

Toast of Tokyo

CHAPTER TWO

Nobu Koide

Nobu had one foot in the front door of his family's home when his *okasan* appeared at the entrance. She fell into the sort of bow reserved for precious sons, then presented him with a smile that rivalled the full moon in all its brilliance. The performance might have been directed at him, but the guests at her annual moon-viewing party were the intended audience.

“Where have you been for the past two hours?” *Okasan* muttered under her breath.

Nobu removed his shoes and stepped onto the foyer's marble flooring, all the while nodding to familiar faces in the drawing room. “Busy at the store, *Okasan*,” he grumbled with a gracious smile for the benefit of those watching.

Okasan knelt on the floor and placed slippers at Nobu's feet. “You promised you'd be here before the party started,” she hissed.

“I've arrived, so there's no need to complain.” The party was *Okasan*'s premier autumn event, really the premier event for all Tokyo's elites. The women of her family had been holding moon-viewing parties since the seventeenth century. *Okasan* could recount every one of the years it'd been cancelled and the calamity responsible: usually

earthquakes, fires, floods, bitter shoguns, political scandals, or a death in the family. Nobu had heard all the stories. Many, many times.

She shuffled a few steps to the side, leaving room for him to put on the slippers. From the drawing-room, Prime Minister Ito observed the activity at the entranceway. Nobu met the samurai-turned-politician's incisive gaze and bowed low. His presence meant Nobu's *otosan*, father, was courting the favour of Japan's foremost politician. "Where's *Otosan*?" Nobu asked.

Okasan gestured to the back parlour. "Sipping *sake* with his friends, of course," she said with such false brightness that she had to be seething.

Okasan's preference, as she'd reiterated over breakfast that morning, would be for *Otosan* to mingle with guests positioned to further the family's pursuit of a title. As the third daughter of a marquis, she'd watched her *otosan* marry off her older sisters to members of the peerage and choose a young man from a family of wealthy industrialists for his youngest daughter. A bureaucrat in the Foreign Ministry, the young man demonstrated diplomatic prowess that would surely earn him the rank of baron, at least. *Okasan* accepted the marriage because she had no alternative but to accept her parents' choice of spouse. One day, her *otosan* promised, Koide-*san*'s vigorous service to the nation would restore her to the nobility.

Okasan believed her day of restoration would be hastened by Nobu marrying a young lady from a titled family, preferably the daughter of a marquis or viscount who would wield his considerable influence on the Koide family's behalf. Fortunately for the

Koides, *Okasan* had enough cousins and friends among the nobility to ensure Nobu an abundance of aristocratic daughters to choose from.

Unfortunately for Nobu, they'd been wholly uninteresting. When the day came that one of the reserved, meek little misses mustered even a jot of the desire he'd felt for the stunning Mademoiselle Renaud he'd met the week before, he'd propose marriage without a second thought.

"I'll join *Otosan*," he said at the risk of stoking *Okasan*'s ire.

Her smile only brightened. Anger thus transformed could blind a man. "Our guests are expecting your lively conversation. You and *Otosan* would be remiss to deprive them." *Okasan* nodded toward a cluster of guests milling about the drawing-room. "Viscount Nagahara brought his daughters, lovely young ladies who'd make a fine addition to any family. You must tell the viscount about the success you're having at the department store."

Okasan's chiding tone carried the presumption he wasn't doing his utmost to fulfil his filial duty and take a wife. In truth, he wanted to get the whole marriage business over with as soon as possible. "After I greet *Otosan* and his friends, I'll speak with Viscount Nagahara and his lovely daughters."

Not that he'd *really* be speaking with the viscount's daughters. More than a few words exchanged with young noblewomen was considered overbearing and ungentlemanly. When he'd first returned from London, he'd spoken full sentences to unmarried women and watched their faces turn unghastly shades of grey as they darted behind the nearest parent.

His reputation for vulgar foreign manners took several years to shake. Now he knew to converse with the *otosans*, exchange a word or two with the *okasans*, and prepare to act

pleased when the mute, modest daughters granted him shy smiles at his mention of flowers, musicales, tea ceremony, or whatever artistic endeavour they'd claimed as their life's passion. For this task, he needed a cup of *sake*, or several.

