

The Tokyo Cover Girls

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Chapter 1

Jess had once seen a Japanese game show contestant crawl through a tub of boa constrictors wearing nothing but a bikini and a poker visor. If only castings were that easy.

Jess pulled her shoulders back, planted her feet on the ground, and stretched her mouth into a smile as the man at the desk scanned her face and body. Apparently satisfied, he turned to her manager, Hiro, and began barking out sounds she could only assume were words. From somewhere behind her she could hear the tinkling sound of the Candy Crush theme song and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. At least Blake had turned the volume down this time.

It was just past ten a.m., and the four members of Tokyo's Visage International Modeling Agency—Hiro, Jess, and her two roomies, Blake and Hailey, were in the head office of a local housewares manufacturer. They had come to audition for a magazine insert advertising the company's new line of bathroom accessories. Blake and Hailey had already taken their turns and were now sitting in plastic office chairs behind Jess. She would have preferred they wait in the hallway. Girls like them always managed to make things...complicated. And right now that was the last thing she needed.

Jess had been modeling for three years, having first started at the age of fourteen. With her large brown eyes, wide cheeks, and teacup chin, her look was what agents called "commercial." Normal people would have just called her pretty. Either way, Jess's face sold well in Asia and she had worked every big city there from Seoul to Taipei. Out of them all, Tokyo was her favorite. The city's catalogue day rates were higher than anywhere else in the region, especially for underwear. One day of Japanese bra and panty sets could net her the same as three days of Taiwanese cardigans. And who couldn't love a place where they swept and washed the streets on a nightly basis? It was like living in a giant dishwasher. Of course, the city hadn't felt as safe as it used to since those girls had disappeared but the money was worth the risk.

Jess glanced at the man at the desk. The client was still deep in discussion with her manager. She allowed her smile to drop and instead scanned the row of display products lined up behind his desk. She wondered which item her face would appear on if she actually managed to pull this thing off: the puppy-print toilet paper or the panda-shaped plunger? Sure, neither was exactly "portfolio gold" but she wasn't in any position to be picky.

Jess had been going to castings for four days already and hadn't landed a single gig. If things didn't change soon, there was no way she would make her summer target. Law school wasn't going to pay for itself.

After what felt like ages, Hiro lifted his gaze to look at her—though they were both standing, Jess was still a good head taller than he was.

“The client wants you to raise your arms and turn in circles,” he said.

Jess cocked her head to the side. This was the modeling industry. People usually asked her to demonstrate catalogue poses, not windmill impressions. On the other hand, it was Tokyo: a girl never knew quite what to expect in this market. Jess reached for the sky and began spinning. As she turned, she couldn't help but wince at the sight of the two girls seated behind her.

There was a reason the client's toilet paper had enormous eyes and his plunger was smiling. It was the same reason all the city's fashion magazines had names that sounded like cartoon series—*An An*, *Cutie*, *Pinkie*, and why hundreds of teen girls arrived in Harajuku every Saturday dressed like they'd escaped from some rich toddler's doll collection. The Tokyo fashion industry was crazy for cute.

Sitting on Jess's left was a girl with wavy dirty-blond hair and round honey-colored eyes. A green portfolio was balanced on her lap along with a thick pile of composite cards—as usual the client hadn't even bothered to take one. Though Hailey looked like the love child of a Disney prince and an anime schoolgirl and should have cleaned up in the city, the girl always managed to do something daft that completely turned off the client. Today's gaff: she had asked the man at the desk where the bathroom was. Hiro had told her three times already that clients didn't talk directly to models. At least the girl had an excuse: it was her first trip and she was obviously lost. Blake was another case altogether.

A platinum blonde with puffy red lips pulled into a bored pout sat fidgeting with her phone next to Hailey. Typical. Blake spent every casting either glaring at the client or staring off into space. She might have gotten away with that kind of attitude in Paris or Milan but not here. Japan liked their girls looking as perky and cheerful as smiley face emojis. The client had dismissed Blake even faster than he had Hailey. Jess didn't know what that girl was thinking. She was obviously no rookie considering how many tear sheets she had in her book. Was she so cocky that she thought she could get away with it or was she trying to destroy her career on purpose?

Importing girls to Japan wasn't cheap. The agency paid for everything upfront—the plane