An Experiment

by mummapaintstheblues

Summary

Surely even the Hokage is able to indulge in the occasional mope in the privacy of his own office.. A project to get these ninja some much needed therapy brings two of them together in a unique way. It might just be enough to pull them out of the loneliness, and Kakashi is determined she won't end up like him.

A long winded slow burn in which Kakashi makes questionable decisions to end his Hokagedom and Sakura continues to be awesome.

Notes

My first fic, which took all my courage to post.
I ship these two with happiness so that is what will happen, and I hope you enjoy.
Chapter 1

The setting sun’s orange light rested on his shoulders as he sat still at the desk that had held him captive since the early hours of that morning. Early being a relative term, anything before 10am certainly qualified. The masses of paperwork had not disappeared as they ought to have, instead they had shifted and amalgamated into new piles for him to wade through the next day. Unfortunately for Kakashi it appeared as if he would need to put in a few more hours tonight if he wanted to make any substantial dent in the work.

An exasperated sigh escaped him, it wasn’t as if anyone was around to hear the grown man openly groan at the idea of doing his own job, so he sulked to the fullness of his ability. Surely even a Hokage was able to indulge in the occasional mope in the privacy of his own office.

Though it was starting to become a very regular and not-so occasional event.

And he had also caught himself indulging, so he called it anyway, in front of Shikamaru and Tenzou. They were yet to comment if they had noticed, which Kakashi was thankful for at least.

The ugly truth of the matter was something he was also trying to ignore, which he thought he could successfully ignore for another three years or so. And if someone happened to probe into the reasons for his demeanour it would certainly open the whole can of worms which he wasn’t sure he was ready for.

Opting instead to at least just admitting the truth to himself, in a vague attempt at actually addressing the issue without actually having to do it, Kakashi rested his head on the desk with another mitigating sigh.

After seven years Kakashi was well and truly sick of being Hokage.

He squeezed his eyes shut at the thought.

Immediately he was flooded with memories of old comrades, his former teachers, and his own students. Guilt growing more and more with each of their faces passing before his eyes. It wasn’t as if he was ungrateful for the position he held, he would do anything for the village and the people who lived in it, and he had at least attempted to do some good while he held this office. But…

But…

It wasn’t as if the job didn’t suit him, on the contrary, politics and rebuilding was something he had unknowingly acquired a knack for.

But…

It was not something he had wanted in the first place, but he would certainly honour his friends last words to him. Kakashi just wondered how long he could continue like this, he would surely go for as long as he was needed, but…

He was tired.

That was the absolute truth behind it. Two wars, rebuilding and then rebuilding again, maintaining the fragile and hard fought for peace between villages, so so much death. It had worn him down to the point where he was starting to seek ever more desperate distractions from his own life. It had started with helping Sakura to set up Naruto and Hinata, which was far less interesting than Icha Icha
but had still kept him just as enthralled disturbingly.

Then he had started fixing things that weren’t even broken to begin with, he just kind of adopted something to improve on it. The standard jonin and chunin uniforms was one thing, then it had been the location and storage of secret scrolls, after that he had helped facilitate the building of a library.

Then it had gotten a little more dangerous. And he’d begun experimenting with his own jutsu.

The handicap he felt at losing Obito’s eye still stung a bit. But it was more that he felt keenly the loss of the part of his friend that he had always kept with him, to see the future with together. Like he had never been truly alone at all. Now, with it gone, it was heavier a loss than he would ever admit. It made him feel completely isolated, even though he had come to peace with his friend now on the other side.

It had also made him feel weak, not something he was accustomed to by any means. Which is where the experimenting had started. Naruto had helped, heck even Sasuke had pitched in at one desperate point, eventually he had developed new and dangerous jutsu to add to his arsenal.

It was almost enough to distract him from the loneliness, almost. It was just ironic that now he was the Hokage, and always surrounded by people or Anbu, he had never felt so alone. Or perhaps it had just never bothered him before now. Missions were once a good distraction.

He sighed again.

Oh how he wished for something that would take him out of this office for a while, just a while, a week or two tops. Out of all the offices to be exact. Perhaps something he could use as an excuse to try out some of the more powerful jutsu he’d been working on.

The door slammed shut and he almost startled out of his position, face down on the desk, but there was only one person in Konoha that shut doors with that amount of force. At least when she was angry.

Resting his head in his palm, with an elbow on the desk, Kakashi decided facing her would be in his best interests if she was in a less than desirable mood. At least this would distract him from his own thoughts for a short while.

“What is it Sakura?”

* * * *

It had been one less than average day for Sakura. It wasn’t that the usual routine had been disrupted at all, it was just there was so much work still to be done. It was relentless, and that in itself she didn’t mind, it is a great thing to be so useful to one’s village and comrades.

But…

There were so many other people she wanted to be helping as well. There just never seemed to be enough hours in the day.

By the time the sun had started to set on her twelve hour shift at the hospital, and she’d made the usual rounds to drop the reports at the Hokage tower, Sakura was stuck in a right funk. For the moment she decided to allow herself to wallow in it, get it out of her system before her next shift at least. It didn’t bode well to mope around patients with actual health problems so she would settle for this five minute wallow and be done with it.
The whole way to the office of her former sensei Sakura’s mind began circling around all the things she wanted to do when she finally found the time. The list was still growing when she finally reached the doors, and that was another issue she realized halfheartedly. Sakura had been filling every minute of her day with something.

Training, teaching, treating patients, you name it. Researching new techniques and making improvements on the current medical tests available. There was always something that could be done, so she didn’t stop.

In the brief moments that she did stop, usually before sleep, that was when the issue became prominent and more troubling. In those moments she could see all the others around her, the ones she’d been through school with, through wars with. And they were all starting or had started, families of their own. Moving in their own directions.

This wasn’t the issue, Sakura was not naive enough to think they would all be together always, certainly not after all they had been through. But she couldn’t escape that awful and all too familiar feeling of being left behind. She needed something to fill this void, to stop her feeling so alone. Something that could keep her fulfilled for long enough that she could put her stupid mind at rest.

That feeling, combined with the almost impulsive need to help, to heal, had caused a plan to form itself. One that would help so many people. One that she would need to get permission to pursue. Her mind so focussed on how to form a logical proposition about it she didn’t notice the force she’d used to close the doors behind her.

Sakura watched Kakashi shift from face down on his desk to leaning his head crookedly on one resting palm, elbow on the desk.

“What is it Sakura?”

She held up the reports and moved to put them in the usual spots. Kakashi managed to nod without actually moving his head, simply raising both eyebrows for a moment before closing his eyes.

Well, there was no way he was in any state to hear her out that night. With one look Sakura had determined that although he was still physically in this office, mentally he had clocked out for the day. It didn’t need urgent attention anyway, and she hadn’t exactly expected him to still be here in any case. But this was an opportunity…

She would need time to prepare.

This was Kakashi after all, she’d need all her facts and figures before he’d take her seriously. If he would ever take her seriously. Sakura unknowingly let the audible sigh escape her.

“When you make that noise it compels me to ask you what the matter is…”

She whipped her head around to look at him in a kind of surprise.

“Nothing the matter. It’s just…” she paused as she thought better of it, “It’s nothing. I’ll see you tomorrow Kakashi sensei!”

With her best attempt at forced cheerfulness she turned to make her way out the door. At that exact moment she considered what would be awaiting her once she left that office, just more busy work that left her feeling more empty and drained than it should because she put her all into every second of it. There had to be something more… The prospect of another night trying desperately not to wonder which of her friends would be announcing their next pregnancy or whatever spurred her on
a little.

Sakura turned to face her Hokage, her captain, who was regarding her with the same bored expression as before. At least his eyes were open now.

“Kakashi sen… Lord Hokage, I would like to schedule a meeting with you to discuss a project I’ve been working on.”

She paused, watching the slight way his expression changed. It was hard to tell if he was taking her seriously but she figured that playing by the rules would appeal to that sensibility of his at least.

“Regarding the hospital I take it?”

Sakura shook her head no and there was a way his posture straightened that gave her the confidence she needed, he was intrigued.

“This is something else I’ve been developing. I think it would be a great asset to the village and I’m more than prepared to put in all the necessary work to get it off the ground. Though the plan is still in its infancy, I would appreciate your consideration on the idea…sir.”

She probably didn’t need to now, but she threw the sir in at the end just to make sure he was well and truly on the hook. Kakashi raised an eyebrow at her, lacing his fingers together with his elbows on the desk and leaning forward slightly.

His seriousness completely shattered as his eyes closed in what she knew to be a smile hidden underneath the fabric on his face.

“Drop the sir, and I’ll pencil you in. Same time tomorrow?”

Sakura smiled widely despite herself.

“You mean it?”

“Well, you insist on dropping off more work for me at the same time every day anyway…”

“Oh, right. See you then Kakashi-sensei!”

She opened the doors and left before she couldn’t contain the excitement any longer. Part of her inwardly giggled at how she’d left him in the complete opposite state to what she had found him in. Sakura had to admit it took a lot these days to get Kakashi Hatake to drop that bored expression. So she would have to be ready for their meeting, she had to make sure that his attention was held, she had to do this.

* * *

Kakashi was now facing a problem entirely of his own doing. It was just as he’d suspected, as soon as he’d admitted to it the nagging thought could not be ignored.

I’m so tired of this.

It was another meeting about a meeting. Long gone were the days where he was invited on site to new construction areas of the village, at least he’d been outside for those. Now he was shoved in some dark Anbu building off the main Hokage tower that had probably never seen any natural sunlight in its time. It wasn’t even anything secretive or concerning to demand his attention, though he gave it all the same. No one could say he didn’t take his job seriously at least.
No, this was a meeting about the meeting to discuss the Chunin exams. Usually Shikamaru would fastidiously vet these things so that Kakashi’s time wasn’t wasted, but the odd one slipped by occasionally.

So he raised the appropriate concerns, as usual, and nodded in agreement at all the right intervals until he was finally released to the next form of mundane torture. He took his time on the short walk to his own office, slowing each time he passed a window to take in as much of the outside world as possible. It was with a sigh that he opened the doors to his prison, deciding not to shut them until the next person barged in demanding something.

The hours that passed were filled with paperwork and reports that needed his scrutiny. Apparently. A lifetime of being exceptional at most things without trying too hard had allowed Kakashi to be able to complete most tasks as Hokage quickly with minimal effort. But he was starting to see why Tsunade hadn’t wanted the job any longer, there was just too much to do even with his speed and discretion as it was.

His hand fell onto the next report in the pile. Deep blue, Shinobi medical reports. Despite himself his lip quirked up in a smirk. The file itself held little more than the physical condition of the ninja currently in the hospital for varying reasons, that wasn’t what had amused him slightly. It was Sakura. As he perused the concise summaries without real interest his mind wondered just what project she had been talking about.

It had taken the medical report to jog his memory of the night previous. The determined look about her had piqued his interest certainly, but it was all forgotten as soon as she’d left and three Anbu had appeared with urgent requests. It was midnight before he reached his pillow finally, and by that stage he’d been too tired to think of anything.

Now that he had a moment he considered her odd behaviour before it had turned into a seriousness that was usually reserved for the annual hospital budget discussions. It was distracting him a fraction and he certainly appreciated that much at least.

Kakashi’s thoughts scattered as an out of breath Iruka ran into the office with another crisis on his hands, and the rest of the afternoon was lost.

Orange rays of sun were again resting on his shoulders as he slumped back onto his desk. It had been a disaster. Students experimenting in extremely inappropriate jutsu that might’ve made even Naruto blush back in the day. But how they had managed to attract all those literal wild animals was lost on Kakashi. It had been exhausting, even if he’d semi enjoyed being outside for a while, he had forgotten just how annoying kids were.

Another sigh, but the sound of familiar footsteps made him sit up a little. Was it that time already? He propped his chin into his hands, elbows on the table, regarding Sakura as she entered his open office. Nothing about her was different, not that he could tell anyway, it wasn’t like he spent a lot of time looking at her. She held up the damned blue reports she had with her and put them in their usual spot.

That was when he noticed the bag at her side. She’d brought some things to show him then. Of course Sakura would prepare for any kind of meeting.

“Thank you for seeing me…”

She put a hand into the bag and withdrew some scrolls and files. Not what he had been hoping for, but it was early days yet.
“Of course. How could I say no to such a request?”

It was true. Sakura had that determined look on her face again but there was a smile there too.

“I heard about your unexpected field trip to the zoo today. Did you want to postpone?”

She was practically laughing, and although he had found it amusing for a moment, Kakashi was well over it now. He didn't care if she heard him sighing in this instance.

“I'm fine I assure you.”

“Is it true there were gorillas?”

“Sakura. Stop stalling. What did you want to discuss?”