The European-style cushioned sofas and heavy wooden tables usually situated in the back parlour had been removed for a low table that ran the length of the room and sitting pillows as befitted a Japanese event. Beyond the open doors to the back garden stood the moon-viewing platform piled high with pounded rice cakes shaped like the full moon and rice fronds laden with grains.

Otosan sat at one end of the table, having ceded his guests the places of honour in the middle, although he outranked most of them. His grey silk kimono hung loosely at his chest, giving the impression of a man lounging about, taking leisure in the company of dear friends and cups of *sake*. But Nobu knew better. Ever the politician, *Otosan* never surrendered control of his faculties to sweet wine, even among so-called dear friends of the Foundation Party.

"*Otosan*." Nobu bowed. "Apologies for my lateness."

"You work too hard," *Otosan* grumbled as though irritated, even though everyone at the table knew it was a compliment for a son in whom he had inordinate pride. He told anyone who would listen about Nobu's European-style store and how it elevated Japan's status as a modern nation. "Go sit at the other end of the table. I'll speak with you later." *Otosan* spoke dismissively, but Nobu caught the affectionate twinkle in his eye.

He took a seat among the Foundation Party's most powerful, and likely drunkest, members in Japan. *Otosan*'s best friend, *Watanabe-san*, filled a square wooden cup to

overflowing for Nobu. After raising the cup to *Otosan* and the best of their nation's political minds, Nobu took a much-needed mouthful of wine. A few more sips, and his muscles loosened. Obligations to investors, store patrons, employees, and his parents lightened, and he joined in the conversation.

"You must get married right away." The Foreign Ministry bureaucrat seated next to Nobu tried with obvious effort to make his speech coherent. "Get the wife pregnant a few times. Make money. Make friends. Then enter politics. That's when you'll be ready to give your best to your country." He pulled Nobu closer with a twist of fingers down to his shirtsleeve. "We need you."

"We'll prevail next term," *Otosan* said consolingly. "They're the new Party."

"They're not new. They're the conservative faction of the Conservative Party," said another of *Otosan*'s friends, as drunk—if not drunker—than the one who'd yet to loosen his grip on Nobu's arm. "They call themselves new, so the people think they're new, but they're nowhere near modern. They're begging to sacrifice one of their testicles to bring back the shogunate."

Otosan's best friend, *Watanabe-san*, looked pensive as he filled the wooden cup of the man seated opposite him. "They're determined that our nation should rule over the east of Asia. Ordinary citizens like that. They want the government to draw its revenue from the colonies and stop taxing the people."

"Colonialism gives the army something to do," the man clutching Nobu slurred. "The problem for us is votes. As long as we require military service from every young man, the conservatives will get their votes." He pulled harder on Nobu's sleeve. "That is why we

need you, Nobu-*san*. You're not military but you've got the look of strength about you. Forget your department store. You must run for office."

Nobu was plenty aware of the expectation that one day, in the not-distant-enough future, he was supposed to abandon his enterprise, join the Foundation Party, and run for a seat in the Diet, none of which he wanted to think about. He was a man of business, not a politician like *Otosan*, and he was doing plenty for the country as such. Koide Department Store was stimulating Japan's trade, manufacturing, and construction as similar department stores were being planned for Osaka and elsewhere in Tokyo. Nobu would point this out to the man hanging on his arm, but he knew better than to argue with bleary-eyed politicians.

Otosan stood and motioned for Nobu to follow. "Please excuse us, gentlemen. My son must greet several families with daughters ripe for marriage, or my wife's efforts this evening will be for naught."

The man next to Nobu released his sleeve and slapped him full on the back. "I was telling your boy it was about time he took a wife."

The other men lifted their cups in appreciation of the sentiment.

Nobu finished the *sake* in his box and followed *Otosan* to the back garden where guests conversed around the moon-viewing platform.

"I'm going to be in a world of trouble with *Okasan* if I don't put you in front of the Nagahara daughters. There are two of them, a regular feast of possibilities." *Otosan* gave a toothy grin.

Nobu would be thrilled if one of the Nagahara daughters offered something to satiate himself upon, and he wasn't referring to what they were hiding under layers of

kimono robes, although he'd prefer a wife who spared him the expense of a mistress. He was seeking the elusive spark of the modern. A demonstration of boldness and wit would go a long way toward easing the persistent worry he was going to spend his life with a woman who believed it her calling to mindlessly tend to his needs and agree with every word he uttered.

