

Candy Cane Cookie Crush

By Suzanne Kamata

Chapter One

Lauren Murata elbowed open the door of her Tokyo apartment and stepped into the entryway. Maya, her pony-tailed seven-year-old daughter, followed close behind. Strands of blonde hair had been loosened from Lauren's bun by the November wind. In one hand, she held a briefcase filled with fifty university students' essays, which needed to be graded ASAP, and in the other, she clutched a bag of fast food from a popular Korean chain. The aroma of freshly grilled burgers made Lauren's stomach grumble. She was famished, having had no time to eat lunch, but first she needed to change out of her tailored gray wool suit. If she got ketchup on it, she wouldn't be able to wear it again until it was dry-cleaned. She stepped out of her pumps. Ahh, bliss. Once she made tenure, she would wear nothing but flats and floaty dresses, but for now, at least until the interview in December, she had to toe the line.

"That smells really good, Mom," Maya said, inhaling deeply. "Did you get fries this time?"

"No, sweetie," Lauren replied, silently congratulating herself. "Tonight, we're having salad. Quick, go get ready and we'll eat."

Maya marched to her room to change out of the burgundy blazer and coordinating plaid pleated skirt, her uniform for Tokyo Cherry Blossom International

School. By the time she emerged in an oversized pink sweatshirt, a white tutu, and dark pink sparkly leggings, Lauren had taken all of the bobby pins out of her hair, shaken out her bun, changed into jeans and a flannel shirt, and arranged the burgers and salads on plates. She felt guilty about serving her girl take-out three days in a row, but at least there were fresh strawberries in the refrigerator for dessert.

Maya flounced into her seat at the small table in the living/dining area. When they had first moved into the furnished apartment subsidized by the college, Lauren had thought that the furniture was sized for a playhouse. She had grown up in a two-story house in Grand Haven, Michigan. Her bedroom alone, with its huge canopy bed, had been the size of the living room/dining area, and the dining room table had been large enough to accommodate eight people. Thinking back, it had been like a mansion (and not in the Japanese meaning of the word). Like a castle for giants. However, now that she was used to the big-enough-for-two table, and the low sofa covered with black corduroy, which was more of a loveseat, Lauren thought the furniture was just right. She'd added a beanbag in the corner, where Maya liked to plop down and read pulpy girls' comics, and a couple of framed prints -- a deer in the woods, and an underwater scene-- on the walls. After two years, it felt like home.

Lauren clapped her hands together, and Maya did the same. They said

“itadakimasu,” which meant “I shall partake,” and dug in. Lauren took a big bite of her burger. Mmm. Delish.

“Mom,” Maya said, her hazel eyes widening. Her burger sat untouched on the plate. “I almost forgot. My teacher said to remind you about tomorrow’s holiday bake sale.”

Oh, crap. Lauren squeezed her eyes shut and gently pounded her forehead with her fist.

“Are you okay?” Maya’s forehead crinkled and her dark eyebrows scrunched together. She reached over and touched Lauren’s arm.

Lauren forced a smile. “Uh, yes! Thank you so much for the reminder!”

Of course, she had forgotten. Of course, she had ignored yesterday’s group message from the PTA president, and the subsequent notification pings, which had probably been about just that. She had been busy teaching the classes that enabled Maya to attend private school—a perk—and for them to live in this apartment, not to mention put food on the table and clothes on their backs.

“I wonder what kind of cookies Max will bring,” Maya said. She put her elbows on the table as she hoisted her burger to her mouth. A dollop of ketchup landed on her chin.

At any other time, Lauren would have asked her who this Max was, and order her to take her elbows off the table and wipe her face with a napkin, but she was suddenly so frazzled that she could think of nothing but what kind of cookies she herself would bring. The initial sign-up had been way back in September. Lauren had diligently filled in her name on the Excel spread sheet, promising to bring “Christmas cookies.” She had been deliberately vague, hoping to buy herself time to decide what, exactly, to bake.

The mothers, who hailed from various countries, were encouraged to share their cultures through baking. The year before, Lauren had sent along Rice Krispie treats. She had loved them as a kid in Michigan, and she thought they were a quintessential American treat. Lauren thought that she had made a brilliant choice.

She’d never met a kid who didn’t like Rice Krispie treats. The American parents, at least, would probably be overcome with nostalgia. The Japanese parents would probably be interested in the treats because they were made of rice, which was the staple food of Japan, and had an almost holy status.

She hadn’t been able to help out with the actual bake sale because she, unlike most of the mothers, who were either stay-at-home moms by choice, or trailing spouses, forbidden from working due to their visa status, had to work. She was a single mother, doing her best to provide for her bicultural daughter. Maya’s dad was Japanese. Lauren

had met him when she was newly arrived in Japan, and teaching at an English conversation school. The school had farmed native speaker instructors out to companies that wanted their employees to learn English for trips abroad. Although she had been the teacher and he the student, he had been the one with the big salary and the high-powered career. The balance had shifted after she had obtained her PhD and their marriage had fallen apart. Since the divorce, he had started another family. He hardly ever saw Maya, and although he sent money, it didn't go far. Tokyo was expensive.

Lauren had bounded off to Tokyo Cherry Blossom Women's College, where she had been hired to teach English and Home Economics the year before, with a spring in her step. She'd done her duty. There would be no guilt trips from elementary school teachers and PTA moms this year. She spent the day engaged in discussions about how to write a perfect paragraph, and a recent controversy over Japanese companies that required their female employees to wear high heels. After her classes were finished, she slipped out early from a faculty meeting to pick up her daughter from school.

When she arrived, however, she found Maya waiting for her, just inside the school gate. Maya's lower lip was pooched out, and her eyebrows were scrunched together. She was holding the bundle, and her home room teacher, Ms. Maeda, a stick-thin thirtysomething Japanese woman with a severe bob, was beside her, frowning.

“What happened?” Lauren asked.

“I’m sorry, Murata-san,” Ms. Maeda began, “But we couldn’t put your cake out at the bake sale like this. You should have wrapped each piece individually in plastic, or maybe paper.”

“Oh, it’s not cake,” Lauren began, then stopped when she saw Ms. Maeda’s pained expression. She had messed up. Not only had she let down the PTA, the school itself, and the charities that benefitted from the bake sale, but also, she had disappointed her daughter.

“For hygiene’s sake,” Ms. Maeda gently added.

Lauren had felt so guilty about that debacle that this year, she had volunteered not only to bake cookies, which she would then wrap individually, perhaps with colored ribbons, but also to sell the baked goods.

