

When your life
is a reality show,
falling in love with
your best friend is
a game changer

Faking Reality

sara fujimura

CHAPTER 16
EXTENDED VERSION

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NEW YEAR'S DAY

New Year's Day is the one day a year that Matsuda is closed. While most other restaurants in Phoenix are hopping, Ojii-chan insists that the Matsudas honor their family's roots and traditions, whether his grandkids are on board with it or not. And this year, they're not. Leo texts me a picture of himself early New Year's morning with a black cloud gif raining on his head.

LEO: Kill me now.

DAKOTA: What? You look nice. The Kitsune Mask pin on your tie makes the outfit.

LEO: Ojii-chan doesn't like it. It's like 9 a.m., and we've had fifty-six arguments already including: Yes, even "adult" children (Sasha) have to go to temple for the annual New Year's blessing. Yes, you will wear a coat and tie (me). Yes, you will spend the entire day with the family who loves you, and you will appreciate all their sacrifices (Aurora). No, you will not have an attitude about it (all of us). Ughhhhhhh.

DAKOTA: I'm sorry. Want me to come over earlier today?

LEO: Nah, that's okay. I have a phone date with Lindsay at 3. On a scale of 1-10, how pathetic is it that our phone calls are the highlight of my day?

DAKOTA: Well...I gotta run. See you at 5.

LEO: Ja mata ne.

I don't have to run, but I definitely need to walk away from this conversation—one step forward, two steps back.

"**Akemashite omedetō** gozaimasu!" I greet Ojii-chan with a polite version of Happy New Year when he opens the door.

Ojii-chan pats the top of my head and says a lot of things back to me, but all my Japanese II brain can understand is Happy New Year. Though Mom and Mrs. Matsuda hug each other all the time, Mom gives Ojii-chan a deep bow and the greeting her grandmother taught her when her mixed Japanese family used to go to the Akagi grandparents' home for O-Shōgatsu. Dad greets Ojii-chan with his usual enthusiastic handshake.

After swapping our shoes for guest slippers, we follow Ojii-chan into their immaculate house, festively decorated for the holidays with bamboo and

See Appendix for more about these
highlighted words.

pine and my favorite decoration, **kagami mochi**. When I was around seven and sad because Santa brought me all kinds of cool presents, but Leo never got any despite being good all year, Mom gave me a quick lesson on how not everybody celebrates the same. I was pissed when I found out three years later that not only did Leo know about the “Santa Game” my family played, but he was Head Elf-in-Charge to Dad’s Santa in shopping for some of those presents. I also learned that Leo’s ability to both act and keep a secret are light-years ahead of mine.

“We have Christmas trees and beautifully wrapped packages,” Mom told me when I cried about being lied to by my family and my best friend. “And the Matsudas have kagami mochi and **otoshidama**. They’re different, but that’s okay.”

I stop to straighten the tiny red fan-shaped paper sitting on top of the mandarin orange on the top layer of the kagami mochi, or as I used to call it “Leo’s Snowman.” It does look a little bit like a snowman sitting on a golden stage. Two white mochi cakes stack on top of each other with the mandarin orange on top like its head. Paper and loops of fine wire decorate the mochi that the Matsudas won’t eat until January 11th.

As we come into their kitchen, Mrs. Matsuda pushes mute on the annual Kohaku TV show from Japan that they record since Matsuda is open on New Year’s Eve. Things must be bad. Leo’s phone is more interesting to him than the twenty cute girls in coordinating short skirts doing their highly choreographed song on the TV. Ojiichan says something in Japanese that is hard and loud. In a synchronization that would make AKB48—still dancing away on TV—proud, the Matsuda siblings sigh, put their phones on the coffee table, and say an unenthusiastic “Happy New Year.”

“You’re not wearing your kimono this year, Jen.” Mom hugs Mrs. Matsuda.

“We decided...not to this year.” Mrs. Matsuda gives Mom an exasperated look. Mom chuckles. Undoubtedly, they exchanged texts about the fifty-six arguments this morning, too.

“Well, you all looked lovely at the temple this morning in your mom’s Facebook post.” Mom shares another telepathic conversation with Mrs. Matsuda.

“Smoke and mirrors,” Aurora grumbles from the couch.

