

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

CONGRATULATIONS

*Sakura:
The Summer
of Becoming*

KITA SPARKLES

Sakura: The Summer Of Becoming

by
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Sakura: The Summer Of Becoming

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Chapter 1

“Megan, what are we gonna do about this summer?” Sakura asked as she soaked in the tub, and Megan was brushing her teeth.

Megan glanced over to her. “Whayumean?” She garbled her words through the toothpaste and toothbrush still in her mouth.

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Well, okay... before it was pretty obvious we were gonna finish the semester and go home when they kicked us out of our dorm room, and then do the whole thing over again with a new room when the Fall Semester started. But now we’ve changed things. We live here. With Summer. We have a life here, significant others here, and responsibilities here. I think our plans have changed for us.”

As Sakura spoke, Megan slowly stopped brushing her teeth. She had not yet considered what Sakura was bringing up. They had actually broken those bonds of “living at home,” and she hadn’t even noticed. “I... I guess I hadn’t thought about it,” she said honestly. “But you’re right, we can’t just leave for three months!”

“How come?” Summer asked from the doorway as she entered the bathroom. She grabbed her own toothbrush and avoided Megan’s kiss. “In a second, Sweetheart. Let me brush my teeth first. My breath isn’t as fresh as yours yet!”

“Well, for one thing, I wouldn’t want to be away from you that long,” Megan pointed out.

“Oh, I missed part of this,” Summer realized. “I assumed I was part of the ‘we’ who couldn’t just leave. I thought it was all of us.”

“Sakura was just wondering what we should do when the semester ends,” Megan explained. “Before, we planned to go home. But we have a new home now.”

Summer stopped her vigorous brushing for a minute and spat out the extra toothpaste. “I’m never gonna get between you girls and

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your family!" she stated strongly. "You need to see them. It would break your Mom's and Felicia's hearts if you don't! Just like I need to see my family. It won't hurt our house to be empty for a few weeks!"

"I don't know how Sakura feels about it," Megan started, glancing toward Sakura, who was now climbing from the tub and reaching for a towel, "But I feel like your family is like family to me too. I think I'd like to come there too for a little while this summer," she decided.

"I'd counted on that!" Summer said, finishing her rinsing and then kissing Megan. "Mmm. You used the strawberry gel."

"Yeah, Royce wants me to meet his family, too," Sakura said.

Megan and Summer looked at each other. How long had Sakura been sitting on that piece of information? "That sounds pretty serious, Half-Pint," Summer said softly. "How do you feel about that?"

"Huh?" Sakura seemed not to have considered it. "Oh, I guess it is!"

"Did he say anything about when or how?" Megan asked.

"Well, they are coming up for graduation," Sakura said, as though this should have been obvious.

Megan blinked at Sakura, toothbrush still in hand. "Abel is graduating?"

Sakura wrapped the towel around herself and nodded like this was the most normal thing in the world. "Yeah. He's older than us, remember?"

Summer raised an eyebrow. "Sakura... you've never met anyone in his family before, right?"

"Nope!" Sakura chirped, already halfway out of the bathroom. "But they sound nice!"

Megan and Summer exchanged a look, the kind of look that said we love her, but she is going to give us a heart attack one day.

Megan followed her out. "Sakura, meeting the family is a big deal. Like... a big big deal."

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Sakura paused mid-step, towel tucked under her arm as she dug through her drawer for pajamas and a diaper. "Is it? I mean, I guess? I didn't think about it."

Summer leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Half-Pint, you're adorable, but you really didn't think about it?"

Sakura shrugged. "I mean... I like him. He likes me. His family wants to meet me. That's normal, right?"

Megan sat on the edge of the bed. "Yes, but usually people freak out about it at least a little."

"Oh." Sakura blinked. "Should I freak out?"

"No," Summer said quickly, stepping in before Megan could answer. "You should be yourself. Abel clearly likes you for who you are. His family will too."

Sakura smiled at that, relieved.

Then Megan added, "But maybe don't tell them about the time you accidentally set off the fire alarm while making ramen."

Sakura gasped. "That was ONE TIME."

Summer snorted. "And it was last week."