The command switched her to all seriousness, she gave him a nod. Kakashi knew she was only making fun of him, as usual, but he was hoping she would be about to offer something in this meeting.

Unfurling two of the scrolls she laid them out on the desk in front of him. He pulled his arms off it to allow more room. She handed him the file.

“These are…”

“Blueprints. Plans for a dedicated children’s hospital inside Konoha.”

Kakashi was swept up in looking over all the details she'd placed before him

“And you feel like this is something the village needs?”

Sakura nodded earnestly.

“State your reasoning.”

There wasn't any need to be so short with her but his mind was processing new information and had gone into autopilot.

“That file speaks for itself. The amount of child cases of post traumatic stress since the last war alone is more than the hospital can handle, at least with any acceptable quality of care.”

He opened the pages to look at the statistics provided.

“With the influx of people migrating to the village each year this number only stands to increase. As well as the number of orphans requiring medical care 24/7…”

Kakashi found himself nodding which only seemed to encourage Sakura further.

“In that file you'll see I’ve also charted the drop in new applicants to the academy. I believe that these untreated cases of PTSD, the ones slipping through the overloaded hospital system, hold a direct correlation…”

Kakashi held a hand up for her to stop talking. She trailed off as he studied the graph in question. It was true, the drop in applicants had been noted by him also. The lengths she had taken to gather these statistics must have been staggering, and time consuming. A project indeed.

“You always were the clever one…”
The words escaped his lips before he could check them. Sakura offered a nervous smile as he glanced up. Since when had she become a force to be reckoned with? Intelligent and thorough. The caring girl becomes the caring woman. The thought entered his mind without his express permission. This whole plan was detailed without flaw as far as he could see. It would have taken some time to compile.

“‘You've put a lot of work into this.’”

“‘Yes, Kakashi sensei.’”

She didn't elaborate. Knowing that he was still concentrating on the contents of the folder in his hand. Sakura waited patiently and silently while he scanned the documents.

“‘You had Tenzou draw these up?’”

Closing the folder he turned his attention to the blueprints.

“‘Yes, he was exceedingly helpful. I also took input from Shizune and some of the existing medical registrars.’”

He nodded again.

“‘Have you given any thought to staff? A project of this magnitude will need to be well manned. Can the hospital afford to lose any currently? ’”

Sakura's eyes widened a fraction, he could see the gears turning in her mind.

“‘Not as yet. There were several promising volunteers come forward as I asked for information. Also the new trainees this year are numerous and capable. And with a dedicated children’s sector it would free up that entire section and staff of the current hospital for other things.’”

“‘And who did you have in mind to run such a venture?’”

She smiled self assuredly.

“‘That would be me.’”

Kakashi sat back in his chair and eyed her with a queer fascination, seeing enough of the plans for the moment. She would be the ideal candidate, but...

“‘Of course you would be the best choice. Will you have the time for such a position however?’”

She raised an eyebrow a fraction in a questioning look.

“‘As long as my replacement at the hospital is up to scratch there shouldn't be any problem with time...’”

She was still confused, and now Kakashi was as well.

“‘Aren't you meant to be planning a wedding instead of planning a children's hospital?’”

Sakura's expression was now set in fixed confusion.

“‘Whose wedding?’”

And so was his.
“Yours?”

She still looked at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.

“Why would I be doing that? I'm not…”

She paused. A sudden look of realization on her, Kakashi wished he had come to an answer just as quickly. Confusion didn't feel right to him.

“You really don't know…”

She said it as a statement more than a question.

“Know what?”

“Sasuke and I broke up a while ago, that's all.”

The way she said it was so matter-of-factly with no trace of emotion, good or otherwise. Kakashi was glad the mask covered his slack jaw.

When the hell had this happened? Last he heard they were engaged to be married… but how long ago was that? He didn't know. He stared at her stunned, though she looked more concerned about him than herself. What was going on here and how could he have missed such a thing?

“I didn't know. I'm so sorry Sakura…”

He slumped a little more into his chair as she stepped forward a fraction.

“Don't be sorry… you're taking this worse than Sasuke y'know sensei.”

She gave him a sad smile and he felt decidedly more terrible.

“How could I not be sorry? He was your dream wasn't he?”

Surprisingly her smile turned a little more cheerful.

“He was. But the dream was better than the reality of it.”

She really had grown up. The thought struck him as odd but she was nearly twenty five after all. It was bound to happen, he'd just never noticed. Like a lot of other things. He really knew nothing about her.

“It's been years since he's been home hasn't it?”

“Three years I think.”

Now he felt even worse. She softly chuckled.

“I don't understand why you're taking it so hard sensei, really, we're both better off.”

“Oh I understand that completely. I'm just more of a useless Hokage, and person for that matter, than I thought. And I wasn't sure there was another level to sink to…”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. Sakura's voice was what brightened him a little.

“You're not useless at all! You've just been busy taking care of the village, and doing a great job of
The insistence of her vote of confidence softened him. Some things never changed, she would always care for whoever needed it and that lightened his mind from thoughts of inadequacy, at least for now. He dropped his hand and smiled properly.

“Thanks Sakura… Now, back to all of this.”

He gestured broadly to the table and her eyes went back to fixed resolve.

“What do you think?”

Kakashi watched her bite her lip nervously and was reminded of her younger days in a sudden wave of nostalgia. He stood and stretched.

“Well, there’s a lot to be done still. Planning permission is one thing, staff and location is another. The biggest hurdle will be the council and funding, but with a bit more detail we should be able to pull it off…”

Sakura’s hands clasped together in excitement, but she was no longer the girl who jumped and squealed excitedly.

“You approve of it then?”

Kakashi smiled down at her face filled with happiness and was pleased for a moment at the young lady she’d grown into, though it was of no credit to him.

“I approve, yes.”

Now she was grinning.

“There’s more people that need to approve, besides your useless old sensei here, and it won’t be easy. I’m sure we can manage it though. It won’t take much convincing.”

At this he glanced back at her expression as it changed to a raised eyebrow of her own.

“We?”

She repeated incredulously and he almost chuckled himself.

“Well of course we. You didn't think I'd make you do it all on your own did you? Something this size is going to take the both of us… What?”

Her eyes had narrowed in his direction.

“You're not doing this just to take all the credit right?”

Kakashi really did chuckle now, but it was more at the irritated expression on her face than anything. Rolling up the plans he rounded the desk and handed them back to her while Sakura continued to eye him.

“Now now, don't be silly. No one would ever believe a useless Hokage such as myself could ever come up with this anyway.”

She softened and giggled, depositing the scrolls in her bag. Kakashi had slyly tucked the report into his desk already.
“I guess you have a point there.”

“Exactly. You've done some excellent work on this project, no one will be surprised that it's come from the best medic in the Fire country.”

She blushed a little at the remark, it wasn't as if he handed out praise readily, it sufficed as a good distraction and she didn't look for the other report. Kakashi resisted the urge to pat her on the head, as was his custom with Sakura. In light of everything he deemed it unworthy for her all of a sudden. She was not a girl anymore after all, she’d been through some pretty adult things now and was proving herself to be more than capable.

So instead he settled for patting her arm lightly and watched with curiosity as she blushed further and tensed. The touch would have only lasted a second or two but the reaction was hilarious. Kakashi made a mental note to probe into that later.

“I get that this is going to need a lot of hands to get up and running sensei, but you're so busy already, you don't have to…”

“Nonsense. I want to help.”

“I could just as easily force the medical students to help with some of the grunt work…”

“It’s fine, this is worth making time for. And you’ll need someone with a political mindset to help with the council.”

“But what about…”

“Sakura.” He full on interrupted her now. “You won't get rid of me so easily. I’m still of some use so have a little faith in me.”

When her expression turned serious once again Kakashi tried to be more attentive.Her words came out in such a way that he believed each one of them had been chosen carefully.

“Forgive me, it’s just rare to see you go to such effort for something. Why would you go so far for this?”

She was giving him an out. Part of his old self appreciated this, but again Kakashi was reluctant to acknowledge the whole truth about the thing. But he owed her as much, he had completely missed her breakup with Sasuke like an oblivious fool.

“Well, what you’ve got here,” he indicated to her satchel and the plans it contained, “it’s really something Sakura. It has the potential to do a lot of good, you know that. Part of me believes that if something like this was around in my time it could’ve saved so many…”

He trailed off, a hand coming up to scratch the back of his head out of reflex even without his headband on. There was no way Sakura was to know that he had been referring to himself as well as the others he’d lost. If this kind of hospital had been around back then… after his father, Obito’s parents too, it would have done them so much good. They would have arrogantly resisted of course, but there would have been something. Some kind of help available to them. Things could have been different, and if his time as Hokage was going to accomplish anything, it would be that tragedies like that never happened again.

This was a step in that direction. It would also get him out of the office for a little while perhaps but that was just an added and unexpected bonus.
Sakura watched Kakashi as he spoke with a kind of softness she wasn’t sure she’d ever heard in his voice before. He didn’t offer information about himself freely, what little she did know was second hand intel. Perhaps it was his way of rewarding her for her efforts, but it felt different to Sakura. Like he was trying in his own way to let her know how significant this project could be.

It pleased her to no end.

After a moment’s silence she replied.

“When do we start?”

We.

It was clear that he needed to do this just as much as she did for whatever reasons. Kakashi smirked underneath the mask, or she guessed that’s what it was anyway, she would never be one hundred percent certain.

“Well, no doubt you’ll bring more work for me tomorrow at some point. Why don’t we go from there?”

Inside Sakura was dancing like a little girl, with excitement and happiness she hadn’t quite felt in some years. Not genuinely anyway.

“Right. I could start on a staffing list of exactly what the centre would require to operate and bring it tomorrow…”

“That sounds great and all, but for now, why don’t you start with dinner perhaps? The list can wait until tomorrow. Besides, I’m hungry…”

He pulled the white hokage robes off in one fluid movement and hung them by the door. Kakashi had managed to confuse her yet again, Sakura stared at the back of his jounin vest.

“You’re clocking out for the day I take it?”

“You. Ramen?”

She was now skeptical of what was happening.

“Sure…”

It wasn’t the most convincing tone.

“What? Don’t look at me like that, I’m not completely terrible… yet. Come on, my treat.”

Even he didn’t sound completely sure of his own words, it was the same bored emotionless tone as usual. Sakura shrugged and followed him out the door. She was hungry, and she couldn't actually remember the last time she'd eaten with another person. Probably after that last mission with Naruto had ended typically in ramen. So months ago.

Part of her wanted to gap it back to her apartment and start working already. She had to remind herself that nothing was going to happen overnight, and it was a rare occurrence that her sensei offered to do anything relatively social. If she turned him down now it might be another ten years before he offered again.
The streets were almost deserted as the sun made its final descent. But whoever they passed acknowledged their hokage or stopped completely to talk with him. Sakura noted that he was able to politely decline their attention with a smile and they continued unhindered.

Kakashi sighed as they rounded the corner to Ichiraku. Sakura sympathized for a moment.

“Long day huh sensei.”

“No longer than usual. Rounding up dozens of wild animals certainly made it feel that way though.”

“I thought there were only a couple?”

“Hm? Oh, no I was talking about the children.”

Sakura let the laugh escape her before she felt the need to tease him a bit. He had done enough in their genin days to deserve it too.

“Oh, so you hate all children. Here I was thinking it was just the kids you were meant to be teaching that you didn't like….”

He put a hand to his chest in mock injury with a pout.

“How could you say such a thing about your old hokage here? Besides you guys were special.”

“Special?”

“Well yeah. I hated you guys a lot more than other kids.”

Sakura scoffed, contemplated hitting him square in his smug jaw, and then it dissolved into begrudging amusement.

“I guess we were pretty terrible…”

She managed after a moment. They'd stopped at the doors to Ichiraku now and she looked glumly at the larger building. A sudden wave of nostalgia for the old stand hit her. What she'd said had been the truth, all of them had been terrible in some way, but it didn't lessen the feeling that she was the worst of them.

“Maybe not terrible exactly, troubled is a better word for it. But you guys did kinda grow on me, so don't look so down.”

Sakura expected the affectionate head pat that he usually offered her in moments of insecurity. Though in her twenties it was something that rarely was needed. But he didn't.

Instead she felt his hand on her bicep with a small squeeze of reassurance. It was a quick gesture, and there was nothing more to it, but it made Sakura tense all the same. Not as badly as the first time thankfully. Kakashi was such a creature of habit that any change in his behavior was probably calculated.

It dawned on her that this was the likely byproduct of him feeling sorry for her. As if breaking up with Sasuke three years ago warranted it.

She hated people feeling sorry for her. She was strong, capable and despite the crushing loneliness occasionally she was far happier without Sasuke than she was with him.