Now she had less than twelve hours to come up with some cookies. Why, oh why, hadn’t she remembered this sooner? She and Maya could have spent Saturday afternoon baking cookies together, just as she and her mother had once done. Now she was thinking that she could stay up all night grading papers between batches of cookies – if the ingredients were on hand, that is – or, she could just pop down to the American bakery down the street.

The cookies would probably cost more than the PTA would sell them for, but would they really care that she had “cheated,” as long as she brought something and volunteered her time? To make up for it, she vowed that she would bake her own cookies next year. She would choose the most labor-intensive recipe that she could come up with. But this time, it couldn’t be helped.

“Maya,” she said, after she’d stuffed the wrappings from dinner into the trash can and washed their plates. “Let’s make a quick run to Emily’s Sweet Shop.”

Maya frowned. “You mean you’re not going to bake cookies for tomorrow?”

“Not this time, honey,” Lauren said, ruffling her hair. “But do me a favor, and don’t tell, okay?”

They pulled on their matching white down puffer jackets and went out into the brisk evening air. It was only the beginning of November, but Christmas decorations had already been up for two weeks. Back in Michigan, when Lauren had been a child, most businesses had waited until Thanksgiving to put up wreaths and trees and tinsel, but these days the jack-o’-lanterns of Halloween naturally segued into images of Santa.

Christmas wasn’t even a red-letter day in Japan. Lauren was supposed to be at work on December 25. But she loved everything about Christmas, and she appreciated that it had caught on, albeit in a distinctly Japanese way. It had become customary for

families to have fried chicken and Christmas cake on December 24th. Rather than being just a time for families to get together, however, Christmas Eve was considered the ultimate date night in Japan. Her female students always became distracted this time of year, their minds more on romance than homework.

After a couple of failed attempts, Lauren, herself, couldn't really imagine dating again, but she looked forward to an evening or two of popcorn and wine and a holiday romcom on TV. She and Maya would celebrate in their own way, with maybe a reading of Clement C. Moore's *The Night Before Christmas*, and Christmas cookies dipped into glasses of cold milk before bed. Then they'd wake up and open presents in the morning.

Lauren followed as Maya skipped past shops decorated with twinkling lights. A muzak rendition of "Silver Bells" seeped out of a stationery store. From some windows, she could see small Christmas trees adorned with colored bulbs. Just beyond a clothing boutique and a florist, they came to the bakery run by an American expat. A bell tinkled as they entered. The air was perfumed with butter and vanilla.

"Hey, there," said a woman wearing a kerchief over her short, white hair. "Pretty chilly tonight, isn't it?"

Lauren nodded. "Got any cookies? There's a bake sale at school tomorrow, and I totally forgot!"

Emily laughed. “Do want something fancy, or something that looks homemade?”

Lauren peered into the case. Her mouth watered at the sight of butterscotch blondies and poinsettia pinwheel cookies. Then she spotted a row of candy cane cookies similar to the ones she and her mother used to make. Wow. She hadn’t come across those in a while. She remembered rolling the dough into snake-like strands, and then braiding the red and white lengths together. They took a bit of effort. And time, which always seemed to be in short supply.

“Do you have a couple dozen of those?”

Emily nodded. She put on a plastic glove and began to put the cookies into a box with gilt trim. The name of the bakery was embossed on the box in swirling letters. Lauren would save the box for something else. She was pretty sure that she had some plastic bags at home. She and Maya could put each one in a bag and tie it with a ribbon.

“Well, that’s sorted,” Lauren said as they left the bakery.

“Can I have one when we get home?” Maya asked.

“Okay,” Lauren said, a sparkle in her eyes. “But just one. You can buy lots of different cookies at the bake sale tomorrow.”

Although Lauren had completely forgotten about the event, she was relieved to discover that she had already put in a request for time off so that she could help out. Much

to her chagrin, the school always scheduled special events on weekdays. The teachers seemed to assume that all of the mothers were available to chaperone field trips or attend student musicals at the drop of a hat. It was true that most of the mothers didn't have jobs, and when they did work, they usually did so part-time. But Lauren figured that if special events were held on weekends, then fathers would be more likely to attend as well.

The next morning, Lauren accompanied Maya to her classroom.

"I brought cookies," she announced to the teacher. "Where should I put them?"

This year, Maya's home room teacher was a young Canadian with dyed purple hair. "Thank you so much," said Ms. Cooper. "And you're volunteering today, right?"

"Yes, I am," Lauren said.

"Did you remember to bring an apron?"

"Uh..." That must have been in the e-mail message that she didn't read, too.

"Everyone has to wear one," Ms. Cooper said. "And you should wear a hair net or something."

Lauren wondered if she had time to race back home and pick up an apron. Or maybe there was a shop nearby? She opened her handbag and rustled around, trying to find something that could work as a kerchief.

Ms. Cooper put a hand on her arm. "It's okay if you forgot. I'm sure that at least

one of the mothers brought an extra.”

Sure enough, once she entered the cafeteria where the sale would be held, one of the PTA moms hustled over with an apron and a cotton kerchief. “You can line up your cookies here,” she said, indicating a space on one of the long tables which had been covered with festive tablecloths.

Lauren took her time lining up the candy cane cookies.

The kids had made signs for their moms’ offerings. Maya set up the placard that she had created which was decorated with a flurry of hand-drawn snowflakes. A snowman held a candy cane-shaped cookie. When she had positioned it just so, she spun off to greet her friends.

A few other women were busy putting out their own wares. Lauren didn’t know the other mothers well, but she recognized a few from drop-off and pick-ups and the occasional PTA meeting. Once she’d finished her own preparations, she took a look around. A mother from Italy had baked chocolate biscotti. One from India was selling ladoos, sweet round balls studded with cashews, and another from China advertised mooncakes. Many of the Japanese mothers had gone for cut-out cookies, dainty in size, and prettily decorated with glitter and jimmies.

Across the room, she caught sight of Sayaka Gunther, the wife of her German

colleague, Franz. Their son Mateo was a year older than Maya. He, too, got the “employee discount” on tuition. When Sayaka was looking her way, Lauren waved. Sayaka, ever reserved, gave her a slight nod. Since spouses and partners were never invited to work functions in Japan, Lauren had only met her a couple of times, and then, very briefly. She knew more about her from social media, where her husband often posted photos of her looking chic in her size-zero little black dresses as they set out for a party somewhere. She was also, apparently, a fantastic cook, as Franz was always posting photos of the dinners she prepared for him, which often featured up to ten separate dishes. Judging by her figure, she didn’t eat much herself.