Sakura pointed dramatically at both of them. "I am going to be SO NORMAL when I meet his family."

Megan and Summer burst out laughing.

"Sweetheart," Summer said gently, "you don't have a normal bone in your body."

"And that's why we love you," Megan added, pulling Sakura into a hug.

Sakura melted into it, towel and all.

"And it's why Abel does, too," Summer added. "So he finished his dis... disser... Whatever?"

"Dissertation." Sakura surprisingly supplied the correct term. "He gave it to me to read." She grabbed a huge sheaf of papers from the nightstand. They landed with a thud on the changing table. The front proudly declared, "Performing Popularity: Social Identity,

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Status Dynamics, and the Construction of Influence in Emerging Adulthood by Royce Abel Saunders ... A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Brookhaven University."

"And you read that?" Megan asked doubtfully.

"Well, no, not yet. I started it..." Sakura answered honestly.

"And got how far?"

"Two pages..." Sakura blushed. "There's a lot of wording that is hard to follow, like all those papers we signed to go to college. But yes, now he has finished his degree in Doctorology." She slipped back into "Sakura-Speak".

"His Doctorate in Sociology," Megan gently corrected.

"So, if he's not going to school anymore, what happens now?" Summer asked. She had really been counting on his help in studying her new career pursuits.

"He said something about being offered a teaching position at the University already," Sakura said. She smiled. "Don't worry, he's not leaving. He's staying for me. He told me so."

This was all news to Megan. She reflected that at the beginning of the year, Sakura surely would have told her all these things as soon as they happened. Summer had left Sakura's bedroom, and Megan closed the door. Sakura looked up at her expectantly, wondering what was up.

"Sakura, umm ... I know this is all your business and all, and you don't have to actually tell me anything you don't want to, but ... how come I didn't know about any of this? You usually share big news with me right away," Megan asked, trying not to sound hurt.

Sakura shrugged. "You've been kinda busy..." she said quietly.

Megan, the not-overemotional Megan, felt like crying when she heard that.

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"I'm sorry, 'Kura. I don't ever want to seem too busy for you! You're my best friend!" She thought back over the evenings and realized she and Summer had formed a bit of a bubble for themselves recently. "I love the way we share each other's lives." She thought more and ended with, "When I get too wrapped up in myself, I've always counted on you to snap me out of it. That's still true."

Sakura smiled lightly. "I don't want to bug you when you're with your girlfriend. Just like you don't bug me when I'm with Royce!"

"But we live with Summer, so I am with her a lot more. Bug me. Let me know when things are going on, like best friends do. Is this making any sense?" Megan searched Sakura's face for understanding.

"You're saying you want me to bother you more often?" Sakura asked.

"Yes." Megan couldn't believe she was saying this.

"Oh. Okay, I can do that." Sakura giggled. Megan was sure she could.

A week later found all three friends in the Living Room. Summer sat down with a notebook and tapped it with her pen. "Okay, we need a plan for the next three months then."

Sakura looked up. "Easy! Do everything!"

Megan put her hand on Sakura's shoulder. "A real plan, not a Sakura-esque plan."

"Hey!" Sakura pouted.

"Technically, I think we CAN do it all," Summer soothed. "Not all at once, but eventually. Babe, you and Sakura go home for a couple of weeks and get reconnected with your family. And I'll go to my parents' home and reconnect with mine. Then you come to visit me for a week or whatever, and we can go from there! All of this is coming after Abel's graduation. Sakura, you and Abel both drive, so I would

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think dates, including those where you both drive halfway and meet, should be relatively simple!”

“Yay!” Sakura sounded. “See? Everything!”

Chapter 2

The auditorium smelled faintly of old wood, new programs, and too many families wearing too much perfume. Banners hung from the rafters, velvet and gold, announcing the commencement of the College of Arts and Sciences. The doctoral candidates sat in the front rows, a sea of black robes trimmed with velvet, each one topped with the soft, floppy tam that made them look both scholarly and slightly ridiculous. Royce Abel sat among them, hands folded, trying to look composed. He had succeeded for the first ten minutes. After that, the nerves set in.