Taking the usual seats at the counter Kakashi made some gesture to Ayame who nodded and began
preparing. When he sighed, again, Sakura felt a strange compulsion to lighten his mood. When the food arrived she glanced at him sideways.

“Still… you treating me sensei, it's pretty suspicious. I feel like snow might fall on my head…”

She made a move to comically cover herself as she reached for chopsticks. Sakura smirked proudly at the light chuckle and scratch of his head he gave.

“Yeah yeah. I may be a terrible Hokage but I'm not a complete ass, well, most of the time anyway.”

She laughed herself and toyed with her noodles, not missing the way the mirth drained from his face.

“You still hung up on that huh?”

Sakura asked before downing a mouthful.

“You mean the whole, completely missing a major event in your life, not realizing it for three whole years, and then bringing it up casually… yeah.”

She figured that’s what this dinner was about. It wasn't as if dinner with her old sensei was and odd thing itself, but Kakashi offering was a rarity. Sakura could feel a growing impatience at his feeling sorry for her. It was sweet, but unnecessary.

“I don't get why it bothers you so much Kakashi sensei. I said before, you're taking this worse than Sasuke did, and you're about one crying fit away from taking it worse than Naruto.”

She chuckled at the way his eyes widened imperceptibly before regarding her lazily but keeping his head facing his ramen.

“I take it our favourite Hokage candidate didn't take the news well…”

Sakura shook her head with a mitigating sigh. Recalling the way Naruto had sobbed and wished that she could find the same happiness he had found. It had eventually morphed into anger at Sasuke’s social ineptitude but the tearful episode had been an extremely long hour and forty five minutes.

“We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I understand. I guess I feel even more useless than usual these days, so that news kind of bothered me, to say the least.”

His startling admonition was what dissolved her annoyance. Kakashi didn't feel sorry for her so much as he felt guilty. As ever he didn't take too kindly to his own failings. The caring part of her was quick to think of ways to console him. Internally she was feeling a little smug about getting special treatment from someone who admittedly denied having any favourite students.

She repeated his gesture from earlier, placing her free hand on his arm and lightly squeezed before withdrawing. The contact didn't make him tense as far as she could tell, but he did go very still.

“Look, like it or not, you're Hokage now. And don't look at me like that, we both know you hate it.”

He turned his head in surprise.

“You're far too busy to notice silly things like this. Don't beat yourself up, seriously, there wasn't much to it in any case.”

Sakura took some more mouthfuls, completely missing how the ex copy ninja had managed to down half his bowl without choking.
“So you were the one who ended it huh?”

He murmured, still chewing.

“Yeah. I had, I guess, an unrealistic image of what it would be like. And I got tired of living with a ghost. How’d you figure that one out anyway?”

“Oh, just an observation… You were always the smart one after all.”

She glanced at him sideways and he winked. She caught the hint, Sasuke had always been a bit of a prick and Kakashi had always stood firm on that belief. Sakura rolled her eyes and huffed amusedly. Despite the mood being lightened a fraction there was still a brooding look on his face, though she was almost certain that it was a permanent fixture of his features now.

Internally she debated whether to down her bowl and gap it so she wouldn’t be stuck with the bill, however genuine Kakashi appeared this time, she was skeptical. But the quiet question he spoke, barely audible in a way like he desperately didn’t want others to hear, stopped her thoughts.

“You really think I hate being Hokage?”

Sakura wasn’t sure at the line of questioning.

“Well, hate might be a strong word. But whenever I see you at the end of the day it certainly looks like you hate it.”

Kakashi was silent, his brow furrowed.

Tsunade had never looked so forlorn, at least not to Sakura. The sannin had looked more put-upon at the end of her term but even that paled to Kakashi. But, he’d always looked that way, hadn’t he? Sakura continued.

“But I guess I don't really know you that well. You could just be putting on a broody Sasuke impression to make all the girls fall over you…”

He snorted and she decided she was off the hook.

“I assure you, it's not intentional. And… I suppose I don't really know you as well as I thought either.”

Taking a sip of water, Sakura locked eyes with him as she swallowed. She didn't recognize his expression at all. But he was right, they weren't close by any means, so this look didn't bother her so much.

He continued.

“I can’t believe you just compared me to an Uchiha. I really must look pathetic.”

This time she was the one who snorted.

“There are worse things you’ve been compared to, probably. Where would you like me to start?”

Sakura became fractionally unsure of this line of teasing when his eyes narrowed toward her in seriousness. It was only for a moment that she thought she’d overstepped her boundaries, until they both abruptly started laughing.

“You know I could dock your pay for that, or put you on D-ranks with Naruto for a month. But that
brilliant project of yours saves you, I guess.”

“Seriously?”

Sakura couldn’t stop herself from saying it.

“Yes, the worst kinds of D-ranks too, the ones with lost cats and menial farm work.”

“No, I didn’t mean that… You really think it’s brilliant? The hospital I mean.”

Kakashi eyed her queerly. Sakura had long since given up begging for approval or praise from any of her teachers, but to hear it from Kakashi himself, who seldom gave any kind of praise at all to anyone brought out that side of her. Perhaps her failed engagement with Sasuke had left her a little more vulnerable that she first thought, perhaps she just needed to feel validated again that was she was doing was worthwhile. It wasn’t lost on her that this was his second piece of praise that evening.

“Of course. It’s a credit to you Sakura, it really is. You don’t need to fish for compliments.”

She shook her head.

“I’m not… Sometimes I just wonder if I’m being over ambitious, or crazy. And then, well, I guess I don’t feel worthy of praise a lot of the time.”

Sakura tried to snap herself out of it, but the idea of going home to nothingness and spiralling thoughts brewed up some more determination in her.

Kakashi spoke in almost a whisper.

“I know that feeling well…”

There was just an edge of bitterness to it, and she understood. Perhaps she shouldn’t have had a dig at him about hating being Hokage, if he would just listen then he’d know how great a job he was doing. Sakura locked eyes with him again and realized.

He was the same as her.

Looking for something else for distraction from the loneliness. He’d just thrown his all into being a good leader of the village and it had utterly consumed him through fear of failure, of course he felt selfish about not recognizing her break up with Sasuke. She would too if it were Naruto or Ino. She watched him shake his head as if to rid the thought entirely.

Kakashi made some gesture to Ayame and she nodded. Her meal finished, Sakura stood and they both made for the door. She presumed there was some kind of tab for the Hokage set in place, so he was kind of treating her.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow sensei. Thanks for dinner, and for… well. Anyway, try not to aggravate any more wild animals huh?”

They were standing on the street, Sakura about to walk in the opposite direction. The scrolls in her satchel calling to her to get back to work. She was excited to see how much she could get done before tomorrow.

“Oh right, I guess you don’t need walking home anymore huh. Pity, I was just thinking about adding a zoo to the list of projects and could use a hand…”

Sakura snorted before she waved and started walking.
“See ya.”

She heard him say goodbye but didn’t look back, she was moving at some speed. Things were finally going her way.

* * * *

Kakashi wasn’t sure what had come over him in asking Sakura to dinner. Hunger had certainly played a big part of it, pity in himself had been the other. He hadn’t taken pity on her in the slightest, on the contrary, Sakura seemed well adjusted and actually thriving, it was all him. He was certain he’d felt pathetic before now but never quite this bad.

What a useless, unobservant fool. It should have been completely obvious when Sasuke had stopped visiting home as much, not that he was ever around really anyway, and his mission reports had continued to flow steadily. But still, he should have noticed. Conversely he had mistaken Sakura’s hard work as something she had just always done, but really she was doing the same thing he did most days. Which was distracting himself from the loneliness… the failure in other areas of his life.

The entire walk home had allowed his mind to wander in unfavorable directions. Nodding to the Anbu stationed at his door as he passed through it, Kakashi stared resolutely into the emptiness of his own home. It never bothered him really, but at this moment he desperately wished for something new to take his mind off feelings of inadequacy.

But there was something new for him to focus on. Sakura had practically handed it to him on a silver platter, and it was a very good something. Potentially it was a project that had the capacity to keep him very occupied, it would also do so much good. He hadn’t lied when he told her as much. She really was the best medic in the fire country.

Not only that, she was now a woman (and that thought disturbed him slightly) who knew what she wanted. She had planned this so thoroughly that it was impossible for him to ignore her. Kakashi huffed in amusement at the thought that Sakura knew what she wanted in all aspects of her life as well. His mind flitted to the brief moment she’d tensed at his innocent touch. She was sure she didn’t want Sasuke, she knew she wanted to throw herself into running this project. In light of this he’d not probed into why his small touch seemed to almost scare her. When he’d done it again briefly it had been less awkward but there was still a tenseness.

Kakashi realized something he didn’t exactly want to. An unoccupied mind was a dangerous thing, it shed light on truths that were much better kept in the dark. Sakura was headstrong, driven, skilled and for all he could see she was isolating herself. She was turning into him.

Kakashi shook his head, stamped off to the bathroom and turned the shower on with more force than necessary. Shedding his clothes as if to shed the realization itself, he threw himself into the water before it had even warmed properly. But showers are not places to ignore one’s thoughts or wash them away so it was just another mistake to add to his already long list.

Perhaps she was unaware of it, and she was obviously still the kind and caring person she had always been. Kakashi had caught the way she’d tried to put him at ease when she was the one who’d broken up with the former love of her life. It made him feel all the worse that she was becoming a recluse just like he was. The thought had begun festering when he figured out just how much time she must have spent on those hospital plans, then her strange reaction to the briefest physical contact. Admittedly it was not his ‘thing’ either, and he certainly never sought it, but someone warm and
caring like Sakura deserved that physical affection. Right?

By the time he’d towelled himself off and dressed Kakashi had formed his own plan, of sorts. He gave himself a secret objective in taking on this project with Sakura. A side project to add to the list.

He would not let her turn out like him.

It was negligible of him to let her get so far in the first place, and it was something that just could not happen. He’d failed their team in many other respects, and Sakura in particular, part of him wanted to protect that kind quality of hers to his last breath. Though he didn’t know her so well now that she was grown up (seriously when had that happened?) he knew that much at least.

She deserves better.

Just like Rin had deserved better.

The thought had been unavoidable, and stung bitterly to the point where he could physically taste it. Features set in displeasure, Kakashi regarded his own appearance for a second before pulling his mask back up his face, again with more force than necessary. He cast a bitter look at his own bed before exhaling loudly in frustration.

Of course he was tired, but there was work that needed doing.

With another nod to the Anbu at the door as he left, Kakashi headed for the one place where he knew something could keep him occupied. The report was calling a siren song from the drawer in his desk. He glanced up to his old teachers likeness on the mountainside.

“I wonder if you had any side projects sensei…”

Moving slowly through the lamplit streets of Konoha, Kakashi distinctly heard a sound that could only be Naruto laughing, magnified by the numbers of many shadow clones. They bounded overhead on the rooftops and Kakashi resisted the urge to grin broadly. Instead he looked back to the stone face with a knowing smile.

“Nevermind. Of course you did.”
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Slowly converting this fic from fanfic.net.

Thanks for the love, very much appreciated.

The previous day Sakura had been filled with a bubbling kind of excitement that had made her job surprisingly easy, and her mood hadn’t wavered from that nervous kind of happiness.

Today was the complete opposite.

It had started the same, but there had been a training accident on one of the fields closer to the village. The kind of accident that involved a few reckless genin and civilians, so resources were already stretched thin when the next event occurred. This one included some pretty high up Anbu in Torture & Interrogation, so the details were still a little guarded. Essentially a captive had been placed under a very sturdy genjutsu, or so they had thought, and had attacked everyone within a miles radius. The damage to the detainee and the property was absurd. That was about the time Sakura had run out of staff and patience.

It did not help that she had not slept for more than two hours, and that was not altogether.

It also did not help when another SCRI (Shadow Clone Related Injury) patient arrived in a critical condition. The overuse of the technique since Naruto had risen to popularity would forever be the bane of her existence and professional life. It didn’t matter how many times she stamped her feet about it, the technique had been forbidden for very good reasons but no one seemed to care.

Sakura stayed later than usual, she had no choice in the matter really with the shortage of able staff members. When she slammed open those hospital doors and breathed deep the first lung full of fresh air in fourteen hours it became clear that her energy levels were just not going to cut it. Resisting the urge to pop a soldier pull she dragged her feet and the heavy satchel on her back down the familiar road.

It was usually the last stop in her day, delivering the reports to the Hokage tower, and it had been the cause of her excitement only yesterday. Today she was going to have to summon everything she had just to stay awake. As soon as she stopped moving it was all going to hit her, and while the fresh air at least kept her eyes open, Kakashi’s office was generally quite warm and snug. As he aged apparently he had gained a bitter hatred for the cold, and anything that could possibly make him uncomfortable.