Lauren was admiring an array of gingerbread boys and girls when there was a commotion at the entrance, a cooing and fluttering as if a flock of doves had alighted. She looked up to see a Japanese man. Not just a man, he was a father, judging by the chestnut-haired boy tugging at the hem of his hooded University of Oregon sweatshirt. And he was holding a big plastic container.

Was he a celebrity? It was possible. Along with the families whose fathers worked for international corporations on long-term assignments, and the diplomats from around the world, she’d heard that one of the fathers was a professional golfer who appeared often on TV, and another was a newscaster.

Then she heard one of the mothers trilling, “Mori-san, it’s so wonderful you could come!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said with an American accent. He flashed a smile of perfectly aligned, sparkling white teeth. “The bake sale is our thing.” He ruffled the hair of the boy next to him.

The boy’s mother was obviously a foreigner. Lauren could tell by his rounded eyes and the high bridge of his nose. She wondered how the mother had gotten her Japanese husband to come in her stead. Or maybe he was divorced?

Suddenly, Maya shot into view and did a little twirl in front of the boy. Was she flirting? Then the two kids took off to another corner of the room. Huh. They must be friends.

Mr. Mori moved toward the tables, greeting mothers as he went. Presumably he had to lay out his own baked goods.

Lauren went back to her table to stand by for further instructions. Her candy cane cookies were now displayed between Mexican wedding cakes and mini sweet potato tarts. She greeted the women on either side of her, one, who looked to be about six months pregnant and who hailed from Central America, and the other, a Japanese woman who was married to an American.

Then, suddenly, she heard a deep voice. “Hello!”

She looked up into Mr. Mori’s warm brown eyes. ‘Oh, hello.’”

“You must be Mrs. Murata.”

“Dr. Murata,” she said reflexively, then blushed. She didn’t want him to think that she was arrogant, but she had earned that PhD.

Confused, his gaze flicked to her left ring finger, which was bare, then back to her face. “Pardon me. Dr. Murata. Of course.”

She couldn’t resist checking to see if he had a band of gold. Nope, no wedding ring, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. A lot of Japanese men didn’t wear them. They were more of a Western thing.

“My son Max talks about your daughter all the time,” he said. “I’m Kazu Mori, by the way.”

“Oh! Maya talks about Max, too. Nice to finally meet you.”

Was he single, too? Where did he work? And how did he learn to speak English so well? Ordinarily, when she met someone new at work, this would be the moment when business cards were exchanged. But here at school, that wasn’t done. In this setting, they were, first and foremost, parents.

“You should give me your contact details,” Kazu said.

Was he going to ask her out? But didn't he have a wife? Lauren ran her hand through her bangs, suddenly self-conscious. The apron made her feel frumpy, and the stupid kerchief made her feel like a babushka.

"So we can set up a playdate," he added.

"Oh, yes, of course, sure." Lauren reached into her bag for her phone. She brought up her number and handed it over so that Kazu could enter it in his list of contacts.

"Well," he said, returning her phone and holding out his hand. "It's nice to finally meet you."

His grip was firm and warm. She felt the heat spread through her fingers, up her arm, and to her chest. When he let go, she couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. Most Japanese people just bowed. There was so little physical contact that she had forgotten how nice it could be. And, it had been a while since she had been touched in any way by such an attractive man.

"These cookies look great, by the way," he said, gesturing to her array of candy can cookies. "Any chance you might make an advance sale?"

The bake sale wasn't supposed to start for another twenty minutes, but Lauren didn't see the harm. As long as she sold the cookies and gave the money to the PTA, which would donate it to a worthy cause, it was all good, right?

“Sure,” she said.

“Two, please.”

She slid two of the individually wrapped cookies into one of the paper bags that she had prepared. He dropped a few coins into her palm, letting his fingers brush against hers, and flashed another knee-weakening smile. “Thanks so much. Come over and check out my rugelach if you have a chance.”

Lauren watched him walk away, already looking forward to speaking to him again. Not because of the jeans that were just tight enough to reveal muscled thighs and a toned derriere, but for professional reasons. She was working on a paper on the division of domestic labor in Japanese households, and he would be able to provide valuable data. How many fathers in Japan helped out with school bake sales? Looking around, it was clear that the answer was not many. This man was a practically a unicorn.

“It’s great that Mr. Mori shares childcare duties with his wife,” Lauren murmured to the two women beside her.

The Japanese mother gasped. “Didn’t you know?” she said in a low voice. “Mori-san is a widower.”

“No, I didn’t know.” Maybe Lauren should make more of an effort to attend those PTA meetings. She was obviously missing out. “Did his wife pass recently?”

“Little Max was a toddler then,” the woman who’d brought along the Mexican wedding cakes said. “So, it’s been a while.”

“Where was she from?” Lauren asked. These women seemed to be fonts of Mori-related information, and they appeared to be more than willing to share. Why not get the whole scoop?

“Poland, I think,” the Latina mom said.

“She was ill,” the Japanese mother added.

“Poor Mr. Mori,” Lauren said. The three of them gazed across the room at the man as another mother handed him a pink ruffled apron. Apparently, he had forgotten his apron, too.

He looked over just then and caught her eye. She smiled, and he flashed her another one of those dazzling grins. Once again, she was filled with a warm tingle. Yes, she definitely needed to check out his rugelach.

Soon the cafeteria was filled with people. The bake sale was open to the public, so in addition to the children, parents, and school staff, customers from the community milled about. Snatches of Japanese mixed with English, Spanish and Chinese. Kids fueled by sugar highs raced around the room. Coins flashed and bags were filled with goodies from around the world.

Whenever Lauren looked over at Mr. Mori's – Kazu's – table, she noted that he was surrounded by women, laughing and preening and touching his arm as they made some comment. Was it because they were all starved for male companionship, being married to workaholics as they were, or because Kazu was especially charming? She wanted to find out more about him, but she didn't want to join the ranks of his groupies. And how could she be sure he wasn't like most of the other Japanese men she knew? Her ex, for example, had seemed progressive and open-minded when they were first going out, but once they were married, he criticized everything she did, from the way she washed the dishes to the way she folded the laundry. Sure, Kazu could bake cookies, but maybe he was the king of take-out.

Although her own table was not quite so besieged, Lauren's cookies sold out quickly. She closed up shop, yanked off the apron and kerchief, fluffed up her hair, and went to browse the others' baked goods. Not wanting to appear too eager, she saved Kazu's table for last. She bought a few brownies—individually wrapped, of course -- from another American mom who was married to a corporate executive, and the last of the Lebkuchen from one of the German moms. When she finally reached Kazu's table, she saw that he, too, had sold out.