Up in the stands, his people had gathered. Sakura was perched on the edge of her seat, vibrating with excitement like a small, caffeinated bird. Summer had already taken three selfies, two of which included Royce in the background, even though he was a hundred feet away. Megan was holding the program like it was a sacred text. Stephanie was fanning herself dramatically. Felicia was eating something she definitely wasn't supposed to have brought inside.

The ceremony droned on in the way ceremonies do, with speeches, applause, more speeches, and a musical interlude that went on way too long. But then the moment arrived. The dean stepped up to the microphone.

"Doctoral candidates, please rise."

A ripple of movement. Royce stood.

"Faculty advisors, please join your candidates on stage for the hooding."

Sakura let out a noise that was half squeal, half gasp. Summer elbowed her. Megan shushed them both. Stephanie rolled her eyes but smiled.

Royce's name was called.

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“Royce Abel Saunders, Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology. Dissertation: *Performing Popularity: Social Identity, Status Dynamics, and the Construction of Influence in Emerging Adulthood.*”

He walked across the stage, trying not to trip on the hem of his robe. His advisor - a tall, thin man with the posture of someone who had spent too many years reading in bad chairs, met him at center stage.

The hooding was ceremonial, almost medieval. The advisor lifted the velvet-lined hood, placed it over Royce’s head, and settled it across his shoulders. The crowd applauded.

Sakura stood up and clapped like she was at a concert, wanting an encore. Felicia gently pulled her back toward her chair because no one else was standing. Royce gave a small, embarrassed bow and walked offstage, cheeks flushed, eyes bright.

When the conferral of degrees came, the entire auditorium rose. The university president spoke the traditional words, “By the authority vested in me, I confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.” The room erupted.

And just like that, he was Dr. Saunders.

Outside, the sun was too bright and the air too warm, but no one cared. Families swarmed the graduates like migrating birds.

Sakura launched herself at Royce first, nearly knocking the tam off his head.

“You did it! You’re a doctor! A real one! Well, not the medical kind, but still!”

Behind her, the rest of the group approached at a more reasonable pace. Summer gave him a proud nod. Megan was already tearing up and mad at herself because she was not the overemotional one, like Sakura. With them were Stephanie and Felicia, whom he recognized from Megan’s birthday party, but that

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night had been so busy they hadn't had the chance to really know him yet. Since then, so much had happened, including the night everything went sideways in Sakura and Megan's dorm.

Felicia reached him first, steady in that way she always was, the way someone becomes when they've spent years being the anchor for a younger sister who needed more than the world ever realized.

"Abel," she said, and her voice was calm but full, like she'd been holding something in her chest for months. "Good to see you again."

He nodded, suddenly aware of how formal his robe felt. "You too."

Felicia took his hand, not in a dramatic, emotional way, but in a deliberate, grounding way, and held it for a moment longer than a simple greeting required.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For what you did that night, for both of them. I didn't get to say it properly before."

Abel swallowed because there was no easy way to respond to gratitude that deep. "I'm just glad they're safe."

Felicia nodded once, the kind of nod that meant she'd said what she needed to say, and then, because she was Felicia, ever the big sister, she reached out and straightened the back of his hood without asking, like she'd been doing it for years.

Sakura smiled at that, proud and relieved all at once.

Stephanie stepped forward next, Megan hovering at her side like she was waiting for her mother to deliver a verdict.

Stephanie didn't speak right away. She just looked at Abel with the kind of deep, maternal assessment that comes from loving two girls so fiercely that the memory of almost losing them still lived somewhere behind her ribs.

Then she exhaled.

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“Abel,” she said, and her voice was warm but steady, “I didn’t get to thank you properly before now. For saving my girls.”

She always called them that - *my girls* - even though one was her daughter and the other had simply become hers through years of shared dinners and responsibilities and the kind of love that doesn’t need paperwork.

Abel shook his head. “I couldn’t just stand there outside their door.”

“I know,” Stephanie said, and she reached out and put a hand on his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “That’s why I’m thanking you.”

Megan leaned in and whispered, “She rehearsed that in the car.”

Stephanie swatted her lightly. “I did not.”

She absolutely had.

