

Excerpt from *Love in Translation* by Wendy Nelson Tokunaga

Chapter One - A Proposal

When I first set eyes on Takuya, my immediate inclination was to take him in my arms and kiss him like he'd never been kissed before.

Such impulsive, reckless behavior, though, was never my style. And, besides, taking such a course of action would have been inappropriate for several reasons:

1. We had yet to be officially introduced.
2. He, at twenty-eight, was five years younger than me, a fact that would be considered rather scandalous in Japan.
3. I had kind of a boyfriend back home in San Jose.
4. Takuya was my homestay "brother."

It had been his mother, Mrs. Kubota, who first referred to him as my homestay brother. And the fact that I was experiencing more than sisterly feelings toward him was probably against one of the rules stated in the *Kubota Homestay Handbook*, if there'd been such a thing.

Takuya was lean and lanky, but solid, and towered over his parents. He had just returned to his family home in suburban Tokyo from working for two years in Seattle for the Japanese food products company Sunny Shokuhin. He was far better looking than in the outdated family portrait in the living room where I first saw him, the one where his conservative hairstyle, school uniform, and studious expression gave him the look of one of those dorky people in the Young Professionals Club I remembered from high school, the types who were seventeen going on thirty-five.

But at twenty-eight, Takuya was quite the stunner, the kind of man who if I'd seen him on the train, I would have had to keep from staring so as not to be too obvious—unlike the people who gawked at me, albeit for quite different reasons.

I tried to make my gaze as unobtrusive as possible, while still taking in the scenery.

Takuya's hair was a natural black, not dyed cinnamon or tangerine like so many of the young people in Tokyo, and it hung thick and silky below his collar. His smile was friendly, his nearly black eyes warm, his demeanor easygoing. This was made all the more attractive by knowing how exhausted he must have been from his long trip, and how overwhelming it had to be to return home after two years overseas. I'd been the sweaty Saint Bernard cooped up much too long in her carrier when I first arrived in Tokyo, after enduring a ten-hour ride in an airborne sardine can. And the heaviness of jet lag weighed down my neck and shoulders like a sack of bricks. Yet Takuya seemed composed, relaxed.

Once he got settled and I sat down with him and his parents at the family's dining room table—a setting of fancy takeout sushi and a Domino's squid-and-corn deluxe pizza worthy of a state dinner—Mrs. Kubota finally introduced me. “Celeste Duncan-san,” she said.

Takuya extended his hand. “Nice to meet you, Celeste.”

Shaking hands, I smiled, but felt nervous. It had only been six weeks since I left San Jose for Tokyo and my Japanese was poor, though I had just started taking free lessons from a teacher named Mariko who, with her penchant for English swear words, was unusual to say the least. I'd asked her what I could say in Japanese to welcome Takuya home so I would make a good impression. In my mind I carefully went over the phrase she taught me. I was ready. I took a breath, and in a slow and clear voice said, “Takuya-san, *kekkon shimasen ka.*”

Silence.

Each member of the Kubota family sat frozen and the uncomfortable quiet lasted much too long.

I turned to see that Mrs. Kubota's expression was not unlike the one she'd exhibited when I walked into her living room wearing toilet slippers—one of abject horror. I waited for her to say one of the few English phrases she had mastered: “Not good, not good,” but she didn't utter a word. Still, I seemed to have done it again, committed another cultural *faux pas*. I yearned to turn into a potato bug—to curl up into a ball and have someone step on me to put me out of my misery.