“No more rugelach?” she asked.

He shrugged helplessly. He was still wearing the pink ruffled apron and he looked, well, adorable. “I’m so sorry. They went like hotcakes. But maybe Max and I can make another batch this weekend.”

The possibility of a cookie exchange -- and maybe coffee and conversation -- hung in the air. Lauren’s pulse quickened. It had been so long since she had been alone with a guy that she was attracted to that she wouldn’t know how to act.

“You really baked them yourself?” she asked. She looked at his hands, the long fingers and manicured nails, and imagined them mixing flour and sugar, rolling balls of dough. She imagined those fingers reaching over to touch her chin, to brush a lock of hair out of her face. *Oh, stop!*

“Of course,” Kazu said, hand over his heart, pretending to be offended. “It was my wife’s recipe. Max doesn’t remember her well, so I try to help him connect with her through stories and recipes.”

At the mention of Max’s mother, she studied him closely, trying to detect signs of persistent grief. No one could compete with the memory of a perfect wife. He did not wipe away any tears or seem to drift off in thought, but clearly, he was so sweet and sensitive. Lauren felt inclined to reach across the table and give him a hug. Of course, she didn’t, though. That would be so inappropriate.

Just then Max showed up. “Dad, come quick!” He tugged on his father’s hand.

Kazu said over his shoulder, “Talk to you later?” And then he was gone.

Chapter Two

Kazu let Max tug him down the hallway. “What is it?” he asked.

“Yuri’s mom told me to find you,” he said. “She said it’s an emergency.”

An emergency? It wasn’t like he was a doctor. Was there a heavy box that needed to be lifted?

Max led him to the music room, then took off to find his friends again. When Kazu walked through the door – surprise! – a little Japanese girl with sausage curls started pounding away at the piano and singing along. Her Japanese mother stood next to the piano.

Kazu winced. How had he been so easily tricked? Because he was a talent manager, people were always trying to perform for him in hopes that he would make them famous. This was the first time, though, that it had happened at his son’s school. He listened to a few bars, fake smile frozen on his face, then clapped three times, slowly. “Very nice,” he said, although her voice was a tad screechy, and her fingers had fumbled on the keys once or twice. “I hope she gets a solo in the school Christmas pageant. I’ll put in a good word for her.”

The mother scowled, but quickly recovered. Obviously, she’d been hoping for

more – an invitation to audition, perhaps, if not a contract for representation signed on the spot.

He gave a salute and backed out of the room, shaking his head. When he returned to the cafeteria, he saw that most of the tables had been cleared and put away, and that Maya and her mother were nowhere in sight. Just his luck. It had been a long time since he'd met a woman he thought he might like to get to know better – one with no ulterior motives, no child or cousin or sibling who wanted to be a famous singer, and one who had no reservations about getting involved with a man with a son from a previous marriage.

The morning after the bake sale, as Kazu sat at his desk fiddling with a chain of paper clip, he was still thinking about her. He should have been preparing for his meeting, but he was having a hard time concentrating. Dr. Murata. Damn. He hadn't even gotten her first name.

With her wavy blonde hair and pool blue eyes, she was pretty, but that wasn't what most attracted him to her. Unlike most women he met, she had a quiet confidence. Although she had insisted upon her title, he hadn't been under the impression that she was trying to impress him. And she hadn't switched over to a higher register of voice to appear more feminine, as some women did when talking to a man. He was pretty sure she

wouldn't have joined in with the other mothers who'd lavished him with praise when he'd unloaded his rugelach. It had been a bit overwhelming, if not annoying. After all, he hadn't cured cancer. He'd only baked a few cookies. A lot of women treated him like a talking dog when he exhibited the least of domestic skills. They'd seemed almost relieved that he had forgotten his apron, so that they could fuss over him anew. But not Maya's mom, Dr. Murata. He'd been planning to find her again and maybe set up a playdate, or at least say good-bye before he left.

He sighed and picked up the framed photo that sat at the corner of his desk. His late wife peered out at him. He remembered the day it had been taken, just after she had found out that she was pregnant. They'd gone for a walk in the park to enjoy the cherry blossoms. He hadn't known then that his perfect joy would be as ephemeral as those flowers.

"Promise me you won't be sad forever," she'd said, when she knew she was near the end. "Promise me you'll remarry someday."

He had nodded, there at her bedside, choking back sobs. Back then, he'd had no intention of keeping those promises, but now he was starting to believe that she had probably been thinking more of Max than himself. What would it be like for their son to grow up without a mother? With a sad dad who ordered way too many pizzas, and spent

way too many evenings sitting in a dark corner listening to the blues?

A knock on his office door jolted him from his rambling thoughts.

“Come in,” he shouted, setting the photo back in its corner and sweeping the paper clip chain into his desk drawer.

The door opened and his number one client, Aki Hoshino, stepped into the room. With his long lashes and full lips, he was pretty enough to be a girl. He moved with feline grace. He bowed and muttered a Japanese greeting before approaching Kazu’s desk.

“Good morning,” Kazu said, taking in his rumpled shirt and tousled hair. “Have a seat.”

“Good morning.” Aki settled in the chair and crossed his legs. His default expression was sulky, which Kazu tried to not let annoy him.

“You’ve got a busy week ahead,” Kazu said. “Get your calendar ready so you can jot this all down.”

Aki produced a cellphone from his jeans pocket. Oh, right. No one kept track of their lives in a day planner anymore. It was all online. Well, as long as he paid attention to the notifications and showed up for all of his bookings, it was fine with him.

“First up, next Monday evening, you are appearing on Hot Hits where you will debut your new song. We’ll meet here at five p.m. and go to the studio together.” Kazu

paused to let him key the information into his phone.

Before becoming a solo artist, Aki had been a member of the all-male group, Playboyz. The name had always seemed a little sleazy to Kazu, but it was meant to imply youth. It was one of those stairstep groups, with members from ages twelve to eighteen, meant to appear to a wide swath of adolescent female fans. When they became adults, they “graduated” and were replaced by someone younger. With his controlled vocals and androgynous good looks, Aki had huge potential as a solo star. So far, there was a great deal of interest in what he did next. “Hot Hits” was one of the highest-rated entertainment shows on TV.

“Okay,” Aki said looking up, ready for the next event.

“On Wednesday, you have a photo shoot for My Boom magazine, so make sure you get enough sleep the night before.”