Before anyone could say anything else, Royce Abel’s parents arrived. Abel’s mother was the first to step forward. A woman with kind eyes, a librarian’s posture, and the sort of smile that suggested she had been holding back tears all morning.

“You must be Sakura,” she said warmly.

Sakura froze. For the first time all day, she looked genuinely nervous. She bowed in a way she had not since leaving Japan ... but then went too low, too fast, and nearly dropped her purse.

“Yes! I mean, hello! I’m Sakura. I’m... um... I’m his... friend.”

Abel’s father, a tall man with a gentle but analytical expression, extended his hand. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Sakura’s eyes widened. “Oh no. I mean, oh! Good! I hope good things!”

Abel’s mother laughed softly. “All good things. He speaks very fondly of you.”

Sakura turned bright pink. Summer smirked. Megan fought, rolling her eyes behind her.

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Abel cleared his throat, flustered. “Mom...” But his mother wasn’t done. “And thank you for cheering so loudly. We could hear you from across the auditorium.”

Sakura gasped. “I’m so sorry!”

“No,” his father said, smiling. “It was refreshing. Most graduations are far too quiet.”

Sakura beamed, instantly back to her usual self. “I can be louder next time.”

Abel groaned. His parents laughed. The ice was broken.

After that, the goal of the day was to celebrate Royce-Abel. He had worked a long time for this, making sacrifices, putting in long hours, and even in that, had found love along the way. He had even found time to save his girl along the way... twice. None of the parents or guardians really knew just how much had gone on that night at the beach house, and as far as all those who had been involved were concerned, they never would!

They went out to dinner at Abel’s favorite restaurant. It was also Sakura’s favorite, once he finally took her there. He had been going for years, since he was an undergraduate student, and knew all the servers by name, and they all loved him – and by extension, Sakura. It was ironic, and he hoped Sakura would not think he had just told her this was his favorite place to trick her. She didn’t. It was apparent how well he was known and respected there... even though the name of it was Hana Noodle House!

It was a small, family-owned and operated Japanese Noodle restaurant. Sakura couldn’t believe the irony of it. He loved something of her culture even before meeting her! “Did you know ‘hana’ means flower ... and ‘sakura’ is a blossom?” she asked him.

“Did you know,” he said, meeting her eyes, “that I loved this place long before I knew a blossom named Sakura?”

Abel’s mind moved from that memory to another, from their first date there.

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Flashback:

Hana Noodle House was always warm - not hot, not stuffy, just warm in that way a place gets when it's been loved for a long time. The windows fogged slightly from the steam rising off bowls of broth, and the air carried that comforting mix of soy, ginger, and something floral that Sakura couldn't quite name but couldn't help but notice.

They had just finished their meal, bowls pushed aside, chopsticks resting neatly on ceramic holders, when Mrs. Tanaka, the owner, approached their table. She was a small woman with silver hair pinned back in a bun and the kind of smile that made you feel like you'd been adopted without being asked.

"Abel," she said, hands folded politely. "You brought your friend today. Very good. Very good." She nodded at Sakura with a warmth that made Sakura straighten in her seat. "And this one, she is special."

Sakura turned pink immediately. Abel pretended not to notice, which only made it worse.

Mrs. Tanaka set down a small tray with two bowls - not cups, but bowls - of pale green tea. The surface shimmered slightly, tiny bubbles clinging to the edge.

"I make matcha for you," she said. "Usucha. Light tea. Good for celebration. Good for a calm heart."

Sakura blinked. "You... made this for us?"

"For him," Mrs. Tanaka said, nodding at Abel. "He always drinks tea after a meal. But today, I think he should share."

Abel looked mildly embarrassed, which was his default expression whenever someone praised him in public. "Thank you, Mrs. Tanaka."

She bowed slightly and moved on to another table, leaving the two bowls between them.

Sakura leaned in, eyes wide. "You drink matcha here?"

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Abel shrugged, a little sheepish. "Sometimes. When I'm writing. Or thinking. Or avoiding writing."

She laughed softly, then picked up her bowl with both hands the way she'd been taught as a child. The warmth seeped into her palms, and for a moment she just held it there, breathing in the grassy, almost sweet scent.

