



Something to  
**BELIEVE**

Robbi McCoy

# **SOMETHING TO BELIEVE**

by

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## PART ONE

Yangtze River, China, before the dam

## CHAPTER ONE

“The water’s going to rise a hundred meters in some locations when the dam is in full operation.” The slight, gray-haired engineer, whose name Lauren had already forgotten, raised his hand level with his forehead, as if to illustrate a hundred meters. “Two million people will have to be moved, which means rebuilding cities from the ground up. Whole cities, *big* cities, brick by brick.”

“A massive undertaking,” Faith said, her attention completely caught up in the conversation.

She had that rapt look on her face, the one that encouraged people to go on talking indefinitely. As soon as Faith had heard this guy was an engineer with more than a casual knowledge of the dam, she’d parked herself at the top of the staircase and engaged him in conversation. She now stood leaning against the brass railing, one hand in the front pocket of her jeans, her sunglasses on top of her head where she’d perched them after moving from the afternoon sunshine into the interior of the ship. Her straight, thin nose was pointed directly at the engineer, who stood no more than two inches above her five-five height, and her forehead was knit into her serious business-like expression, the one Lauren thought of as “the scientist.”

Lauren stood self-consciously near the doorway, her attention drawn to the artwork on the walls and the richly patterned carpet, the gleaming stair banisters and the chandelier above them. It wasn’t that the Three Gorges Dam project didn’t interest her. It was just that they had boarded the ship only moments before and she was anxious to see everything, especially their cabin.

Besides, she had read about all of these statistics already while researching the trip. Lauren smiled to herself as she recognized one of the essential differences between them, that Faith preferred to get her information from people and Lauren preferred to get it from books, or from the written word, at least, in whatever form it came to her these days.

“In the United States,” continued the engineer, “such a thing just wouldn’t be possible. Can you imagine the outcry, all the lawsuits, everybody asserting their rights? I’m not knocking America. I’m just saying it’s different here in China. They’ll all cooperate and lend a hand. Whoever doesn’t like it will keep their mouth shut and plenty of people will get screwed.”

“It’s a different mindset,” Faith agreed. “Do you think they’ll make the schedule?”

“Fully operational by 2009? I think they might, yes, with the exception of the ship lifts. Those suckers probably won’t be up until 2014, but the dam will be producing electricity in just a few years. No doubt about it.” He shook his head, awed at the prospect. “This kind of job would take twice, maybe three times as long somewhere else. At this level of technology, I mean. They’re going to tear down these towns and rebuild them with manual labor! I’ve seen crews of workers everywhere breaking up concrete with hammers and chisels.”

“One thing they have in China is people power,” observed Faith.

He nodded. “Amazing what people can do when you’ve got enough of them. Look at the pyramids, for instance, and they didn’t have a single truck. At least here they’ve got a few machines.”

Her cheeks flushed, Faith said, “Speaking of the pyramids, all things being equal, do you think there’s any modern engineering feat to rival them? I mean, given all our technology, have we achieved anything as impressive as that?”

“God, no! We’d have to build a stairway to the moon to claim something equivalent.”

Faith laughed her deep, carefree laugh.

“I’m going to go find our cabin,” Lauren said, excusing herself.

“Okay,” said Faith, glancing around at her. “I’ll be right there.”

Lauren turned into the narrow hallway, which was flanked on both sides by identical doors, reading numbers as she walked the length of the hall to locate their room. When she arrived at their cabin, she realized with frustration that Faith had both key cards. She could go back, but decided to wait. She stood her suitcase against the wall, then sat on it facing the door to their cabin.

Another passenger came along, a tall, athletic-looking blonde wrestling a large suitcase. She stopped to look at the room numbers, then came up to Lauren and said, “I think ours is just past you.”

“Oh, sorry,” Lauren said, standing flat against the wall to let the woman pass by. She was in her mid-twenties, Lauren guessed, cute, dressed for warm weather in a short-sleeved shirt and twill cargo pants. Her straight hair was in a ponytail under a white baseball cap. She stopped at the cabin next door, verifying the room number.

“Thanks,” she said, parking her suitcase and shoving her hands in the pockets of her pants one by one until she produced the card that would open her door. Her suitcase, Lauren noticed, had a rectangular rainbow sticker on it. Lauren looked her over again, more interested, as she stuck the card in the slot and pushed the door open, then shoved the suitcase in the doorway to hold it ajar.

“Cassie!” she hollered, waving her arm and looking back down the hallway. “Right here!”

Lauren turned to look at the woman heading toward them pulling another suitcase. She was older, about Lauren’s age, mid-thirties, had thin, brown, shoulder-length hair parted in the

middle and swept behind her ears. She wore a plain yellow T-shirt and blue jeans. Her glasses reflected the overhead lights, obscuring her eyes. She was nice looking, Lauren thought, in a casual, comfortable sort of way. There was no doubt now. Their neighbors were lesbians. American lesbians. Strange coincidence, she thought, as Cassie caught her eye and smiled warmly. She too wedged past.

“Looks like we’re neighbors,” Lauren said.

“Yes.” Her eyes were clearly visible now. They were deep brown, lit by enthusiasm and amusement. “I’m Cassie Burkett.”

Lauren took hold of her offered hand briefly, noting the dimples which appeared as she smiled again.

“Lauren Keegan.”