In truth, Aki was at that age where he could eat cheeseburgers all the time and stay up all night, and he would still look as fresh as a just-unfurled peony. Kazu felt a flicker of envy. Now in his late thirties, it took him some effort, such as an occasional face mask, to keep from looking haggard, and extra sit-ups to maintain his six-pack abs. And no, he shouldn’t have eaten so many of those Christmas cookies last night.

“They’ll be sending a car for you at nine a.m., so be ready.”

“Understood.” Aki nodded and diligently keyed in the information.

Kazu figured the photo shoot would be an easy assignment for him since he’d been posing and pouting for cameras for years as part of Playboyz. It must be almost second nature.

Kazu took a deep breath before launching into the next item on his list. “And at the end of the month, you will be appearing in a ‘talk show’ as part of the Tokyo Cherry Blossom University’s Culture Festival.”

“Talk Shows,” where a talent engaged in a casual conversation onstage, usually with a professional emcee, were a standard of manga and anime festivals. And now they were becoming a popular event at university cultural festivals. As he had heard it, a cute college student would be doing the interview at this event instead of a professional.

Aki looked up, his eyes filled with panic. “Uh-uh, no colleges.”

Kazu sighed. He could have predicted Aki’s reaction. Having been homeschooled since the age of eleven, and not very well, he was extremely self-conscious about his lack of education. They had a deal that Kazu would never make him do anything that made him look stupid – none of those quiz shows where celebrities dredged up all they remembered from high school, no calls for him to comment on current events, and certainly, no lectures at institutions of higher learning.

“It’s not what you think,” Kazu said. “It’ll be fine. This school isn’t Tokyo University or one of those other places full of eggheads. It’s a girls’ school.”

Aki seemed to deflate a bit. This would be no big deal. It wouldn’t even be much of a challenge. He could handle girls. He was almost too popular with girls. Even if he did have something profound to say, their hysterical screaming at the sight of his face was bound to drown out his words.

“Look, there’s nothing to be worried about. The students at this place aren’t into rocket science,” Kazu went on, building up steam. “They just want to work a little while before they get married. They’re studying to be flight attendants or makeup artists. Or maybe home economics teachers. They’re interested in cooking, and housekeeping, stuff like that.”

Aki bit his lip, considering. “So I wouldn’t have to make a speech?”

“Like I said, it’s a ‘talk show.’ You don’t even have to prepare,” Kazu continued. “It’ll just be you, and maybe one of the students on the stage, and the girls will ask you questions. And not like, ‘How can we achieve world peace?’ It’ll be more like, ‘What’s your favorite color?’ or ‘Do you have a pet?’”

Kazu realized that he was sounding like a jerk. He could almost feel the ghost of his wife swirling around him, hear her voice scolding him. How do you know that there

isn't a future prime minister among those young women? she'd probably say. Or How dare you suggest that being a flight attendant isn't an important job! But he had to talk his boy off the ledge. And he really needed for Aki to show up. He had promised the university president, who was also the head of Max's school, that he would deliver the guest speaker for the Culture Festival. He figured it would absolve him of PTA duties for the next four years. And it would be good PR for Aki. The college students would adore him.

“Okay,” Aki said at last, hitching up his shoulders. “I’ll do it.”

###

The rest of the day was uneventful, pretty much as planned. With that most unpleasant task of talking Aki into something he didn't want to do out of the way, Kazu felt lighter and happier. That evening, still buoyant, he decided to make Max's favorite dinner, curry and rice. He took carrots, potatoes, and onions out of the crisper, and started to peel and cut the vegetables.

“Hey, buddy,” he called into the next room where Max was enacting some grand battle with a Godzilla figurine and a Superman doll. “Come on in here and help me wash the rice.”

“Okay, Dad.” Max laid down his toys and joined Kazu in the kitchen.

Kazu watched as he carefully scooped rice from the bin into the rice cooker's removable pot. He used a stool to reach the sink, turned on the faucet, and swished his hand around to clean the rice.

Pin pon! The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Kazu said, wiping his hands on a towel.

He peered through the peephole and sighed. It was his middle-aged neighbor, Mrs. Tanaka, a regular visitor. He opened the door to find her standing there in her apron, a dish covered with aluminum foil in her hands.

"Good evening, Mori-san," she said, smiling brightly. "I made some extra fried chicken. I thought I'd bring it over for you and Max."

No doubt she'd taken note of the food delivery guy who'd been at his apartment the previous evening.

"Thank you so much," Kazu said, accepting the platter. "That was very thoughtful of you."

"Nothing beats a home-cooked meal," she said pointedly.

"You're absolutely right." Kazu slowly closed the door. "Have a good night, now."

It was nice that the ladies of the apartment building tried to look after him and Max, but he wished they would give him a little credit. At least he knew that Mrs. Tanaka

wouldn't try to slide a headshot or a USB with a recorded song into the package of food.

And Mrs. Tanaka was a really good cook.

“Who was that?” Max asked. He'd finished his task and was now setting the table.

“Oh, you know. Our friendly neighbor, Tanaka-san. She brought over some chicken.” He put it on the table and peeled back the foil for a look. It was still piping hot, the coating lightly browned and crispy, and it smelled delicious.

“Yum!” Max said.

“And we're also having curry and rice, which is your favorite, right?” Honestly, it had been a few nights since Kazu had cooked dinner, but he wanted to be appreciated.

“Double yum!”

“And I think we still have a few cookies left over from the bake sale for dessert.”

Speaking of which, they had already devoured the candy cane cookies. Max had loved them, and although there were dozens of recipes online, it occurred to Kazu that he could ask Maya's mom for her own recipe. That would give him the perfect excuse to contact her.

When they were finally seated at the table in front of their bowls of steamed rice topped with beef and vegetables and spicy sauce, Kazu said, “How would you feel about

inviting Maya over to play?”

He had to be careful about introducing a new woman into his son’s life. He wouldn’t want Max to get attached to someone he wasn’t serious about. Also, if they didn’t get along, there was no way that he could be involved with her. Having both mom and daughter come over, he could see whether or not they might work out together. There would be no pressure. They would just hang out and talk and maybe have some cookies.

Max, his mouth full of curry, nodded enthusiastically.

“Okay, then.” After dinner, Kazu would send a text.

Chapter Three

After dropping Maya off at school the next morning, Lauren popped in her earbuds and brought up her “Grrrl Power” playlist, a selection of songs by the likes of Bikini Kill, Sleater-Kinney, Pussy Riot and other high energy all-female bands. The music always got her pumped up for teaching. She bobbed her head along with the beats, sometimes mouthing along with the lyrics, not caring if people gave her odd looks.