By the time Sakura reached the tower it was dark everywhere except the office of the man himself. A glance at the one clock she’d spied since she’d been allowed to leave the hospital indicated she was at least three hours late. She would have smirked a little more at the idea she was finally giving him a taste of his own medicine but she was so tired.

His doors were open, she tapped on them anyway, though he’d probably heard her.

Standing at the window behind his chair, facing Konoha as it sparkled with street lamps, Kakashi
turned his head in surprise as she entered.

“Long day huh?”

His voice was devoid of mirth at using her own words against her, just as well, she might still have the energy to knock him into next week. Sakura shrugged.

“Could be worse I guess.”

At this point she pulled out the veritable stack of blue reports she knew he would have to read. Kakashi’s eyebrow raised before he took the expression of a wounded child. She kept her eyes on him as she thumped them down in the suspiciously empty in-tray. He had already shed the white robes for the day.

“I take it the training field fiasco wasn’t the only thing keeping you busy then?”

She nodded yes and he sighed before shifting some of the papers on his crowded desk looking for something in the chaos. He held up a piece of paper and regarded it with disdain before holding it out to her.

“I wrote that letter of intent to relocate the training fields away from cavillon areas, two years ago.”

Sakura skimmed the letter, her eyes growing wide at the red stamp ‘DENIED’ brazenly over top of his own signature.

“Why would such a thing be rejected? You obviously knew something like this was going to happen.”

When she handed it back there was just a hint of frustration about him that she recognized.

“It was bound to happen with all the expansions. But, to relocate the training fields would mean cooperation from the clan heads, who don’t exactly want to give up any land without a substantial profit… So the council took one look and tossed it. I think they were just humouring me to look at it in the first place…”

Sakura was listening, but she wasn’t really paying attention. She was right, it was comfortably warm in here, too comfortable. Things were getting muddled around the edges enough for her not to bother thinking of an appropriate reply. Thankfully he changed the subject enough to command her attention better.

“Anbu give you much trouble at the hospital?”

Sakura considered her answer, but just thinking was becoming a difficult task on its own.

“No more than usual, at least no cavillons were caught up in that mess.”

Kakashi scoffed and nodded.

“Yes that was some kind of miracle in itself.”

He’d begun shuffling through the papers again, standing still and leaning over the desk. Sakura subconsciously began rubbing her eye, perhaps trying to push the tiredness out for just a little while longer. When her focus steadied Kakashi was regarding her with a strange expression, had he been talking?

“What?”
He sighed, loudly. But without any actual words of explanation just kind of started moving. Sakura barely recognized where he was, in a blur of motion he’d wheeled the chair from behind the desk out and around to the other side. She could feel it hit the backs of her knees, before she could even turn his hands were on her shoulders. In an instant she’d completely tensed, it wasn’t as if she hated being touched, but her body just disliked surprises so it happened without her intention. Kakashi didn’t linger, just kind of pushed her into sitting on his chair.

She turned her head to look up at him, he stood behind the chair still with his hands on his hips.

“You’re practically bumping into the furniture. Just sit for a while. We still have things to go through tonight and I don’t want you falling over.”

Sakura raised an eyebrow.

“What about you?”

He moved back to his original leaning position while waving her silent.

“I’ve been sitting all day…”

There was an edge of bitterness to his voice but she knew better than to press him for detail. He’d obviously had a day of it himself, and he still saw fit to make sure she was comfortable. With an appreciative smile she nodded.

“Thank you, Kakashi sensei.”

He looked at her briefly, his eyes closed in what she considered a smile but again, she would never be completely one hundred percent certain of the expression with that damned mask. He scratched his head.

“You’re welcome. Don’t thank me just yet though… wait until I find… uh, there it is.”

Kakashi had found a manilla folder which he opened before extending to her. Sakura took it and began eyeing the pages with confusion, unsure exactly what she was looking at for a second.

“This is…”

“Potential locations”

Sakura’s eyes went wide. Each page held specific details of a vacant or abandoned area that was zoned exactly in the areas that she would want the hospital to be in. Close to the existing hospital and the academy too. There had to be ten pages at least, and despite being exhausted moments ago Sakura suddenly got a second wind of energy. Each page she studied carefully, Kakashi was silent as she concentrated. Vaguely she recognized him reaching into his desk drawer for something.

“Some of these are…”

“Bordering on ridiculous? Yes. But I figured the more options we have the better.”

About three pages in Sakura spied what appeared to be an old hideout of Orochimaru’s and her stomach just about flipped.

By the seventh option she noticed something else which made her smile. This wasn’t some list compiled by Shikamamaru or one of the other administrator’s, this had Kakashi’s handwriting all over it. And his flare for imaginative solutions. By the time she had skimmed the last page he was holding
out another file for her to take.

“Apologies, I borrowed this. Just wanted to make sure I had all the facts right when looking for vacant sites.”

It was her original report. Sakura took it and lightly placed it back on the desk, still holding the manilla folder as if it were a paper bomb. Something must have shown on her face because he looked at her with concern for a moment.

“Something the matter?”

“No, no. I’m just really impressed Kakashi sensei.”

If she didn’t know him better she’d have sworn there was a tinge of blush above his mask.

“I told you, I’m not completely useless yet.” He made some coughing noise and she suppressed a laugh. “We’ll have to make a pretty solid proposal to the council, so there’s a lot of ground work to cover. Obviously we’re not going to get much done overnight but it’s a start.”

The sudden burst of energy was beginning to ebb, but it made Sakura remember something.

“Oh, I have something…. Here.”

Perhaps not as impressive as the folder he’d shown her, Sakura handed him the three sheets of paper she’d compiled the previous night. There had been a lot of painstaking effort involved in preparing those three pieces and she’d suffered lack of sleep because of it. Excitement being the other thing keeping her awake… and frustration.

“A roster…”

She nodded.

“A roster in progress anyway. I’ve not as yet officially reached out to any of the medics on that list, but while I was doing research they expressed interest in it. The last one is just a list of the new medical recruits that would potentially do well in that environment. I’m the one who trained them so it would be easier to keep them as residents…”

A yawn abruptly escaped her, she couldn’t help it. He raised an eyebrow.

“You work fast…”

Unsure if that was actually a compliment Sakura just nodded and took another look at the folder in her hand while he concentrated. This chair was definitely too damned comfortable, at least this time she felt the yawn and was able to stifle it. Sakura’s head had been buzzing after she’d put that list together the night before, it was just so exciting for her. As soon as she’d hit her head to the pillow, sleep had been impossible. She’d tried all the tricks, warm milk, counting, breathing exercises, even pleasuring herself. But she’d had no energy for the last one and hadn’t actually been able to finish the job properly so-to-speak. So her state of frustration had carried through her whole day, which had been one terrible thing after another, now it was just tiredness.

* * * *

“You work fast…”

A nod. That was all the reply he was likely to get by the looks.
Kakashi gathered as much information as he could from the roster in progress, but it wasn’t anything that required his attention for the moment. He stored away the knowledge that Sakura had seemingly put this together in one evening with very little information to go on. That would be helpful later on.

She didn’t notice when he put the papers down near her. She didn’t notice when he shifted to stand by the chair.

The moment she’d stepped in the door he knew she’d overdone it. Eyeing her with curiosity Kakashi went over to the files she’d so delicately thumped into his in tray, deciding he wanted to get a proper look at what else she’d been up to today. It would surely be more interesting than anything he’d done.

“Kaka…”

Sakura looked up expecting to see him still standing at the desk, the way her head spun round to find him was amusing but he wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was a throw back to the days when he got his kicks confusing her as a genin. He smirked.

“..shi sensei, has this old hideout you’ve got marked been.. Cleared out?”

She’d paused the question in seeing what he was doing.

“Yes it has, by yours truly. But that doesn’t mean anything. The place has been sealed for a long time and who knows what’s down there.”

“It’s under ground right?”

“Yes. With the land on top vacant. We would need to check the structural integrity, you like that location I take it?”

She nodded yes. He continued skim reading the dark blue folders.

“You really did have a busy day huh.”

He heard the sigh in reply. As if the training field accident hadn’t infuriated him enough, the Anbu T&I incident wasn’t actually reported to him until long after the rampage had been contained. The excuse being they didn’t want to bother the Hokage with something so trivial, the truth had crossed him dangerously, and it took a lot for him to actually lose his temper.

The main reason it bothered him now was currently sitting in his office chair.

When she hadn’t arrived at the usual-ish time Kakashi had assumed something had happened at the hospital with the Anbu patients. Shikamaru had no information to give him aside from what he already knew, so he’d sent them all home and waited. It wasn’t as if he had anywhere to be, and there was work aplenty.

Kakashi didn’t like that she had completed a fourteen hour shift and was now embarking on another evening of work. The Sakura he’d once known would have hightailed it out of the place and found the nearest comfy bed, and no one would have seen her for days. It confirmed his theory, she was fast becoming consumed by her work.

The bottom medical report was more substantial than the others, it surprised him that it had nothing to do with the days incidents.

“You have a lot of information here about what appears to be a very average genin…”
“That the SCRI patient?”

“Huh?”

She looked at him confused.

“Oh, sorry, yes. ‘Shadow clone related injury’ we've turned it into an acronym.”

Kakashi’s eyebrows raised as he read the actual details, moving round to his desk and kicking the stool out from the side of it. The action seemed to startle Sakura but she said nothing more as he continued to read and sat.

“These are extensive injuries…”

“Yes, it's a good thing he's young enough to bounce back from the chakra depletion, but the damage to the internal organs might have been permanent if he'd gone much further.”

“Reckless. This must happen often if you feel the need to abbreviate it.”

Sakura nodded glumly. Sitting at the side of his desk he could plainly see the dark circles under her eyes.

“At least twice a week.”

Kakashi read further into the folder to see the probing questions she’d asked of the genin to find out where he’d learnt such a jutsu. But there had been no coherent answers.

“You think someone is teaching forbidden jutsu incorrectly.”

It was a statement, she nodded again, seemingly unaffected by it. Kakashi had read between the lines of the report.

“That's a pretty hefty claim. I wondered why you looked so worn out, why haven't you told me about this sooner?”

Sakura shrugged before she answered. Rubbing her eye again, Kakashi wondered what else was keeping her awake at night.

“There's no actual proof, they've been pretty tight lipped when they do come in. Naruto knows nothing about it either. I didn't want to…”

“You didn't want to bother me huh, I'm hearing that a lot lately.”

He interrupted her with a sudden and out of sorts burst of frustration. Today's slight by the Anbu, the very organisation he'd been in himself, was still a little raw. Hearing it from Sakura was the final straw obviously.

“No, not that, silly. I didn't want to alert whoever is doing it, if they are doing it at all, until I had an actual lead. I already asked Shikamaru about the scroll of sealing, but he told me I could look for a million years and never find it…”

Kakashi coughed, knowing exactly why she, or anyone, would never find it as it currently sat in his pocket disguised as his favourite novel.

“... Iruka sensei informs me, repeatedly, that no such technique is approved or taught by instructors. I keep ending up at square one, like you said it's a pretty bold claim, and for all we know they could
just be mimicking what they see. I figured you would tell me to get more proof…”

She was now looking at him with a furrowed brow.

What an ass. She was just using her initiative like she had always done. Automatically he'd assumed incorrectly that she felt the strange compulsion every else did to leave him in this office to die of boredom. He pinched the bridge of his nose when he remembered why she was here in the first place, she had come to him for this project after all. Ass.

“I even asked Iruka sensei and Shino to incorporate proper clone usage into the training program. I drill it into my own students as well.”

Kakashi held up his hand.

“You've taken all the measures I would have done.” He sighed and physically had to force the next sentence to form. “Sorry, I'm being an ass.”

Her eyes went wide before her expression softened.

“No need sensei. Sounds like you had a long day yourself…”

He paused. Long didn't even begin to cover it. The words were out his mouth before he could stop himself. He had been spending too much time on his own again obviously.

“Long is one word for it. Boring would be the other.”

“Even with the accident and escaped suspect?”

“That would have been exciting, if I had actually been told about it before it was all contained. Apparently I am only of use when stuck inside this office.”

Kakashi hadn't meant it to sound so bitter, but it was the truth and it wasn't as if he was happy about it. He hadn't minded particularly going down in history as the worst Hokage of all, he'd just never felt so useless in all his life. His entire shinobi career was based on how good he was at his job and entirely useful.

“That's not true Kakashi sensei.”

Sakura's earnest reply held his attention.

“You are so smart, they probably figured something like that would bore you to tears. It's definitely beneath you, I would say.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, but tried to remain emotionless. The words she said were affecting him in a way he couldn't describe. If he had to name the feeling it would be something akin to relief.