Admittedly, he desired a love match. Ever the optimist, he held out hope there was a modern young noblewoman among all those tittering daughters. But he was also a pragmatist. Most likely, he was going to find himself attached to a woman who left him hard as a rock for French *modistes* in Ginza.

Otosan approached Viscount Nagahara with a warm politician's greeting. Nobu followed suit. He'd inherited *Otosan*'s suave manners though lacked his zeal for political manoeuvring. The viscount's bushy moustache rose with his broad grin. Nobu bowed to the viscountess and her two daughters, all of whom were clad in kimonos of the finest silk. Neither daughter was particularly attractive. Nor were they unattractive. As expected, they kept their eyes downward and delivered their greetings with appropriate softness.

Then, if he wasn't mistaken, the younger daughter's lips quirked ever so slightly. Had her older sister made an amusing comment under her breath? Levity might signal a spirited, adventurous young lady.

Conversation moved to their collective good fortune for the cloudless sky allowing an abundance of moonlight. The daughters kept their eyes dutifully averted and contributed the requisite nods and polite murmurs. What a difference from European women, who would've at least taken part in musing on the autumnal moon's grand scale. Because he was

bored, and irreverence was a temptation he frequently permitted himself, he informed the viscountess about his plans to put bloomers on the department store mannequins.

Her façade fell, starting with her jaw, giving everyone around the noblewoman a clear view inside her wide-open mouth.

A stifled giggle might have come from the younger sister's direction. Nobu couldn't be certain he'd identified the sound correctly, or if there was any sound at all since there was only silence when he looked over. But she was adjusting an opal pin in her hair, which could've loosened with what might've been mirth. A good enough sign. Perhaps he'd allow *Okasan* to inquire about the Nagahara daughter.

"They were a lovely pair," *Otosan* said after they'd wished the Nagahara family a pleasant remainder of the evening and joined the guests meandering along the back garden's pathways.

"The younger one seemed to find my mention of the scandalous bloomers amusing. Or at least she delighted in her *okasan*'s reaction."

Otosan nudged Nobu with his elbow. "Humour makes for a happy domestic life."

"I might be interested in getting to know her further," Nobu said as they circled back to the display of pounded rice cakes. "But say nothing to *Okasan* yet. We're busy at the store, planning for the year-end holidays."

"Fear not. If I told her a word of it, she'd have every piece of gossip about the girl within an hour and Viscount Nagahara expecting a proposal."

Nobu cringed at how the rumours would fly and how disappointed—or thrilled—the Nagahara daughter would be when he failed to offer a marriage proposal. “We ought to spare the Nagahara family the burden of *Okasan*’s enthusiasm.”

“Which seems to have no bounds.” *Otosan* narrowed his hawkish eyes at a group of men speaking in the back parlour. “*Okasan* has known the family since she was a child. One of their daughters would make a good choice.” As he spoke, he somehow managed to keep one eye on the men who’d raised his suspicions yet give Nobu his full attention. His political tricks always left Nobu impressed.

“Father, my dear brother needs no reminding that he must marry up to secure the Koide family’s place in the peerage.” Asako, his younger and only sister and undisputed queen of sarcasm, presented them with a gleeful smirk as she joined them with a bunch of rice fronds in hand. *Okasan* must have sent her out to replenish the ones that had blown off the moon-viewing platform. Hell, Asako probably volunteered. She’d jump at a chance to be free of *Okasan*’s hovering.

Since returning to Japan five years before, the queen of sarcasm had been exercising her royal rights with abandon. Of all the family, Asako had experienced the most difficulty with their return. She’d been six years of age when they’d departed Japan and hadn’t become fully accustomed to Japanese ways. For her, home was Europe, really London, where they’d spent their final years abroad. Leaving had forced her apart from treasured friends and traditions, and the language she knew best for a place that was supposed to be home but felt nothing like it. He hated the keen sense of grief that plagued her.

Otosan glared at Asako. “Don’t let *Okasan* hear you say such things.”

Asako clicked her tongue. “Mother wouldn’t understand. Her English isn’t good enough.”

“You shouldn’t be speaking a foreign language in front of people who don’t know it. It’s rude.” *Otosan* positioned himself toward the group of men he’d been eyeing earlier. “I’m going to speak with our guests. You two should do the same.”

“We will, *Otosan*,” Asako said in deferential Japanese while giving a proper bow to *Otosan*’s back.