Anyway, as a foreigner in Japan, she could get away with certain things. No one expected her to conform one hundred percent. Well, now that she was divorced, at least. Her ex had sometimes become irritated when she did something that she hadn’t even realized was rude, like leaving a broom in the entryway. And his mother! She had once gone on a tirade when Lauren had hung out the laundry with shirts facing north. Apparently, that was one way to invite the dead into your house. Who knew?

Lauren reached the gate of the college and flashed the guard a smile. He nodded and waved her in. A couple of students bowed when they saw her, then giggled, and hurried into the building. Lauren went first to her office, where she took out her earbuds and unplugged her phone, then hung up her coat in a metal locker in the far corner.

As Lauren stepped into her classroom her eyes went to the space above the

blackboard, as they always did. She could read the phrase “good wife, wise mother,” which had been inscribed there back in the early days of this small, family-owned university to inspire the young women who came to study there. In the wider world, attitudes had changed, supposedly, and the words, from the famous 17th century treatise *Onna Daigaku – Women and Wisdom of Japan* – had been painted over, but they were still legible.

Lauren was pretty sure that the university president, who was something like eighty years old, still held with neo-Confucian ideals of how women should behave, and what they should aspire to. The university was first established as a kind of finishing school for daughters of wealthy families. Some had come to study secretarial skills, which had gotten them jobs in famous companies, where they had met and married men with good jobs. In fact, back in the day, some companies had sought to hire women from Tokyo Cherry Blossom Women’s College in order to provide potential brides for male employees. After marriage, they had usually quit working, making room for the next wave of the college’s graduates. Since the school was private and the tuition was hefty, it still attracted young women with rich parents, but, in theory, they would open their minds to knowledge and pursue careers as teachers, civil servants, dental hygienists, and so on.

When Lauren had completed her doctorate in women’s studies three years before,

there weren't any full-time job openings in Tokyo in her field. She had submitted an application to Tokyo Cherry Blossom Women's College for a position teaching English. She had a bachelor's degree in English, and a master's in linguistics, so it wasn't a stretch. During the interview, the university president, Ueno-sensei, had mulled over her application, while the other men on the hiring committee sat there, staring at her. She'd wanted to ask then why there weren't any other women at the meeting, other than the office worker who'd brought in cups of tea on a tray. After all, it was a women's college, and didn't they have quite a few women instructors on staff?

"I see that you have published some papers on housekeeping in Japan," President Ueno said, adjusting his hearing aid.

"Yes," Lauren confirmed, straightening her posture. She was wearing a black suit with a white cotton collared shirt, the uniform for job interviews in this country. She was more used to wearing flowy dresses and tunics, and the outfit felt as constrictive as a kimono. "I am very interested in how the division of household labor affects gender parity. That will be the subject of my next book."

"And what was the subject of your first book?" one of the other men asked. He looked to be close to retirement age.

Hadn't they read her application materials? Or were they just making

conversation?

“I published a monograph about the cultural significance of Harumi Kurihara,”

Lauren said.

“Oh, yes,” the man said. “My wife adores her TV show. She has all of her cookbooks.”

Lauren forced a smile. Kurihara was known as a “charisma housewife,” a sort of celebrity homemaker with superior domestic skills, but she was actually a very savvy businesswoman, a point that Lauren had made over and over in her book. Sure, she talked about how much she enjoyed taking care of her husband and cooking his favorite dishes such as ginger pork, but she was probably the main wage earner in their family.

“Ah, yes,” President Ueno chimed in, raising a hand in which Lauren detected a slight palsy. “Kurihara-san is an excellent role model for our students.”

“We need someone to teach our girls English,” said another guy, this one, with horn-rimmed glasses and a goatee, who appeared to be in his forties. “And we also need someone to teach Home Economics. Would you be willing to take on both subjects? If you’re hired, I mean.”

Could it be that these men thought Women’s Studies and Home Economics were interchangeable? She had so many questions. But for now, she really needed a full-time

job, and this one would come with excellent benefits. She'd be able to enroll her daughter in the very expensive attached private elementary school, established as a training ground for the university's education majors, where instruction was half in English, for free. The college also offered subsidized housing, which came in handy after the divorce.

“Of course. I would be happy to teach Home Economics,” she said. If she got the job, she would find a way to interject her feminist principles. Usually, administrators didn't pay much attention to what actually went on in the classroom. Just as they apparently didn't pay a lot of attention to the applicants' publications.

As soon as she had been hired on the standard three-year contract, she got to work on another book to beef up her list of publications. Although the pace of academic publishing tended to be glacial, she quickly produced a collection of household tips and hacks from America, which she'd entitled *Lessons from Mama*. She'd gotten it translated into Japanese and self-published it. Surprisingly, it had taken off, and been picked up by a Japanese publisher. She was occasionally invited onto TV to share, say, a tip on how to remove a red wine stain from a white sofa (white wine!) Every time she made such an appearance, her name and affiliation flashed on the TV screen. The college was thrilled by the publicity generated by the chryon – Dr. Lauren Murata, Associate Professor at Tokyo Cherry Blossom University.

Now that her contract was winding down, Lauren was about to submit her application for a tenured position at the college. The president had assured her that the process was mostly a formality. They loved her and were proud of her accomplishments. If all went according to plan, she'd have a permanent job locked down by Christmas. And when that happened, she was going to put posters or something over that antiquated phrase, maybe replace it with something like, Young women, be ambitious!

As usual, Lauren had gotten to the classroom ten minutes early so that she would have time to settle in and gather her thoughts. Inevitably, the students streamed in a minute before the chime signaling the start of the class period. As it was the first lesson of the day, some of the young women brought in paper cups of coffee or cellophane-wrapped buns from the convenience store on the corner. One or two girls, who sat in the back, typically put their makeup on during that first class, using their cellphone cameras as mirrors. Lauren didn't approve of their behavior, but she'd learned to pick her battles. If they stayed awake and did their homework, she was fine with that.

She took roll slowly, allowing for the students who regularly sauntered in late. Then she was ready to begin her lesson.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said.

“Good morning, Murata-sensei!” they responded in unison.

Although she used some Japanese in her Home Economics classes, she tried to keep everything in her native language in English class.

“I read your papers on effective social media campaigns, and I must say I was quite impressed!” Knowing that her students spent a lot of time looking at their phones, she’d had the idea of having them analyze Twitter feeds rather than insisting that they rely upon textbooks. “I see that a couple of you wrote about the potato salad incident.”