“Don't you raise your eyebrow at me Lord Hokage. It's true. You make everything look so easy with that big brain of yours, and you look so bored doing it. Everyone just assumes it is easy and that they shouldn't annoy you about it. It's when you actually apply yourself that it's scary…”

She held up the manilla folder and raised her own eyebrows a fraction. But boy did she look tired. Kakashi felt decidedly worse, there she sat putting him at ease for an insecurity he thought he had buried awhile ago. She patted him on the arm lightly for reinforcement, repeating his gesture from yesterday. The action however brief reminded him of the side project he'd undertaken, and he congratulated himself that at least she was initiating the contact now.
“I don’t know about all that, but you know, you can always come to me for anything. I may be Hokage now but I’m also still here to help you whenever you need it.”

He watched her nod enthusiastically with a sprinkle of blush across her face.

“You leave this with me,” he held up the medical report, “and I’ll try put my brain to use. God knows it needs a workout.”

She laughed, Kakashi took enjoyment in the fact that he’d caused it, even if it had been sort of at his own expense.

“And I’ll come to you first next time, it’s a promise.”

He nodded, tempting as it was to make light of the situation and insist that she not come to him with every little thing, he decided that it wasn’t appropriate anymore. Perhaps a few years ago, but this was not the time.

“Thank you, Sakura.”

He had tried to add a softness to his tone that was usually absent, it had the desired effect. Sakura smiled, though her expression remained a little perplexed, as if she had expected something of a more teasing nature.

“I guess this little project has given me a good deal more to think about. I had hoped to have you select a couple of those locations for us to scout…”

“I could do that now…”

“No, that won’t be necessary.”

At this he plucked the folder from her hand and placed it on top of the others. She shot him a scowl mixed with confusion and he almost smirked.

“Not tonight anyway. You look close to passing out and I’d rather not have to explain why that has occured in my office…again.”

The last part was added under his breath, she caught it all the same and rolled her eyes with a smile.

“I’m fine Kakashi sensei, honestly. Just a little frazzled…”

She yawned abruptly cutting off her own sentence.

Frazzled huh. Something was definitely bothering her outside of hospital work.

“No arguing.” He stood for affect and pulled back the wheeled chair she was currently sitting in.

“This can wait. I worked out a kind of timeline about this, one night isn’t going to effect that.”

Sakura stood with a pout, when she went to reach for the folders on the desk he stopped her, moving them just out of her reach.

“And those can stay here until tomorrow, just to make sure you actually get some rest. You can have them back later when you’re recharged.”

When she straightened he half expected her to knock him through the window, but it seemed she was too tired even to argue, he was unable to read the look on her face. He stretched.
“Right, now that’s out of the way. Have you eaten today?”

She shook her head.

“Breakfast maybe, I can’t remember much else…”

Even her voice was different.

“You’ll need to eat before you sleep.”

“I know that…“

“Barbeque?”

There was a pause in which Kakashi became very unsure of himself. Her eyes finally met his, they were resolute with a dangerous flicker of something. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to speak but thought better of it. Eventually words came out, and Kakashi had that odd feeling again that each one of them had been carefully weighed and measured.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

He almost scoffed. Of course she thought this kind of attention was suspicious. When had he ever paid her any concern, off the battlefield anyway. Kakashi also began to wonder just how long it had been since anyone had directly noticed her for what she really was. Though she seemed so well put together in every respect it had to be lonely as hell, and he was an expert in that particular feeling.

For what he did know, Tsunade was well on the other side of the world with little time to spend with her favourite apprentice, Naruto was married and onto his second child, Sai too. And Sasuke, well he was out of the picture. Sakura’s parents were also out of the picture from what he could vaguely remember. With a tinge of sadness and all the care he could possibly offer he met her eye.

“I know you’re strong enough to look after yourself. I know that well. But I am worried about you right now, and I will always care about you, Sakura. Let someone do something for you for a change hmm?”

The steely look she had been directing at him finally gave way, her eyes shining as they welled up a little. Kakashi figured it would be more to do with tiredness than the words he’d spoken. Her voice came out quieter than usual, but it wasn’t that gloomy tone from before at least.

“Barbeque sounds good.”

“Good.”

He gestured to the door with a jerk of his head, waiting until he knew she was following him before adding.

“It’s your turn to buy, by the way.”

He ambled quickly down the stairs chuckling a little at her shouts of ‘I knew it!’ and dodging a well aimed chair.

* * * *

Sakura had been sitting at her kitchen counter for some time, staring at the now empty takeout
container with complete and utter confusion.

From the moment Kakashi had shoved the bag into her hand, Sakura's face was a permanent fixture of confusion. She'd barely had time to blink before he'd disappeared into the night with a simple 'see ya'. Truthfully she'd been confused throughout the entire evening.

The whole interaction with him had been unusual. He wasn't just being nice, he was being weird.

Sakura liked to think she knew the man a little after ten plus years, but all his typical and expected behaviors were absent. Maybe she just didn't know him as well as she thought, maybe he had always been nice and she had just never spent enough time alone with him to recognize it outside of a mission. He had always been a little weird too.

Sakura shook her head and discarded the trash. Maybe she was just tired. Very tired.

Forgoing her usual indulgent bath after a long shift, Sakura stripped and dropped herself onto her bed. She didn't even bother with pajamas, underwear was good enough. Lying back she barely registered turning off the lights before sleep claimed her.

Pity it didn't last long.

It never did. With bleary eyes she could make out the alarm clock at three am. Five hours. It was a good effort but by the time she watched the clock hit six it saddened her that it was all she would be getting.

As a medical professional it occurred to her that this was a byproduct of being overtired. It bothered her to no end, but no matter how hard she tried conventional methods to combat it, nothing worked. Overworking her mind and body appeared to be the only way. And her own efforts at tiring her frustrated body out were fruitless. Ino had suggested a 'battery operated sex device' during their last conversation about it, that was months ago now. Sakura stashed the toy in her drawer and never looked at it since, just the idea of putting batteries in it was too much effort. Though now she was just about frustrated enough to power up the damned thing.

And because she had nothing else to do while she waiting for her alarm to go off, Sakura worked out it had been almost two years since she'd last been...well satisfied. Even that was a pitiful drunken escapade with some random guy she'd grabbed at a bar. Years. It seemed hilarious and ridiculous to her at first, but she'd realized how quickly time seemed to pass as she got older. Even that last conversation with Ino had been months ago. It filled Sakura with dread when she considered that life was just passing her by.

With a sigh Sakura threw her legs over the side of the bed and headed straight for the bathroom. Maybe she would have a better day today. The hot shower did nothing to relieve the dull ache between her legs.

Maybe she would pick up some batteries later…

By the time Sakura had reached her office and shoved a granola bar down her throat she was certain, today was going to be better and she was definitely going to the store after her shift.

Thankfully the time passed without major incident, there was certainly enough paperwork from yesterday to catch up on. It got so dull Shizune insisted that Sakura leave early and get some rest, she gladly accepted the offer.

Taking her sweet time, Sakura took to the streets of Konoha. It was strange to be out of work while it was still daylight hours, the mid afternoon sun with all its heat and glory on her back. On a mission
Sakura did her essential shopping, batteries included, and stormed back to her apartment all before 3pm.

The place was well furnished, after her mother had passed Sakura had inherited all the furniture she would ever need, her father claiming he didn't need it when he moved far enough from the village to forget the pain. She couldn't blame him for it really. Except the furniture made the place feel smaller than it already was. It was just perfect for her anyway. And she was the only one likely to live in it.

Busying herself with tidying away her groceries Sakura came to be standing over her bed with a pack of batteries in one hand, the bright blue device in the other, and a scowl on her face. Since when had she become this lonely and pathetic? Since that night she'd told Sasuke that she didn't want to be the person he was turning her into. She refused to believe that leaving him was a mistake, she really had been miserable toward the end. She was happier without him, but it didn't mean she wasn't still lonely.

She shook her head violently. Now she was being ridiculous, she was a grown woman and could take care of her needs herself… surely. She didn't need anyone else… That was another thought that filled her with dread (along with the actual size of the device in her hand). The prospect of spending her time alone, with the dubiously sized toy as company, was pathetic. What she needed was something to make her necessary, and to fill the void.

What she needed was to get down to business. Throwing the toy and the batteries back into the drawer she decided to head over to the Hokage tower early. All the paperwork was there, and the idea of scouting potential locations had her excited enough. Once it was built this hospital would be the project that kept her going, it was all she needed.

The entire way there Sakura's mind began to calculate which of the locations she could remember from Kakashi's selection would be the most suitable. She'd been so tired when she saw them it had been hard to concentrate. When she reached the office and tentatively knocked on the open door it was empty of it's usual occupant. She was early after all. She sighed in relief all the same, part of her wanted to properly apologize for her questioning him the night before and hadn't yet worked out how to do it. She'd automatically assumed he was taking pity on her and wasn't taking her seriously, it hadn't even dawned on her that he actually cared. Weird.

She had also thrown a chair at his head. Though he kind of deserved it. Weirder still, she hadn't ended up paying for dinner at all. Neither had he but that was beside the point. Kakashi was still Kakashi.

With a smirk she found the pile of relevant folders and scrolls sitting neatly by the in tray she usually dumped the medical reports in. It was no longer empty, but it wasn't at it's usual stacked level either. Unsure if she should wait for him or not, he had said she could have them back today after all but he hadn't said if he would be present, Sakura popped into Shikamaru’s office. The only likely person to know where their Hokage was. She knocked.

“Hey Sakura.”

He sat at his desk surrounded by folders in very neat stacks. A very young and bored looking chunin sitting in the corner of the room.

“Hi Shikamaru.”

“What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

He seemed almost cheerful these days, Sakura blamed/thanked Temari for that.
“I'm here a bit earlier than usual. I was hoping to catch Kakashi sensei, do you know when he'll be back?”

A typical Shikamaru sigh.

“Not sure. It's the last Thursday of the month right?”

Shikamaru turned his head towards the chunin who nodded while regarding Sakura with quiet awe. Sakura raised an eyebrow.

“What's that got to do with it?”

Shikamaru jerked his thumb to the giant calendar that took up the whole side of the wall.

“Last Thursday of every month, for the last five years at least, Kakashi blocks out the hours between three and five. He doesn't always come back in unless he's swamped.”

“Where does he go?”

“Classified.”

Shikamaru’s face broke into a smirk, betraying his tone of voice. Potentially feeling the wrath that was Sakura's temper he continued.

“Sanji, why don't you head out early. Just double check Kakashi's schedule for tomorrow before you go.”

The teen seemed elated as he suddenly animated to life and exited in a hurry. Sakura knew immediately that he was getting rid of him. When they were safely alone Sakura questioned him.

“Classified huh?”

“Yeah, at least that's what he says anytime someone asks. I tried having him followed but he's a crafty bastard. Guess you can expect that from an ex Anbu captain.”

Sakura's brow furrowed.

“Wait, so Anbu don't even know where he is? What if something happened…”

“If they do know they aren't saying anything. I'm willing to bet they could find him if it were urgent. But hey, he's a private guy, he only takes one day off a year and those two hours once a month.”

“Guess I'll wait til tomorrow… hold on a second, he only takes one day off a year? Kakashi does?”

Shikamaru nodded.

“Yup. It's a pain because one of us has to be here all the time, otherwise he starts rearranging things.”

“One day. Gods, and I thought one day every two weeks was rough.”

Not that she would admit she actually hated taking that forced day off usually. It appeared Kakashi was the same.

“Yeah, it's always the same day in September. And I know for a fact that he's untraceable on that day. But the village is so peaceful now, and he has things here running so smoothly, we'd be able to handle it if something came up.”
Don't let him hear you say that.

The thought popped into her mind abruptly. What had he said before? He was only useful when kept in an office? She was sure Kakashi, of all people, was grateful for the peace that they had earnt, but he must be bored out of his skull. Especially someone with his intelligence, while Shikamaru (someone just as smart) would be too lazy to be bored by it, and too busy at home with his young family.

“Funny, I’ve never noticed before. Guess I really don’t know him that well though.”

Shikamaru shrugged.

“Like I said, he’s a pretty private guy. I don’t think anyone knows what kind of life he leads outside of this office. He does a lot for all of us, so we just leave him to it now. He deserves it a couple hours a month at least”.

Sakura nodded, he did do a lot for others. Her included.

I’m worried about you right now, I will always care about you, Sakura.

“I’ll leave a note on his desk. Anyway, thanks Shikamaru.”

He nodded as she smiled and made to leave.

“Oh, I meant to ask, how are Temari and the little one doing?”

At this she watched the expression on his face completely change to one of contentment.