Aurora wears a University of New Hampshire sweatshirt over her black yoga pants, and her hair is pulled into a sloppy bun. Leo has his own passive-aggressive fashion going on. He still has on his original khaki pants, but Leo has untucked and unbuttoned his dress shirt until his Kitsune Mask T-shirt underneath shows. Only Sasha has on her original Buddhist temple

outfit, a fashionable but straightforward polka-dotted dress, and her hair pulled up into a perfect bun.

“There’s my favorite trio!” As usual, Dad does not read the room correctly and plows forward. He plops down on the sectional between the scowling Matsuda kids and grabs Sasha and Leo in a double-armed hug. “So proud of you kids. Sasha killing it at pastry school, especially with her manju-making. And Aurora being accepted into UNH and getting ready to start a whole new life this fall. And of course, Leo, our culinary entrepreneur preparing to take over the family empire one day.”

Mom and Mrs. Matsuda share an eye-roll-lip-curl look of exasperation. It takes talent to hit everybody’s pain point in one breath. Dad makes things slightly better when he digs in his inner coat pocket and comes out with three small, decorative envelopes. “One for you. One for you. And one for you.”

“It’s not much,” Dad says, though I saw the crisp Benjamin that went into each of those envelopes. “But I hope you do something fun with it.”

This is one New Year tradition that will never get an argument.

“Thanks, Mr. Doug. You are always so supportive of what I do,” Sasha says, and the others echo her thanks.

Ojiichan pulls a decorative envelope out of the inner pocket of his blazer. “And I have something for my—”

“Currently favorite granddaughter,” Aurora mumbles, and Sasha lets out a snort.

“Taihen datta ne.” Ojiichan shakes his head, but the tiniest of smiles pulls at the corners of his mouth.

“Dōmo arigatō gozaimasu, Ojiichan.” I accept the **otoshidama** with this year’s zodiac symbol printed on it with two hands and give Ojiichan a deep bow.

My parents used to not let me accept Ojiichan’s otoshidama, the Japanese New Year custom of giving the children in your extended family money in small, decorative envelopes. That is until Mrs. Matsuda pulled Mom aside one year and begged her to allow me to accept it. She explained that because Ojiichan is estranged from his family back in Japan, and all four of my grandparents are gone, he truly thinks of me as his bonus granddaughter. Dad only agreed if “Uncle Doug”—who loves giving gifts—got to reciprocate without commentary on the amount. So now Ojiichan is happy, Dad is happy, and all the Matsuda grandkids are happy. Win-win-win.

“Aaaaand, I’ve got a little holiday cheer for the adults.” Dad rolls off the couch with a groan and comes back into the kitchen. He digs around

in the bag we brought. He pulls out a dark brown glass jug with the HOT DAM! Beaver logo etched on one side. “For the menfolk: Some of my latest New England IPA for Kenichi. And a growler of my top-secret formula lager for you, Masao.”

Funny, there has never been any pushback to Dad’s annual gift of beer or our other gift, an extra-large bottle of sake imported from Japan. Based on Mom’s expression the year I accidentally dropped the gift bag on our concrete driveway and cracked the bottle, I would say it is pretty expensive.

“It wouldn’t be New Year without our annual McDonald-Matsuda tradition.” Dad pulls out the bottle of sake and presents it to Mrs. Matsuda with two hands.

The Matsuda adults all gush and over-thank my parents.

“Shall we make a toast?” Mrs. Matsuda says.

Ojiichan puts a decorative, lipped lacquerware tray on the kitchen island stacked with five **masu**—wooden boxes about the size of my palm—and three champagne flutes.

“Did one of them break? There are only three,” I say.

Tired of being left out of the annual toast, I glass-etched our first initials, one for each Matsuda grandkid, onto champagne flutes when I was thirteen. Leo’s and mine have a tiny Kitsune Mask symbol next to our initials. Sasha is the first to the kitchen, with Leo and Aurora straggling after her.

“Wait,” Sasha says, “Does this mean I finally get to participate?”

“Since this year you are both an adult in Japan and can legally drink in America, you may.” Mr. Matsuda rearranges the wooden boxes until four of them connect to make one big square, and the fifth one sits on top in the middle.