In said incident, a young mother had been grocery shopping with her child. She had picked up a package of ready-made potato salad from the deli section, when a man – a stranger – had try to shame her by saying, “If you’re a mother, why don’t you make your own potato salad?” Another woman who had witnessed the encounter immediately grabbed not one but two packages of potato salad, and later tweeted about it. Her tweet had been shared tens of thousands of times.

“That man was so rude,” Miho Kimura, one of her brightest students, whom she’d hired as a teaching assistant, piped up.

“I know, right,” said Yuka Hata, who had spent a year in the United States on foreign study and loved to employ slang whenever possible. “What a mansplainer!”

“How would you react to that?” Lauren asked, sensing a teachable moment.

Eri Tanaka, the purple-haired student in the back row, who had just applied a

coat of mascara, raised her hand.

Lauren nodded to her.

“I would say, ‘If you are a man, why don’t you mind your own business?’”

Laughter rang out.

Pleased with the class’s reaction, Eri bumped fists with the student next to her.

“On that note, why don’t we try a role play? Imagine you are out in public, and a stranger makes a judgmental comment about what you are doing. How would you respond? Make pairs, and I will give you fifteen minutes to prepare. While you are doing that, I will return your papers.”

Well, that woke them up. As Lauren wandered down the aisles handing back essays, she heard them brainstorming. One student related that a stranger had admonished her for eating ice cream, hinting that she was too fat. Another had been shamed for wearing a low-cut blouse. Some chatted in Japanese, but Lauren knew they would use the dictionaries on their phones to look up the words that they would use in English.

They were already twenty minutes into the class period. Lauren heard heavy steps go past her classroom door, into the lecture hall next door, followed by the low, gruff tones of her colleague, Franz Gunther. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. While she herself made it a point of being early, Franz, as he had told her himself, never arrived

more than ten minutes late.

“You have to show them who’s boss,” he had said once. “Make them wait, and then make a grand entrance.”

Franz, who was originally from Munich, had been hired a year after she had. He was also on a three-year contract, brought on to teach American literature and German. His master’s thesis had been on the Incredible Hulk. Like many Western men in Japan, he had an inflated sense of his own importance, but he was her sole foreign colleague, so she tried to get along with him, no matter how much he irritated her. Now, as she finished passing out the papers, she clenched her jaw at the muffled sound of his voice coming through the wall. He had probably never made potato salad – or cookies – in his life.

Of course, thinking of cookies brought Kazu to mind. Had he eaten the candy cane cookies yet? Had he guessed that she hadn’t actually made them? And would he actually call her after having entered her number in his phone? She had checked her messages the night before, and again this morning while she was having her coffee. So far, nothing yet. But what was she doing thinking about a guy she had just met the day before when she was supposed to be teaching? She shook her head and finished handing out the papers.

After two more classes and lunch, she had the faculty meeting, held in a

cavernous hall. The college president sat at a long table at the front, facing the rest of the attendees who occupied the rows of additional tables. Lauren entered the room from a rear door and walked past the tables already claimed by the early arrivals. Like the students themselves, many instructors preferred to sit at the back where they could nap or thumb through their phone messages or read novels during the long, tedious proceedings. Unsurprisingly, Franz was already in place. As she brushed past him, she nodded in greeting. He grunted back. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that he had brought up a game on his tablet.

Lauren took her place front and center, in clear view of the president and key administrative staff. Although the meeting would be boring, her application for a tenured position would be considered soon. She wanted to make a good impression, to show that she was committed and engaged. Any one of these people could be on the hiring committee this time around.

When everyone had settled in and the clock chimed the hour, the college president made his usual greeting. He looked directly at Lauren. Then the first order of business – the upcoming Culture Festival – was introduced. The mic was turned over to Professor Mariko Suzuki, a petite Japanese woman in a boxy pink tweed suit and matching pink lipstick who taught French. She was the Culture Festival committee

chairperson.

“As you know,” Professor Suzuki, began, “the students voted on the guest speaker for the event.”

Lauren recalled that the students had been given a shortlist of names to choose from, including “charisma housewife” Harumi Kurihara herself. Someone had suggested adding Lauren to the list, saying that she could talk about her book *Lessons from Mama*, but who wanted to listen to their usual professor during a once-a-year-event? Lauren had demurred. The other choices were a male pop star, a human rights advocate, and a woman who had served public office.

“The most popular choice was Harumi Kurihara,” Professor Suzuki said.

A few instructors clapped.

“However, as it turns out, her fees are beyond our range, and she happens to be busy on the date of our festival.” Professor Suzuki paused for effect.

Let it be the politician. Lauren had made an effort to instill the importance of female leadership in her students. Most men had never had to wear high heels all day, she had told them, so why should they be deciding dress codes? They would all benefit from the wisdom of a prominent woman speaker.

Professor Suzuki surveyed the audience with a mischievous look in her eyes. “I

am pleased to announce that we have invited the second most popular choice, Aki Hoshino. And his manager has accepted our invitation on his behalf.”

This time the applause was louder and lasted longer. Someone actually squealed, and another person let out a “Woot!” Lauren shook her head in disappointment. Why hadn’t they bothered to check Kurihara-san’s availability in advance? They might have been able to substitute a different woman speaker with something substantial to share. Then again, it might be fun to have a celebrity on campus. Lauren glanced back at Franz, hoping to gauge his reaction, but his eyes were glued to his tablet. He didn’t seem to be paying attention at all.

The meeting moved on. The next topic concerned the best font for the festival posters. This would take a while. Lauren tried to keep her eyes from glazing over as she let up on her concentration. She allowed herself to bring up the image of Kazu Mori, to recall the feeling that had zapped through her as his eyes met hers across the cafeteria the day before. No, this was bad. She was behaving like her students. She raised her hand and took the floor.

“Yes, Murata-sensei?” the administrative assistant passed her the mic.

Lauren stood up, tugged the edge of her jacket into place and said, “I strongly feel that Garamond would look best on the poster.”

The final order of business was the college's decreasing enrollment numbers. Entrance exams wouldn't be held for another couple of months, but it wasn't too early to consider how to increase the number of applicants.

"We must do our utmost to preserve the pristine reputation of Tokyo Cherry Blossom Women's College," President Ueno intoned. "We will not be able to endure the slightest scandal, or the least bit of negative publicity. Let's all do our best to protect this fine institution."

Falling enrollment was a problem all across Japan due to the declining population. But Lauren thought that there might be other reasons why fewer students were choosing to attend this college. Although it did have a long tradition of turning out women who would make "good wives and wise mothers," the curriculum needed to be updated. When she had tenure, Lauren would mention this and suggest new areas of study. For now, she nodded and kept silent. She wasn't in a position to rock the boat.