"This is real matcha," she said quietly. "Not the powdered sugar stuff."

"Mrs. Tanaka doesn't believe in shortcuts," Abel said. "She says tea should be made with respect."

Sakura nodded, suddenly serious. "My grandmother used to say that."

She took a sip, and her eyes softened. The tension she carried in her shoulders, the little buzz of excitement she always had around Abel, even the leftover adrenaline from the long day... it all eased, just a little.

"This tastes like home," she said. "I didn't know until now that there was anywhere in this country that does this right."

Abel watched her the way someone does when they're trying to memorize something without meaning to.

After a beat, he lifted his own bowl. "Did you know," he said, meeting her eyes, "that I've been drinking this here since before I knew a blossom named Sakura?"

Her breath caught - just a tiny hitch - and she looked down into her bowl as if the tea might explain why her face suddenly felt warm.

"You didn't know I existed," she said, trying for lightness and almost managing it.

"No," he said, "but apparently the universe did."

Sakura made a small, flustered sound and took another sip too quickly and immediately fanned her mouth. "Hot!"

Abel smiled, the kind of smile that reached his eyes. "It's tea, Sakura."

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"I know," she said, cheeks pink. "I forgot." Sakura tried to regain her composure, lifting her bowl again with exaggerated care. "This is really good," she said. "It's... calming."

"Good," Abel said. "You're safe with matcha."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that a comment about coffee?"

"Yes."

She huffed, but she was smiling.

And for a moment - in the warm, steamy glow of Hana Noodle House, with the clatter of dishes and the soft hum of conversation around them - it felt like the world had slowed down just enough for both of them to breathe.

Abel was smiling; it was one of his favorite memories. "Whatcha thinking about?" Sakura asked from beside him.

Abel smiled even wider. "You," he said simply.

Sakura smiled her confident smile. This time, she had almost expected that answer. Mrs. Tanaka moved about quickly through the kitchen behind them, overjoyed that this time Abel had brought with him not just one friend, but seven! When she came back to the table, she gave voice to the questions that Sakura had as well.

"What do you do now? Now that you *doctor*?"

Abel laughed softly, the sound a little shy, a little proud, and entirely overwhelmed by the day. He rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture Sakura had come to recognize as *I don't know how to talk about myself without feeling awkward*.

"Well," he said, "first I'm going to eat this entire bowl of ramen, because I haven't had anything since breakfast."

Mrs. Tanaka snorted. "Good answer. But not a real answer."

Sakura leaned forward, chin in her hand, eyes bright. "Yeah, Royce. What are you going to do now?"

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He glanced around the table at Sakura, at Summer and Megan, at Felicia and Stephanie, at his parents, who were still marveling at the menu like it was a museum exhibit, and something softened in his expression. The kind of soft that came from gratitude, and from finally reaching the end of a very long road.

"I'm going to teach," he said. "I start as an adjunct in the fall. Intro to Sociology, and a seminar on identity and performance."

Summer raised her eyebrows. "So you're going to teach a class about how people pretend to be cool?"

"That's... not exactly how I'd phrase it," Abel said, though he couldn't help smiling.

"It's how you phrased it when you explained your dissertation to me," Sakura said, poking him lightly in the arm.

Abel groaned. "I was tired."

"You're always tired," Megan said, wiping her eyes again. "But you still did it."

Stephanie nodded, pride softening her features. "You earned this, Abel. Every bit of it."

Felicia lifted her tea bowl in a small, solemn toast. "To the doctor."

Mrs. Tanaka brightened. "Yes! To Doctor Abel!" She clapped her hands once, loudly enough that half the restaurant looked over. "He good boy. Always polite. Always tip well."

Abel turned red. "Mrs. Tanaka ..."

"And now," she continued, ignoring him entirely, "he brings a beautiful girl and a big family. Very good. Very lucky."

Sakura nearly choked on her tea. Summer smirked. Megan covered her mouth to hide a laugh. Stephanie pretended to be deeply invested in her napkin. Felicia just raised an eyebrow, amused.

Abel cleared his throat, ears pink. "I... uh... I am lucky."