Ojiichan opens the sake and gently pours it into the top-most masu until it overflows into the boxes below it. It’s a little messy, with one of the bottom masu spilling onto the lipped tray, but that’s okay. It represents the overflowing of kindness and generosity from the host and appreciation of the guest’s friendship. Mrs. Matsuda picks up the top box, wipes off the bottom on a towel, and hands it to Dad. She repeats the process until Mom, Ojiichan, and Mr. Matsuda each have one. Meanwhile, Sasha opens the bottle of apple cider and hands a flute to me, Aurora, and Leo.

“Wait,” Mr. Matsuda says when Sasha reaches for the remaining masu. Instead, he offers Sasha a ceramic sake cup with a rabbit and the moon design on the side.

Mrs. Matsuda fills the cup halfway full. Sasha opens her mouth to start argument #57 of the day but reconsiders. Now that everybody has a celebratory drink in their hand, Ojiichan begins his annual toast. To their

credit, the Matsuda siblings wisely keep their eyeballs firmly facing forward.

“Here is to my family.” Ojiichan scans the arc with his outstretched masu. “May this new year be filled with good health, good business, and good friends.”

“And new adventures,” I say.

Everybody looks at me. Crap. That was supposed to be Mr. Inside Voice.

“And new adventures.” Leo lifts his flute toward me.

“And new business ventures,” Sasha says.

An awkward silence falls across the room, especially when Mr. and Mrs. Matsuda share a look.

“Kampai!” Ojiichan says, though his voice isn’t nearly as spirited as in past years.

“Kampai!” Everyone echoes, taking a drink.

Sasha sputters and coughs. Ojiichan laughs at Sasha’s expression.

“This is why you only get a small cup.”

“Yep. One cup is fine. Thanks.” Sasha wipes at her watering eyes. “I will take a glass of wine, though.”

“Whoa, slow down there, new adult. Let’s get some food in our stomachs first, okay?” Mrs. Matsuda says.

“Ta-dah!” Leo puts a tower of large, daintily decorated lacquerware boxes on the counter. He breaks the tower down into three boxes, each layer filled with little bits of this and that. “After making **osechi-ryōri** for half of the Japanese community in Phoenix the last two days, I’m glad to finally get to eat one of them.”

“I can’t make traditional osechi because I can’t find all the special foods, but I hope this is okay.” Ojiichan is culturally required to be humble about the culinary masterpiece his family created, and we are culturally required to disagree.

Dad dips back down into our bag. “I’m planning on bringing a bunch of these babies back from my trip to Alaska this summer and smoking them myself, but until then. Voila.” Dad pulls the plastic wrap off the decorative platter to reveal smoked salmon slices, high-end crackers, a little bowl of caviar, and an assortment of vegetables.

The oven timer goes off as the parents continue to gush and thank each other for their food contributions.

“Awwww, yeah,” Leo says, and my mouth waters at our Matsuda grandkids’ New Year tradition.

Mrs. Matsuda shakes her head as Leo pulls two large cookie trays out of the oven. They are filled with BBQ chicken wings, tater tots, and

mozzarella sticks—all pre-made by someone whose last name is probably not Matsuda.

“You didn’t forget your part of the feast, did you, Dakota?” Leo plates up all the deep-fried goodness onto their designated decorative platters.

“Bam.” I put the box of chocolate-dipped Oreos next to Leo’s plates. I didn’t make the Oreos. I didn’t make the chocolate dip. I did, however, dip the Oreos into the chocolate dip and sprinkle them with white edible glitter. Good enough. “You’re welcome.”

“Life’s short. Eat dessert first.” Leo picks up one of the Oreos and crams the whole thing in his mouth. As he chews, Leo gives me two thumbs up. “You passed the test, Koty. You are allowed to stay and enjoy the Matsuda-McDonald feast.”

I flick Leo in the arm hard, but he just laughs. We move the bounty of food to the counter, and everyone receives a plate and a pair of chopsticks.

“Itadakimasu!” we echo Ojii-chan, who officially starts the race to food coma.

We settle around the kitchen/open living room in duos and trios. I pull out my phone and take a quick picture. My plate is filled with lacy lotus roots, a shrimp with its head still attached, mozzarella sticks, tater tots, smoked salmon on bougie crackers, a rectangle block of non-decorative mochi roasted and covered in soy sauce, and two dipped Oreos. And now a pile of **kuromame**.