When the meeting finally ended almost two hours later, Lauren was mentally and physically drained. Who knew pretending to pay attention could be so exhausting? She wanted to retreat to her office and scroll through cute panda memes on Instagram, or maybe take a nap at her desk, but just as she was about to break from the pack leaving the conference room, Professor Suzuki called her name.

“Yes?” Lauren smiled brightly.

“I have been waiting for your contribution to *Petals*,” she said. “Maybe you could share some more of your household hints? Like in your book *Lessons from Mama*?”

Petals was the in-house academic journal. Frankly, publication in its pages didn’t count for much. Every essay submitted to the journal was accepted, and as far as Lauren knew, no one actually read it. No one was obligated to write for the bulletin, but in the interest of team spirit, they were expected to, all the same. Lauren suspected that underneath that calm, cool exterior, Professor Suzuki was panicking because she didn’t have enough contributions. And she might be on the hiring committee.

“I do have something that you might be able to use,” she said. “Would you be interested in an essay on the German wife of Nagayoshi Nagai?”

One of her pet projects was bringing to light the unsung foreign wives of prominent Japanese men in history. Nagai was known for having discovered ephedrine, but his wife Therese had taught at Japan Women’s University. She had been instrumental in introducing German culture and cooking to Japan at a time when there were even fewer women instructors, let alone foreign ones.

“That sounds perfect,” Professor Suzuki said. “Of course, it will have to go through peer review, but it should be fine.”

Lauren nodded. It went without saying that “peer review” was just a formality among faculty. As far as she knew, no instructor had ever advised against publishing another colleague’s submission.

“I’ll look it over and send it to you by tomorrow,” Lauren said. She had been planning to send it to a more prestigious journal, but she didn’t have time to come up with something else for the bulletin. Oh, well.

“Excellent,” Professor Suzuki replied, then strode off, her high heels stabbing at the parquet floor.

Finally, back in her office, Lauren allowed herself a look at her messages. Nothing.

“Anything exciting happen at school today?” Lauren asked as she scooped macaroni and cheese onto plates.

Maya’s dad had insisted upon homemade soup at every meal, and he had grumbled whenever there wasn’t rice. Now that it was just the two of them, they could eat whatever they wanted for dinner. Maya loved her mom’s homemade mac and cheese.

“Hmmm.” Maya wriggled in her chair, and put a finger on her chin. “Actually, there was a happening today.’

Lauren suppressed a smirk. Where did her daughter come up with these phrases.

“Oh?”

“This kid Matteo punched another boy in the face. His nose started bleeding.

There was blood everywhere!”

“Matteo?” That name sounded familiar. Could it be...?

“Yeah, his mom is a teeny tiny Japanese woman and his dad is a big German guy,” Maya explained. “Matteo is really big, too. Everyone is afraid of him.”

“I think I know his dad,” Lauren said, dishing out flowerets of steamed broccoli.

It figured that his son was a bully. “So then what happened?”

“Uhh, the principal called his mom, I guess, and he had to go home,” Maya scooped up some macaroni and brought it to her mouth. When she’d swallowed, she continued. “And then we had a talk in our classroom about how to solve disagreements, like, with rock, paper, scissors.”

Lauren nodded. At least the teachers tried to address the issue. When Maya had been in a public kindergarten and some kids had picked on her, the teacher had said that it was because she didn’t fit in. Instead of thinking up ways to make the classroom more inclusive, she’d suggested that Lauren put Maya in an international school.

‘Well, I hope Matteo’s parents have a talk with him about getting along with

others,” Lauren said.

Maya gave her a thumbs up. “Me, too.”

“Max doesn’t get into fights like that does he?” Lauren asked. She was pretty sure she knew the answer, but she had to ask. To be fair, sometimes biracial kids got bullied just because they were different. Maybe someone had picked on Matteo for being half-German and he was reacting to that. Maybe Max and Maya got picked on, too.

“No,” Maya said, shaking her head. “Max is very peaceful. That’s why he is my friend.”

“Excellent.” And more points for his father for raising such a nice boy.

They’d only met briefly, but Lauren couldn’t stop thinking about Kazu. As she tucked Maya into bed that night after reading another chapter of *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, she wondered if Kazu was tucking in Max right about then, too. And did he read him a bedtime story? If so, what?

She kissed Maya’s cheek, softly closed her bedroom door, and went into the living room. She was just in time to hear her phone ping, indicating an incoming message. There was a text from Kazu. She felt a little flutter in her stomach.

“Hey, Dr. Murata. Those candy cane cookies were amazing!” he wrote. “What is that secret ingredient? You’ve gotta give me the recipe! Max is begging me for more of

these cookies.”

Secret ingredient? Oh, no. Lauren knew of a few recipes for candy cane cookies, but what if they weren't the same? She hadn't had a chance to try one of the cookies herself, so she couldn't imagine what the secret ingredient might be. She would be too embarrassed to admit that she had bought the cookies, even though she had never told anyone that she actually baked them. She bit her lip for a moment, pondering her dilemma.

“Call me Lauren,” she texted. “And better yet, how about if I bring you a freshly baked batch of cookies?” He'd appreciate that, right? As a single father, he was probably a very busy man. Or was that too forward?

“Great idea,” he replied. “And Lauren it is.”

Swoon.

“Next Saturday? Why don't you bring Maya over to my place around three? You and I can have coffee while the kids run around.”

Oh, so it was more like a playdate, a chance for their kids to hang out together. Still, she was eager to get to know him better, and again, she thought that he might be able to supply her with some valuable data for her paper. And she knew that Maya and Max were friends and would have fun playing with each other. Win, win.

“Sounds like a plan,” she texted.

He replied with a dancing bear emoji and a link with directions to his and Max's apartment.

Lauren dropped down on the sofa. Kazu had invited her over for coffee! Okay, so it wasn't an adults-getting-better-acquainted kind of date, the kind that might eventually lead to kisses and cuddles and maybe more. Or maybe it could turn out to be that? But did she even really want that? She had been getting by pretty well on her own. The last thing she needed was another man to pick up after and cook for and try to micro-manage her every move. Then again, maybe cookie-baker Kazu was different. At any rate, she was getting w-a-a-y ahead of herself. They were just going to have cookies.

What if he found out that she hadn't actually baked the cookies? Would he think that she was a liar? Well, maybe she could get Emily to give her the recipe. If she made a batch of cookies herself, just this once, she wouldn't feel so bad about her deception.