it, and then slowly put her hand in his. His fingers were soft as they closed around her hand.

“I’m just going to take the liberty to say you can do this, Libby. I can see the strength in you, just from reading your manuscript, and the few conversations we’ve had, and I think you are amazing. This betrayal could destroy you. The pain could eat you alive, but I don’t think you’re going to let it. I see a fight in you. And with this opportunity, I think that we can create something amazing together.”

Libby’s hand was sweating in Jason’s, and the way he was gazing at her felt like he was seeing into the very core of her soul. She blinked away tears and wiped at them with her free hand.

“Libby?” An unwelcome voice shattered the moment between agent and author. Libby’s chest heaved and she withdrew her hand from Jason’s immediately, feeling as though she were going to throw up.