“Hai, hai,” Ojii-chan says when Leo refuses his teaspoon of black soybeans in sweet syrup. “You need them for good health and hard work this year. Our whole family needs good luck this year.”

“The beans are delicious,” Mrs. Matsuda says loudly. Translation: Just eat the damn sweet beans and make your grandfather happy.

We all eat the beans.

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“Suckah!” Aurora says when the Matsuda siblings finish playing janken—the Japanese version of Rock, Paper, Scissors—and Leo gets stuck washing the dishes. She high-fives Sasha. “Let’s go upstairs, Sash.”

“Why are you always Cinder-fella?” I nod at the pile of dishes that have to be done before we can start our ever-evolving Top 5 Kitsune Mask episodes marathon.

Leo lets out an irritated sigh. “I think the game is rigged against me.”

“Here, I’ll wash. You dry. I don’t know where stuff goes.” I reach into the pantry and pull Leo’s full-sized black apron off the back of the door. When I slide it on, it carries the scent of his soap mixed with whatever oily thing he was cooking the last time he wore it. It still makes me smile. “Glad

you're getting a lot of use out of my present from what? Seventh grade?"

"Eighth. Because that's the fall Kitsune Mask came out." Leo digs through a drawer and pulls out a clean dish towel.

"Speaking of gifts." I dig through my family's bag and pull out the stained-glass window decoration I made for Leo of a nine-tailed fox.

"This is so cool!" Leo's dimpled smile immediately disappears. "I thought we weren't exchanging Christmas-slash-New-Year gifts this year so that we could put the money toward you-know-what."

I deflect. "Yeah, we totally aren't. I had such a fun time creating stuff with Mr. Tang that now I have a surplus of stained-glass window decorations. Like, everybody will be getting one for their birthday, Valentine's Day, Ground Hog Day...."

"Thanks. I love it."

Leo hugs me. It's a side hug instead of his usual frontal hug, but I'll take it. It's probably better this way.

"How about a little tuneage while we work?" Leo says.

"The Leo Mix?" I say, holding up my phone.

"Did you add Rayne Lee's newest song?"

"Hell yeah," I say as my phone finds the kitchen's Bluetooth speaker.

Leo does a goofy shoulder dance to the beginning of "Create Your Spark." By the first chorus—probably thanks to the sugar buzz from all the Oreos—Leo goes full ham. Mrs. Matsuda comes to investigate the thudding sounds coming from the kitchen—also known as Leo performing the video's bouncy choreography—but wisely retreats without comment.

We are three-quarters through The Leo Mix and on the last few dishes when Rayne's breakout, slow-jam song "One Last Kiss" comes on. Leo bumps my shoulder as he does the single-single-double bounce pattern like Rayne does in the video. Water flies off the tray I'm rinsing and hits me in the eye.

"Hey!" I flick some suds at Leo in retaliation.

"Come on. You know you want to dance with me." Leo travels backward, never missing a beat in the dance pattern, to throw a used napkin in the trash.

Though I intended to retrieve a forgotten glass off the coffee table, Leo mistakes the drying of my hands as my acceptance of his dance invitation.

One step forward.

Since we're mimicking the video, I take Leo's hand like Rayne does to the guy in her video. A squeal rips out of my chest when Leo spins me around in a ballerina-like turn. We continue to dance hand-in-hand through

the second verse and chorus until we get to the song's bridge. Leo attempts—and epically fails—to do Rayne's trademark vocal run up into the stratosphere.

I lean into Leo until we are forehead-to-sweaty-forehead. We're both breathing hard, but when Leo looks directly into my eyes, blood surges to my face. The four slow snaps that go with this part of the song keep us connected, closer than we've been in a long time. Leo bites his bottom lip. I close my eyes.

Two steps forward.

Leo kisses me. Only it's not on the lips like I'd hoped. Just like Rayne does to the guy in her video, Leo kisses my hand and backs away as he sings along with the final chorus. Though he doesn't have Rayne's Lamborghini to peel out and leave me in a pile of dust, it kind of feels the same way anyway.