“They are doing great. Starting to miss the days before he could talk back though y’know.”

“He’s talking? How old is he now, I can’t have missed that much?”

Shikamaru laughed.

“He’s two. We suspect he’s been able to talk for a long while now but didn’t want us to catch on that he knew exactly what we were asking him to do.”

Sakura deadpanned.

“Oh shit, he’s exactly like you.”

“Yup. We’re in trouble alright.”

Now she was laughing as she finally left the office. She didn’t necessarily mind the small talk about her friends and their families, she did still care for all of them. It just felt like a foreign world to her that she would never get to know, but sometimes she didn’t mind that either.

Hastily scribbling a note to Kakashi she took a chance that he would find it better if she actually stuck it to his chair. Leaving it on the desk itself would practically ensure that he never found it in the mess that was left on top of it. She smirked, wondered a little at where the man may be, took the files and left.

* * * *

It had been an exceedingly uninteresting day for Kakashi, his only solace being the small pockets of
time he’d stolen to further research the hospital project. He’d been so wrapped up in it by the time he was meant to leave he was almost late for the regular appointment, not that being late usually bothered him, but this was of some importance.

The thing that actually startled him being that he’d completely forgotten momentarily what day it was. How could he forget the last Thursday of the month?

Sometimes it was the only time he'd get out in a calendar month. At least on business that wasn't to do with being a below average Hokage.

The arrangement had been taken under the advisement of Tsunade before she had left. You’ll need to do it, Hatake. She had said in all her drunken glory, Kakashi thought she was kidding at first, but the woman had actually made referrals about it on his behalf. Increasingly she’d pestered him until he finally agreed to go along with it, and only then did he realize how much he really did need it.

He had approached it initially in the same aloof manner that he always did anything he wasn’t so keen on. Like some of Guy’s more ridiculous challenges. Tsunade had practically dragged him to the first session, berating him about the requirements for becoming Hokage. The second session had been just after Tsunade had left, more out of obligation than necessity.

The third session had been two years after that, and he had been the one to reach out for help. Because that was what he had needed, help.

Kakashi refused to call it therapy. Even though it was exactly that.

What has started as simply a mental assessment for his capabilities as Hokage had turned into a regular thing. When he had reached out for the help that had been offered to him years later he had been, in a word, lost. Desperate would be another way to put it. Those pesky feelings of inadequacy resurfaced during that entire moon fiasco.

There were many things they talked about during these sessions, all of them completely unrelated to his work. Which is what he had needed. An unbiased medical professional who listened and offered advice on healthy ways to approach his own distressing thoughts. Tsunade had been correct. The doctor himself was an expert in PTSD, well acclaimed with other veterans, and completely discreet. It was a situation that had lead Kakashi to develop new coping strategies, and in his decidedly better frame of mind, find new strengths to compensate for the loss of Obito’s eye.

It was something he should have done years ago. But there was no use feeling guilty about a past he couldn't change.

But the memories were still there, the nightmares too. And those ever present pesky feelings. Even after the end of the last war and peace had settled.

Doctor Crane had many theories about it, but all in all, no matter how healthy a person was physically, the mind was a different matter. And PTSD could strike at anytime. It was a known fate for many Shinobi, but they often did not live long enough to see it through. Or like Jiraiya, and even Guy, they found increasingly absurd coping mechanisms.

So Kakashi had decided it was a good thing to keep both his mind and his body in check. He even relished the regular physical challenges from Guy. And like that exercise, these sessions were just as crucial to his fragile wellbeing.

It was not therapy. It was just a check up.

Usually the two hours went by quickly enough, the conversation flowing naturally to the point where
Kakashi really did feel he was just having a chat with an acquaintance. But the guy had a knack for knowing when there was something that needed to be said, or registering things Kakashi’s own mind refused to let him admit out loud. For all Kakashi’s thinking the doctor was probably part Yamanaka the way he got into his head.

Today they had enough for a quite a substantial conversation. It hadn’t started that way, it had started how it always did, with the doctor asking exactly what he had been up to outside of office hours. And Kakashi replied in the same way he always did, that it was always office hours for a Hokage, but when he made a flippant comment about ramen with a former student things had picked up from there.

Kakashi hadn’t needed to omit any details regarding the children’s hospital project because they had never gotten that far. Dr Crane had listened up to the point where they had gone for ramen and then began questioning why exactly Kakashi felt perturbed by not knowing about Sasuke and Sakura’s breakup.

“My why do you think it bothered me so much?”

Eventually he had gotten annoyed by the line of questioning as if it was going nowhere and wasting his time. So Kakashi had aimed the question back at him.

“I’m not sure.” Had been the reply. “It could be a trust issue, that those close to you didn’t feel it necessary to bother you. More than that, it could likely be to do with your own feelings of failure, anger at yourself for not seeing it when you feel you should have. It could be many more things…”

As Kakashi walked the streets of Konoha slowly back to Hokage tower he ruminated on what those many more things could possibly be. They’d talked about a few of them. But growing increasingly uncomfortable about it Kakashi had masterfully changed the subject and continued to talk about the next nights interaction. Dr Crane had been oddly quiet about it all, just letting him go into detail about what had transpired. Including the strange compulsion to force Sakura to sit down in his own chair. The doctor had nodded, gave nothing away on his face, but perhaps jotted a few more things down than usual. Kakashi hadn’t always allowed him to document the sessions, but after he’d been shown the scroll and seals used to store it he’d acquiesced.

The tower loomed in front of him with the sun setting behind. He sighed.

It all came back to feeling like a failure to his precious people. But now at least he was in a position to do something. He realized that having that kind of professional help available to all troubled shinobi would save a lot of people. Sure they’d resist it as well, but if they were anything like him they would know soon enough. After so much loss it gets hard to reach out, and just knowing that someone was there to help had made all the difference to him at least.

That was one of the reasons he’d jumped so readily at Sakura’s proposal, the more he thought about the past treatment of Konoha’s orphans and traumatized shinobi, himself included, the more he realized it was necessary. Not just for him. And not just because of some compulsive need he felt to help Sakura, although that was certainly part of it, he’d failed her so much already. Kakashi had hidden that detail from Dr. Crane entirely. Although judging by the way he’d left the session, the doctor already had his suspicions. It had ended with the usual homework assignment, find a hobby NOT work related. But as he’d been about to leave there had been an added task, try and talk to others more.

Shikamaru and the rest had all gone, leaving one lowly clerk dozing in the offices downstairs, the lamp had been left on in his own office. Kakashi let out the sigh he’d been holding in since he’d entered the building. Talking to others was not exactly his forte. Sure he could talk to Guy if he
wanted to, and on occasion if he was desperate he would do just that. But he had the feeling the kind of talking that Dr. Crane was asking him to do didn’t fall into that sort of category. The doctor had pestered him before about opening up to those he trusted, not just to a therapist, Kakashi had argued that it wasn’t therapy and they’d ended up going in circles.

Glancing at his intray, he moved to grab the small pile, smirking inwardly at the much smaller dark blue report on top. Sakura’s day had been a lot less exciting that yesterday. Good, he thought. She really did deserve a rest, even if she didn’t want it.

He’d flicked it open before he even reached his chair, curious to see what she had been up to. The feeling was a strange revelation to him, he’d certainly never been that eager to hear about her day before now. Perhaps it had something to do with the conspicuously absent hospital plans from beside that intray. He’d noticed that almost immediately.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

The question replayed in his mind like an accusation. When he’d unwillingly taken out his inadequacies in her direction, and been upset by a breakup that she was clearly one hundred percent over, she had comforted him. It was ridiculous, pathetic even. So of course he was going to treat her nicely, on top of this she’d also offered possibly the greatest project of his tenure.

Dropping the stack onto the desk with a depressing thud Kakashi went to take his seat and paused, eyeing the piece of paper that was tacked into the back of it. Pulling it off his smirk was replaced with a genuine smile. It was only a brief note, but it was probably the best one that had been left for him in a while. Though Naruto’s disturbingly accurate Icha Icha doodle would always hold a special place inside his wallet.

“Sensei,
All charged up and at the library with our project. Feel free to join me if you can, it’s a pretty neat place.
Sakura
- dinner will be provided”

Before he registered what was happening his body had begun to move of its own accord, pocketing the note and flicking the lamps off with zeal.

Up until now that library had been his favourite project, any excuse to go there was greatly appreciated, though there was no way that Sakura could have known that. But maybe she did. He had spoken with her quite openly about how bored he’d been… Kakashi’s thought processes shifted as he exited the building.

Try and talk to others more…

It was the ‘more’ at the end of that sentence that now suddenly held meaning. He had been talking to her more than anyone else. At least, about things unrelated to the running of the village. It hadn’t been a conscious decision for him to do so, the words had just kind of formed once he’d learned of all that she had been through.

More than anything he wanted Sakura to be able to talk to him as well, she couldn’t end up like him. She was too kind, and she deserved kindness in return.

Kakashi made the decision to continue to be nice to her, and hoped like hell it was enough to make her realize… she deserved more.
Sakura stood back to admire the spread before her. The result of an hour's work uninterrupted without being overly fatigued from a day at the hospital. She had sourced the majority of the larger volumes on her own, they mostly consisted of architectural plans. The specific details of the prospective sites were a little harder to find, but the clerk had been obliging and now Sakura was all set for the evening with all available resources within arm's reach.

Arm's reach being a relative term, she'd had to take over one of the empty conference rooms to fit it all in. The table was massive enough for all the plans to be laid out fully. She'd started ordering them by preference, ease of access came into account so that placed three options immediately at the bottom. Anything located beyond the first wall of the village was too out of the way for the major populace. Anything within a few miles radius of the existing hospital also got preference. But these sites were dubiously constructed, one being the old sannin’s hideout, another was a completely abandoned manor house that just gave her the creeps.

It was, in all, slim pickings.

Ideally Sakura would have a completely new building established on vacant land. Something clean and practical. She wondered if it would cost more to renovate an existing building than to build a new one.

Kakashi was right though, at least they had a few reasonable options to peruse. Sakura had started to wonder if some of these properties, the ones that were more an eyesore, had been abandoned for a reason. She also considered that perhaps if they took one of these sections off the hands of the state, they would actually be doing them a favour. It was probably why he had picked them in the first place the crafty bastard, for political favour. Sakura smirked and cast her eye over to one of the vacant chairs, well, almost vacant. It currently held two containers of donburi which she had brought from home, when all natural light faded from outside she doubted whether he would turn up. But it didn't deter her.

Instead Sakura sat at the middle of the long, square table and created a list of questions on each prospect. Some of these questions she would need to direct to Kakashi, the hideout was a bit of a difficult one for her to navigate, and some of the questions she actually answered herself over the course of the next hour.

It was good work, distracting work at least, she was certainly not bored enough for her mind to be wandering about her perpetual state of loneliness. But something did bother her when she began reading the details of an expensive plot of Nara land that Kakashi had highlighted in his notes. Classified. The words played through her mind in Shikamaru’s bored timbre. No one knows what he gets up to outside this office. When he got the chance to leave it too, she thought vaguely. We just leave him to it. It must be a lonely existence surely, but he'd always been on his own hadn't he?

It perplexed her that she knew nothing of him really, after all this time.

As she wondered for the upteenth time exactly where their Hokage disappeared to on the last Thursday of each month, Sakura made a mental note to mention it to Tsunade the next time they corresponded. That was her last thought on the matter for the moment, her attention shifted to the second in line of preference, as if just thinking of Lady Tsunade was enough to call her to it. She
never thought that an old hideout of Orochimaru would be one of the top candidates.

It bothered her. She didn’t exactly relish the idea of using the hideout as a basement for a children’s hospital, especially after all the terrible experiments he’d likely have performed on children in it.

“Maybe I’m thinking too much…”

Sakura mumbled to herself, so completely lost in the file in front of her that she reacted more slowly than acceptable for a ninja.

“Probably. Tea?”

“Yes, thank you.”

A steaming cup appeared miraculously in her hand and she almost jumped in her seat. Dropping the folder down, she did well not to spill a drop at least.

“Oh! Kakashi sensei!”

“Yo. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“How long have you been here?”

He had been standing at the very end of the table making tea in the only available space it offered, but she hadn’t even noticed.

“A while. You’ve been staring at that page for five minutes you know.”

Sakura, in another time perhaps, would have slapped him for freaking her out like that. God knows she’d pummeled Naruto enough times for surprising her, Sasuke only just managed not to incur her wrath because they’d been dating. She set the tea down after clearing a spot, not sure if her accidental death grip would break the ceramic.

“Well, thanks for the tea anyway.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The way he smiled at her then was strange, at least to Sakura, it was unfamiliar. His mask was crinkled in the normal fashion but his eyes were open and looking at her.