The cute blonde took Cassie’s suitcase and carried it inside. Cassie turned back to Lauren and said, “That’s Jennifer.”

Lauren recognized the awkward moment of not knowing how to introduce the lesbian lover—*partner, girlfriend?* No matter how comfortable you were with yourself, this scene played out over and over with strangers. Is this a moment to make a stand? Take a chance, knowing nothing about this other person? Or just let the moment go down easy for everyone?

“My partner Faith is just around the corner,” Lauren said, offering a crucial piece of information.

“Ah,” said Cassie, looking enlightened and surprised. This wasn’t an Olivia cruise, after all. No reason to expect more than one gay couple on board a boat with a mere sixty passengers. Not to mention having one next door. “Nice to meet you, Lauren. We’ll see you at dinner, then.”

Cassie disappeared into her room just as Faith rounded the corner, key card in hand. She

looked bright-eyed and invigorated, her cheeks still rosy.

“Sorry, honey,” she said as she arrived at their door.

“That’s okay. It’s been more interesting waiting here than you might think.”

Faith opened the door and led the way inside the small cabin, their home for a four-day cruise on the Yangtze River. There were two twin beds separated by a small table. Sliding glass doors opened onto a private balcony with two plastic chairs. The shower was tiny, but functional. All very cozy and smart.

Once they were inside with the door shut, Faith slipped her hands around Lauren’s waist and kissed her. “Welcome to your stateroom, Madam,” she said.

Lauren ran her fingers through Faith’s short, platinum hair, noting the childlike glee in her eyes. Faith pulled her closer and kissed her more passionately. She felt a familiar need rise in her. Later, she promised herself, pulling reluctantly away.

After the long flight from Portland to Beijing, then the flight from Beijing to Wuhan, they had slept in their hotel for a solid ten hours last night. Now it felt like they had finally arrived, refreshed and ready for this first leg of their vacation.

“Let’s get unpacked,” Faith said. “Only twenty minutes to dinner. By the way, what was so interesting about waiting in the hallway?”

Lauren heaved her suitcase onto one of the beds. “I met our neighbors.”

“Stuffy old retired postal workers from Florida?” She pulled a stack of shirts from her suitcase and placed them in a dresser drawer.

“Couldn’t be further from it. They’re lesbians.”

Faith tilted her head and eyed Lauren with curiosity. “No shit? Are you sure?”

“Positive. Their names are Jennifer and Cassie.”



“Oh, you know their names and everything.”

“Well, not everything. Actually, that’s all I know.”

Faith stood and looked at the wall separating them from their lesbian neighbors. “You don’t suppose somebody did that on purpose, do you?”

“Put the lesbians next door to one another?” Lauren laughed. “No, I don’t think so. There are dozens of widows and divorcees on this boat, all sorts of women rooming together. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence. I mean, I don’t know about you, but I don’t recall checking any box that said ‘lesbian.’ Or even any euphemistic, badly-translated Chinese version of that, such as ‘women of the Sapphic persuasion.’”

Faith brightened, recognizing a challenge. “Or women *sans bon hommes*.”

“Or even women *sans mal hommes*.”

Faith struck a whimsical pose. “Women who go gaily amid perverse delights.”

Lauren laughed, then shook her head. “You win. But, seriously, I think it’s just a coincidence.”

“Yes, you’re probably right, but you know what your Aunt Rachel always says.”

“There’s no such thing as a coincidence. Yes, I know, but Aunt Rachel also believes in leprechauns and dragons.”

Faith grinned. “Don’t you?”

Lauren smiled at the irony of the question. Faith believed in nothing that wasn’t a scientific fact. She was a refreshing and unlikely combination, a cynical optimist. The things she took pleasure in—myth, magic, science fiction—they all occupied the realm of fantasy for her. She saw a sharply delineated line between the real world and the imagined one. Though she lived exclusively on the harsher side of that line, life in general delighted and rewarded her. She

expected the best things to come her way and she was not often disappointed.

Living with this paragon of positive thinking, Lauren struggled with her natural tendency toward pessimism and managed, most of the time, to land somewhere in the middle.

“No,” Lauren said with finality. “Merely a coincidence, I’m sure. But it might make the cruise a little more interesting.”

“It’s hard to imagine it being more interesting. We’re about to travel back through two thousand years. No rift in the space-time continuum necessary.”

Lauren huffed at Faith’s sci-fi reference. “Based on that hotel we stayed in last night, I’d say we already traveled back a few hundred. This is much nicer.”

“Oh, much nicer, yes.” Faith put her hands on her hips and frowned at the beds. “Let’s move that table out of there and push these beds together.”

“Are you expecting to get lucky tonight?”

“You never know. Gotta be prepared.”

Faith’s eyes twinkled mischievously. At forty-four, she was a dynamo of energy and Lauren had trouble keeping up with her, despite being seven years younger. Faith just seemed more alive than most people. More lively, anyway. She got up in the morning ready to attack the day and went to bed at night generally satisfied with how well she’d done. Lauren, on the other hand, had never been able to muster that kind of *joie de vivre*, especially in the early morning. They were just different types of people. And that was okay. Fifteen happy years together had shown this to be a compatible pairing with little strife and no regrets.

“I wouldn’t be a bit surprised,” Lauren said, pulling the table out from between the beds, “if we *both* get lucky tonight.”