Instead of ending the song with Rayne's "One last...kiss," Leo ends it with a, "What the...hell?"

Caught in the motion-sensor lights, Aurora sits on top of the six-foot wall in their backyard. She cranes her neck so far to see what's going on in the kitchen that it throws her off balance. Aurora's arms windmill before she falls off the wall and into the oleander bush below. She pops back up a moment later, brushing off her yoga pants. She puts an index finger to her lips before turning and climbing back up on the wall. Like a tightrope walker, Aurora's shaky squat turns into a stand with her arms out for balance. She takes a few steps down the wall before making a sharp left. Now, it's Leo's and my turn to crane our necks as Aurora walks like a cat down the communal wall, which divides his neighborhood into two.

"One of these days, Aurora's going to break her neck sneaking out her window like that," Leo says.

"Where's she going that she can't use the front door like a normal person?"

"Ten bucks says she's going to Jayden's house for his family's annual Snowball and Hot Chocolate party. Also known as Fight #27 today." Leo sighs. "Welp. Nice knowing you, Aurora. Though she does get points for ingenuity. Meanwhile, my love life during winter break has consisted mostly of texts, selfies, and one phone call each day. Woo."

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault. Even if you guys hadn't come over, I'd still be stuck here for New Year's instead of up in Flagstaff with Lindsay's family. Ugh! I wish Ojichan's archaic traditions would just die."

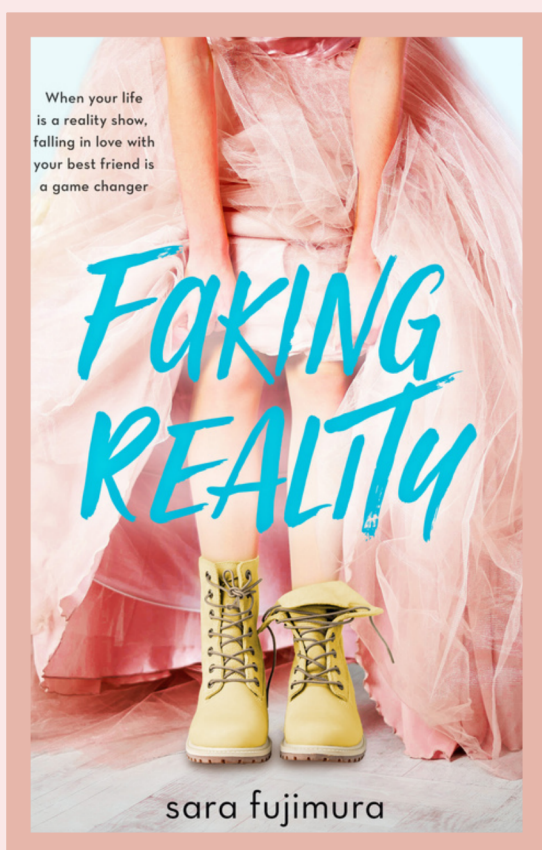
I swoop around Leo to collect the final glass so he can't see the hurt on my face. He noodles around on his phone as I finish the last of the

cleanup. We don't dance again. Or talk, really.
Two steps forward. Forty steps back.

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Sara Fujimura
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Description

Product Description

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Leo Matsuda dreams of escaping his small town Arizona life and the suffocating demands of working in his family's restaurant, but the closer he gets to his goal—thanks to the help of his best friend (and secret crush) Dakota—the more reasons there are for him to stay.

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APPENDIX





SARA FUJIMURA

Sara Fujimura (Foo-gee-moo-rah) is the American half of her bicultural Japanese-American family and spends about a month each year in Japan. She started as a journalist, so it is no surprise that Sara's young adult books contain a lot of facts to go along with the fiction. Whether you want to know about Japan (TANABATA WISH), the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 (BREATHE), what it's like to be an Olympic-caliber skater (EVERY REASON WE SHOULDN'T), or how unscripted television works (FAKING REALITY), Sara takes readers on swoony journeys to unusual places. She is a creative writing teacher and literacy advocate who is excited to support the next generation of authors. If you go to anime cons, you may also see Sara as her alter ego, The Obento Lady. She is an active member of SCBWI.

EVERY REASON WE SHOULDN'T was named an NPR Best Book of 2020.

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