“Sorry I missed you at the office, but I see you’ve wasted no time. This is an impressive layout Sakura.”

Her anger dissipated.

“You think? It took a bit of digging to get some of it.”

“I didn't even realize this kind of information was held here…”

Sakura raised an eyebrow at him as he skimmed one of the property reports. She knew he probably didn't get far past the romance section.

“Hmm?”

Kakashi seemed to sense the knowing look she shot at him.
“Oh nothing. Just wondering if you've ever been on the nonfiction side to the library that you built…”

He chuckled quietly and scratched his head. Sakura noted his expression was a bit more familiar now at least, she took a sip of tea and tried to find the paper she'd been studying.

“So what has you thinking too much anyway?”

Finding what she was looking for, she held the paper out to him, he took it and sat at the end of the table. Sakura's glance flicked to the containers of food again.

“I see. I'm not sure if this was one of my better ideas…”

She had handed him the layout to the hideout that she'd copied, with questions and markers littering the paper. His brow creased worriedly.

“I mean, it's not a bad idea. The land is certainly vacant. No one else seems to want it, so it would be a steal price wise. I can see why you chose it…”

“I see you have the same concerns I do as to the structural integrity. The existing underground rooms may not be useable, but I think it would be unwise to completely demolish them… there could still be anything down in that labyrinth.”

“I thought you were the one who cleared it out Kakashi sensei?”

He looked up from the paper for a fraction of a second, his whole face still tense.

“I did. But that was fifteen years ago, at least. Even with Orochimaru’s cooperation with the village as it is I wouldn't trust it completely either.”

“I was going to ask about what it was like down there…”

Now it wasn't just his face that was tense, Kakashi's whole body seemed to go rigid. His entire being was uncomfortable with this situation and Sakura could tell that much at least even if she didn't know him as well.

“You don't have to answer if…”

“Oh, it's nothing like that. It's just, customarily Anbu missions aren't exactly discussed with others. And it was quite a while ago. Leave this for the time being, I will acquisition the mission report and we’ll go through it then.”

He handed the paper back to her, it was placed back in its spot as second on the list. Though now Sakura was beginning to doubt if it should rank so high.

“The next course of action would be to examine the property ourselves, we’d have to eventually…”

Sakura had not expected those words to fall from his lips. The idea of checking out an old hideout of Orochimaru's left her with an uncomfortable feeling in her chest, even if it was abandoned. But also, more disturbingly, she was suddenly excited.

More than she should be feeling.

She tried to contain it as she replied.

“I'm game if you are. And it is currently ranked second as far as location goes…”
“I see, I wondered if that’s how you’d ordered them.”

Kakashi now stood an appeared to be scrutinizing her arrangement across the table from her.

“Some of these places have very little information to go on, like this one…” she gestured to the Nara property, “I can only assume it’s been well maintained. And some of these I don’t even recognize and their suitability is questionable at best…”

“So you’re saying we might need to go on more than one field trip then?”

Sakura’s eyes shot up to his, he’d picked these places on purpose. The pure mischief was written all over his face in the smirk that was carefully hidden behind that mask. This was all just to get out of the office for him, she was sure of it, and she was playing right into his hands. While perhaps a few days ago she would have called him out on it, slapped him sideways and continued to work alone (Hokage or not, it was slapworthy) her thoughts from earlier that day stopped her.

It must be a lonely existence. “I’m only of use when confined to this office…” One day off a year…

Crafty bastard. How could she say no when he’d been so nice to her? Also she'd still not been able to apologize like she had wanted. Maybe she could just be nice back…

As she began to wonder if his treatment of her had all been an elaborate ploy, a larger part of her just didn’t care. She was excited. Her plans were finally coming to fruition, and there was no way he could ruin that.

And he was trying to help. In his own way.

“I guess it does…”

Sakura almost mumbled it, returning her eye to the lists of information before her. If she was careful, and thorough as always, then Kakashi wouldn’t be able to drag this out either. She couldn’t tell yet if that was his intention, but she was curious to see how far he would go to get out of the office.

Her eyes flicked back up as he sat down. The expression on his face so changed she was completely unsure what was going through his mind.

He looked worried, he looked weird. Mostly it felt as if his entire body had been possessed by some demon of despondency. Sakura's brow creased. She would never know.

* * * *

Kakashi was frustrated at himself as he stood in that conference room, and not for the usual reasons. His brain was not working as it should. It might have had something to do with his session today and the treacherous thoughts circling his mind. But most likely he was getting angry again at his own limitations, perhaps his age also.

The truth being, he could not remember anything about that particular hideout.

At first, as she’d started talking about it, he swore he remembered the details. But there had been so many hideouts during those years. This one on it’s own was not so special to stand out in his memory, or it was something far worse than that and he’d successfully repressed it. Either way, he’d need that report.

Useless.
A bitter voice went through his mind as he silently took a seat across from Sakura. He'd made some flippant remark about making field trips to the others, but right now he was not wholly certain of his own deductive abilities. If he couldn't recall one measly mission then what use would he be…

Kakashi had been rapidly scanning papers with Sakura's careful notes jotted in the margins. Desperately trying to pull himself out of his own head in an attempt to be useful. It wasn't lost on him that this was the same kind of reaction he'd had at hearing about Sakura and Sasuke's break up. Kakashi made a mental note of that. Maybe he would have to increase his mental health check ups to fortnightly.

Sakura made a throat clearing noise and he looked up to find her staring at him expectantly. Her bemused expression laced with concern, like a mother might give a child whose picking at his dinner. Had she been talking?

“Sorry, got lost in my own head there. You were saying?”

She tried to put him at ease with a small smile that faded back into genuine concern.

“I was asking if you'd eaten yet.”

“Oh.” At this Kakashi had to actually think. “Vaguely I recall eating something this morning… but it all blurs into one.”

“Okay, good.”

Sakura stood, and wandered over to the bag she had sitting on an unused chair. Withdrawing two containers and leaning over to hand him one with a proper smile on her face this time. He regarded the container with curiosity before actually taking it.

“You made dinner?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Well yeah. It’s not healthy to eat takeout everyday like you do, but I guess you don’t have time like us regular people to cook for yourself… You gotta take care of your insides as well as your outsides y’know.”

Kakashi was listening but got distracted when he actually opened the container. It was one of those weird steel things with a compartment underneath of boiling water to keep the food warm. Trust Sakura to think of everything. But the dish itself looked pretty amazing considering what he remembered of her inedible food pills all those years ago. She handed him a fork, he'd swiped a taste of it before she even sat back down. The mystery behind the mask was still something he clung to.

“Thank you Sakura, it actually tastes really good.”

“And what’s with the tone of surprise? What were you expecting it to taste like hmm?”

Kakashi felt the need to rapidly change the subject to save his own skin.

“Oh, no it’s not like that. Did you grill this in miso paste or something? It’s quite a rich flavour…”

She went back to smiling and rummaged through her bag again. He sighed in relief.

“Yeah, I made it myself. There was this new recipe I found and wanted to try…. Here…”

Sakura had gone to hand him a small scrap of paper, but Kakashi countered her with an identical one
pulled from his own pocket. She looked at him confused.

“Let me guess, it was the one printed on the flyer for that new restaurant downtown.”

He had recognized the subtle flavour difference and immediately attributed it to that.

“Yeah, actually. I finally got a chance today to make it. I didn’t realize you were into cooking Kakashi sensei.”

He shrugged.

“In a past life I guess. Like you said I don’t exactly get time to dabble in the kitchen these days. Really though, thank you Sakura, at least I got to try this one. I didn’t realize you collected recipes…”

Now she shrugged. The smile had drifted back to concern and Kakashi had to wonder just how pathetic he must look or sound to warrant it. She began to pick at her own container before she replied.

“Collecting recipes maybe, it’s no fun cooking just for yourself though.”

She’d said it quietly enough but he had caught the tone of sadness there and it pulled at his chest for a moment. Maybe it wasn’t concern he’d seen at all. At a loss for how to cheer her up, Kakashi shifted uncomfortably, though Sakura appeared to shake herself out of it just fine.

“You were down town today then huh?”

When she averted her eyes he took another mouthful.

“Yeah I managed to escape, sort of, for a while anyway. I hear you had a much quieter day today too hmm?”

Sakura nodded.

“Blissfully uneventful yes. I even went grocery shopping.”

Kakashi silently laughed. The tone of her voice gave her away in an instant that it was anything but blissful, and judging by all the work she had achieved without him this theory was correct.

For the rest of the meal they ate in relative silence, Sakura picking up her paper again, occasionally asking him a question regarding property rights to one of the sites she’d chosen. In that time Kakashi had deduced that it had been close to six months since he had actually cooked a meal for himself in his own home. And this thought was more depressing than he cared to admit. On that note he remembered something else.

“I drew this up today, here.”

Sakura took the scroll from him, unrolling it while Kakashi took the opportunity to down the rest of his dinner when she was distracted.

“This is that timeline you were talking about?”

He nodded, standing to put the now empty container back into Sakura's open bag. She was studying it so carefully she didn’t notice when he relieved her of the other empty container. When he tucked that one away too he spied the library books that she had stashed in there also. Curiosity getting the better of him, he lingered to see what they were. Kakashi was just glad that his back was to Sakura and she couldn’t see his face.
The bag held two volumes. One very large text book on what appeared to be child psychology. Unsurprising. And another, smaller novel that was decidedly fiction. And this was the cause of Kakashi’s amused, but more shocked, expression. He almost wished he hadn't read the title of it, but it was too late to help himself now.

*The Bride of the Demon Prince.*

The dubious title, paired with the shirtless and conventionally handsome man on the cover, made it clear the book contained one thing. Smut. Kakashi was certain his eyebrows had disappeared past his hairline, potentially lost forever.

“I'm confused Kakashi sensei, why do you have two calendars here?”

Sakura's question caused him to clear this throat in surprise.

“Well, it'll be tight, but the first is if we get all the planning approved before the new year, and new budget fall into place. Which gives us…”

“Four months for planning and approval… then there's the actual construction.”

Sakura looked a little gloomy as she finished the sentence. Kakashi took his seat back in front of her.

“That's about right. So the first calendar is what we'll need to accomplish, and by when, for that to happen. The second is a more relaxed version but it would delay the project by another year. At least.”

“Do you really think we can do it in four months?”

She still looked down, Kakashi tried his utmost to be as reassuring as possible.

“The more I look at what you've pulled together in just a few days, yes I really do think it can be done.”

Sakura smiled and he found himself returning it.

“Mind if I keep this?”

She rolled up the schedule while he nodded yes. As she tucked it into her satchel Kakashi couldn't help himself. The urge to tease her was just too great and the opportunity had arisen itself.

“Interesting reading material you've got there…”

When Sakura turned her head and met his eye, he tried to contain the smirk on his face as he made a quick glance to the other bag and back to her.

Kakashi wasn't sure what he expected, but it was something at least. Maybe a blush or denial that it belonged to someone else. But she offered nothing. At least in her expressions anyway.

“Hardly call a medical journal interesting… necessary perhaps.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him as if issuing a silent challenge, daring him to ask about the other… It was a game too tempting to resist, and he hated that it just happened to be one of the few romance novels he hadn't heard of.

So in caliber with her reply, Kakashi raised his own eyebrow and refused to answer with words. Instead he gave her an expression that was loud and clear, dripping with a sarcastic yeah right. He
kept it up until she shifted under his gaze and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Oh, you meant the other thing. Of course you would find that interesting… A patient of mine recommended it, that’s all.”

Sakura dismissed it so easily, but didn’t deny that it was hers.

“You don’t sound overly enthused about it. No good huh?”

Kakashi was again expecting something, at this point he’d settle for anything, a small blush or even a cough. Surely she would change the subject, but she didn’t.

“It was fine, a bit corny maybe. You really shouldn’t judge a book by it’s cover you know Kakashi sensei, just because it’s not that disgusting Icha Icha…”

“Not judging, just making an observation. And it’s not disgusting, it’s literary genius.”

Sakura started laughing in that hearty way, like she had over ramen the other night, and if he didn’t feel so attacked about Icha Icha Kakashi would have been more pleased to hear her happy again.

“Yeah yeah,” she waved him silent while still quietly laughing, “If you want to borrow it that’s fine. But, unfortunately, you are kinda right, it’s not great. I got bored about halfway through and had to force myself to finish it.”

She’d said that last part with a sigh that was sad enough to force out all the usual satisfaction he’d get from being right. The Sakura that Kakashi thought he knew would be embarrassed by this conversation to an extreme degree, perhaps even threaten physical violence. But this Sakura, the grown up version, was talking about it like it was nothing.

Was she doing it on purpose just to be nice to him? An horrific thought entered his mind briefly that perhaps she was even more like him than he realised. Maybe she’s just comfortable talking with you hmm? Pervert.