Nobu nodded at the fronds in Asako’s arms. “Are you planning to toss those in the trash heap?”

“Absolutely not. I’m going to adorn our platform. But let’s walk a little. I need to stretch my legs before applying my fine decorating skills to Mother’s display.”

They headed back down the garden pathway away from the house. “Is *Okasan* pleased with her party?”

Asako moved the fronds to her other arm and shook bits of dried leaves off her kimono sleeve. “She calmed down when you finally arrived. You’ve been causing your dear mother a panic these days. She’s terrified you’re bedding that foreign woman you were speaking with at the store opening.”

Nobu bristled. Granted, he’d spent the past week imagining what it’d be like to bed Mademoiselle Renaud, but he’d done nothing at the store’s opening to give the impression he was in fact bedding her. “*Okasan* would never say such a thing.”

Asako delivered a pointed glare at several women leaning toward their conversation. “Mother was appalled at how she flirted with you. Typical foreign woman,

according to our worldly and sophisticated *okasan*.” Asako rolled her eyes at the word “worldly.”

“All that from watching me greet the Frenchwoman at the store opening. She owns a boutique on Ginza Boulevard.” Nobu was proud of how nonchalantly his words had come out since he felt anything but nonchalant whenever he recalled the knowing glint in the mademoiselle’s Mediterranean blue eyes. It’d been like she was reading every sinful thought in his head without a shred of judgment. Like he could’ve voiced every one of his filthy desires and she wouldn’t have blinked an eye, just moved nearer, so he could... Nobu clenched his jaw. “You can assure *Okasan* I’m not bedding Renaud-san.”

“I’m staying out of it. You tell her next time you arrive home before midnight. We rarely see you.” Her tone was playful, but he heard the hurt.

They rounded back toward the moon-viewing platform. “I apologise. I’m busy at the store.”

“You’ve got plenty of people who can be busy for you.” She widened her eyes as though preparing to deliver information of life-or-death importance. It was a perfect imitation of *Okasan*. “You’ve got aristocratic blood flowing through your veins. You shouldn’t be letting the unseemly business of fashion, and the even unseemlier concerns of money and profit, distract from your true purpose. Marrying well.” The queen’s sarcasm was reaching new heights.

“The last thing you want is for me to marry, because then it’ll be your turn.”

He didn’t have to look over at Asako to know his comment had brought out a scowl. Asako’s mouth closed in a firm line whenever aunts and cousins inquired as to the sort of

man she preferred for a husband, or when *Okasan* droned on about the charms of a Kawasaki son or the grand home she'd enjoy as the Ishii scion's bride.

Unfortunately for Asako, she was an only daughter. Eventually, she'd have to accept the man of *Okasan's* choosing, which Nobu had promised was the wisest choice. *Okasan* might be staunch in her determination that he and Asako marry nobility, but she'd never resign them to lives of misery. She'd find Asako a man whose disposition suited.

They reached the moon-viewing platform, and Asako placed the rice fronds between the plates of pounded rice cakes. "I know my fate, dear brother. To pine away for that which I cannot have."

"Resigned to your fate?" Nobu said with exaggerated disbelief. "That's the most Japanese thing about you, dear sister."

She tilted her head back and let out a hearty laugh without attempting to conceal her teeth. Several women who'd been eavesdropping on their conversation frowned in unison. Asako frowned back. "You must tell *Okasan* you've discovered something Japanese about me. She'll be thrilled."

"It'll give her the hope you've been denying her," Nobu said with an equal punch of sarcasm. If there was any justice in the world, Asako would still be among her bluestocking friends in London, discussing the various ways to torment Parliament until women had the right to vote.

But they were in Japan. Within a few years, he and Asako would be married to high-born Japanese, and *Okasan* would have several high-born grandchildren. He'd be

making plans to sell Koide Department Store while preparing to run for office as a member of the Foundation Party.

Nobu bit back a curse at his parents for having raised him abroad. He'd forever be plagued by a vision of the life he could've had in London: owning stores throughout the city, a woman by his side whose beauty intrigued him, whose thoughts gave him pause, who made him ache to run his hands through her dark, silky locks.

Someone like Mademoiselle Renaud.

Might it be possible to have his London life in the city of Tokyo with a French *modiste*? He had every intention of finding out.

END OF CHAPTER TWO

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