But it was too late. The thought had already entered his mind.

“Didn’t do anything for ya huh?”

He’d hate himself later for saying it out loud, but he hated himself anyway so it was just something else to add to that list. It was almost like an out of body experience when she got up to retrieve the damn thing.

“It was too slow for me. But my patient insisted it would cheer me up. Here, maybe you’ll like it more than I did.”

She handed it to him from across the table. Kakashi paused before actually taking it. The realization that he wasn’t the only one noticing how lonely Sakura was did little to make him feel better. And she was lonely enough to be reading this? Despite the ridiculous cover he found himself intrigued, enough to flip it over and read the synopsis.

The snort of laughter that escaped him was completely out of his control. Sakura eyed him as she sat.

“Seriously Sakura,” he couldn't remember the last time something had been so hilarious, “this is terribly written. If you want something to read that will cheer you up I can help you there. The fiction side is my specialty after all.”
There. Now he was sure he had won, there was a blush dusting her cheeks as she slowly blinked at him.

“I guess you are the expert, but you don't…”

Kakashi stood up and interrupted her.

“Too late, I already have something in mind. I want you to have three of those locations picked out for scouting by the time I get back…”

He was already out the door, not missing the way her jaw dropped as he went. It was satisfying. Kakashi attributed that to nostalgia, teasing them as genin had always been a great source of amusement. It took precisely twenty seconds for him to locate the novel he had decided on. If he was right, it would be perfect for cheering her up. It had just the right amount of teasing slow build up, but the reward at the end was well worth it and well written.

Making his way around the rows of books the sound of the doors slamming a little louder than acceptable made Kakashi glance toward the entrance. Three young ninja had walked in, awkwardly supporting one of them so he could stand. Kakashi recognised him as Sakura's patient, the one they had used the acronym for. But there was no way he was fit to be released yet. Stealthily keeping out of sight, Kakashi watched them amble to the history section with a professional curiosity. Just what were these kids up to here? It was all a bit too suspicious to be coincidence.

Inwardly he debated approaching them directly. But Sakura had been right earlier, it was too risky to tip off whoever may be instigating the whole thing. More investigation was needed. Instead he wandered quietly over to the desk clerk, remaining unseen would work in his favour.

“Uh, excuse me…”

“Oh! Lord Sixth! Sorry I didn't see you there!”

Kakashi smiled as she bowed a little.

“What can I do for you?”

“Just after a little information if you can help me.”

“Of course sir, I'll do my best.”

He hated the sir. It made him feel ancient. During his sessions the doctor had suggested it went far deeper than that, and he just didn't feel worthy of the title.

“I was just wondering if it was common practice for the genin teams to be, how do the young ones put it, hanging out in the history section?”

She giggled before looking as though she was thinking about it. Kakashi wasn't so familiar with this clerk but she seemed efficient enough. She reminded him of Ayame in looks.

“Now that I think about it, they do seem to spend some time there. Only the boys mind you. Has to be at least twice a week I have to clean up the mess they've left behind…” she ended the sentence with a sigh.

“Mess?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Wrappers, cans, balled up paper. Boys will be boys I guess. I have told
them to clean up after themselves, and they are very quiet so that's good at least but they always leave something behind. They're not in trouble are they?"

The gears began to turn in Kakashi's head.

“Oh no, nothing like that. It's just refreshing to see young ones with a passion for books. You just leave this with me, I'll have a little chat with them about the mess. Don't trouble yourself…”

As she profusely thanked him, Kakashi had already zoned out a little. Forming a plan of sorts, it wasn't until he went to summon Pakkun that he realized there was a book in his hand. He smirked. This was going to be a fun week.

* * * *

It had been a couple minutes and Sakura was still staring, stunned, at the door. She really must be overtired, or frustrated, because her body and mind weren't acting as they should. She'd completely forgotten that book was also in her bag waiting to be returned. When she remembered it had been too late, but it was like her body hadn't even registered the embarrassment. Even with the questions he asked, and now he was actually finding her something to read.

Inwardly Sakura was completely shocked, and she guessed that was the reason why she reacted this way. Now she could feel the blush in full force. Maybe it was a good thing it had been such a delayed response, she’d handled the conversation quite well. Heck, they had both been laughing as if it were the most casual thing in the world to be talking about.

But he was still acting weird. And now she was too arguably. There was something off about Kakashi more than usual today. He'd been on his own a lot longer than she had been. So out of some kind of twisted sense of duty to the man who had saved her life a few times, she had decided to be nice.

So they were both a little frustrated with life. And lonely perhaps. It just made this project all the more worthwhile. So Sakura decided to enjoy the company at least while she could, even if it embarrassed her to death afterwards.

It was with that resolve that she turned her attention to her choices before her. Three scouting trips huh? Sakura decided on the ones she needed more information on, rather than the ones on the top of her list. Just as she was starting to wonder what he was up to, Kakashi re-entered the room. She hastily put together the three options to show him, but when she looked up she paused.

His face had completely changed again, that mischief in his eye from before had gone, replaced with concentration as he sat down across from her. The way he was glancing off at the door lead her to wonder if perhaps the situation had made him uncomfortable.

She exhaled, doing the only thing she could think of to put him at ease. Give him an out. Sakura cleared her throat.

“I picked some out sensei, but I don't like the idea of scouting them in the dark.”

It was as if he'd forgotten where he was for a moment. As Sakura watched his eyes shift focus she had to wonder at where his thoughts had drifted to.

“Right, good. Sorry, got lost in my own head again.”

Usually she'd have made a good natured jibe about aging taking its toll on him, but again she didn't feel like her usual self. And she was a little concerned at this sudden shift, she had liked hearing him
actually laugh for a change.

“**It’s fine, don’t apologize.**”

She smiled meekly and held out the papers for him to take. He surprised her again.

“**Swap you.**”

There was a book in his other hand. Sakura guessed she must have looked like a stunned animal at that moment. He took the papers and practically shoved the volume into her grasp, as Kakashi sat back in the chair going over her selection Sakura remained frozen. When she finally took a look at the thing he’d given her (that she was tentatively holding like a paper bomb) she was still too stunned to say anything.

How had this happened? Why was he being weird?

The book itself had a black cover with no picture and wasn’t overly thick with pages. But as soon as she caught sight of the title Sakura’s daze broke with a quickly stifled giggle.

“**The Passions of Alejandro?**”

“What was it you said about judging a book by it’s cover hmm?”

“Sorry sensei, couldn’t help it. I’ll just save this little treat for later then…”

She placed it in her satchel, at first she’d had no intention to read it and she was certainly busy enough to put it off. But there was a morbid curiosity growing for it now and she didn’t like that one bit.

“I’m kind of jealous, I wish I could relive the experience of reading that for the first time…”

“Oh, it’s an experience now is it?”

“Well, of course. Unlike that poor excuse for a book you were reading.”

He hadn’t looked at her once since handing it to her and the petulance in his voice was almost laughable.

“**Hay it wasn’t as if I chose it or anything, how was I to know it was terrible? The only things on my bookshelf are textbooks and journals.**”

“That sounds...depressing.”

“We don’t all have your refined tastes sensei.”

Now he peered at her over the paper with a quirked brow, she met it with one of her own. Kakashi made a little throat clearing noise and shuffled the papers again, Sakura couldn’t help smirking. All embarrassment forgotten she sat back as he considered the options.

“This is an interesting choice…”

He held up the picture of the abandoned manor house.

“I’m just not familiar with that specific place. It’s always been boarded up, I’d be able to decide better with all the facts.”
Kakashi had been staring at that page for a while with his brow furrowed, it was that same rigid look he’d had when Orochimaru’s hideout was mentioned. The medical professional inside Sakura was starting to wonder if he was actually ill, it would certainly answer for some of the weirdness.

“Well we’re definitely not scouting that in the dark. When are you next free during daylight hours?”

She had to think seriously for a second.

“Hopefully I’ll get a lunch break tomorrow?”

Placing the paper on the table he gave her a despondent look.

“Please tell me you actually take time off like your supposed to hmm?”

You’re one to talk. The thought crossed her mind but thankfully didn’t voice itself.

“Yeah, providing there aren’t any accidents or disasters. My next day off is Sunday…”

“Not what I meant exactly but okay. You know you’re required to take regular breaks throughout the day right?”

Sakura resisted the urge to roll her eyes, even if she understood his concern it was not necessary. Instead she just nodded and sighed a little.

“Good. I don’t really want to encroach on your day off, but we could always put in leave for you for a couple hours…”

“No, no Kakashi sensei, that won’t be necessary.” Sakura vaguely realized how earnest (and pathetic) she must sound and tried to remedy it unsuccessfully, “I’m not doing anything Sunday anyway so there’s nothing to intrude on. There is a major surgery happening next week and I want to prepare for it, but that’s all.”

“You know you work too much right?”

His voice was deadpan and Sakura felt an overwhelming need to tease back this time. She kept her face completely devoid of emotion.

“Right back at you.”

They regarded each other for all of five seconds with serious expressions before a low chuckle rumbled from him across the table and Sakura broke into a smile.

“Alright alright, I can take a hint. No more lecturing.” He stood and stretched. “Well, we’ll have more information once that report comes from Anbu. Then we can plan accordingly. I don’t think these three will require more than an hour or two to scope out… What have you got these out for by the way?”

He’d wandered to the end of the table where Sakura had stacked ten hefty reference books, mostly maps of Konoha past, he opened the cover of the one on top.

“Well, I was thinking more about the proposal to the council this afternoon. I wanted to see if there was precedence for a children’s hospital in Konoha, or even a clinic. But I didn't have much luck, it doesn't help that the village has been rebuilt so many times.”

Kakashi nodded and flicked a couple pages, tracing the paper with his fingers like he was taking a walk down the old streets with them. It was this expression that sent a red flag up in Sakura’s medic
mind, but she couldn’t exactly place why. He looked so forlorn it tugged at her chest to see it.

“I could have told you that. This will definitely be the first… Inside of Konoha anyway.”

He chirped up with his last sentence and pointed toward the door.

“What are you talking about? There’s another one…”

“…in the Sand Village, yeah. We do have a section dedicated to other villages, maybe we can find a layout?”

“Or some statistics in regards to their genin applicant numbers? They always have more than us right?”

Kakashi looked at her with a smile as he headed for the door.

“Bingo. Did I ever tell you that you were the smartest one…”

“Yeah yeah, stop buttering me up when we both know it was your idea.”

“Just leave the chairs where they are hmm? I had some explaining to do this morning and I’d rather not do it again.”

Shit.

Sakura had completely forgotten her intention to apologize, and now that he’d brought it up she was at a loss for words. Though she had made him dinner… but he’d bought her dinner twice. And she had been pretty nice to him (and by that she meant her fists had kept at her side and not on his face).

Shit. That wouldn’t do for an apology at all.

If Kakashi’s behaviour got weirder as they ambled over to the Sand Village section, Sakura did not notice. By the time they reached it she did notice that her face was pulsating and probably bright red. But it was now or never.

“Kakashi sensei?”

“Mmm?”

He turned to face her directly and they stood there in the narrow aisle.

“I wanted to say sorry, you know, for the whole chair thing. I don’t want to cause you extra trouble, especially since you’ve been so great about this…” she broadly gestured to the conference room. “Guess I was frustrated yesterday and…”

“Sakura.”

His almost whispered interruption caused her to freeze. But it was more the way his hand reached out and rested on her upper arm that made her entire being become tense. It was a reaction she would probably never be able to stop even if she wanted to. She watched his expression soften and tried to relax herself, but it only happened once he had dropped his hand.

“You never have to apologize to me, alright?”

When he didn’t elaborate any further and simply offered her what she considered a small smile (she could just make out the way his cheeks shifted underneath that damned mask), it sent her into a
downward thought spiral. Despite this she offered a sheepish upturn of her own lips and nodded. Kakashi went back to scanning shelves of books and scrolls.

Sakura thought on what he said for a while as she pretended to pay attention to what she was doing. It all boiled down to one thing, he still felt guilty about the whole Sasuke thing. It bothered her in an instant but as she watched him from the corner of her eye, another nagging voice in her head would not stifle itself.

He was acting weird. He is on his own a lot. He never looked happy whenever she saw him in that office. Something was indeed up with him, and the caring part of Sakura wished he would take it a little easier on himself. Tsunade had never wholly blamed herself for the state of things like Kakashi did, it wasn’t healthy, at least not in Sakura’s opinion.

It was that moment that she made a conscious decision to undertake a mission, of sorts, on her own. Even if it made her even more flustered, and possibly insane, she would do her utmost to see him cheerful again. And potentially get him to see just how great a Hokage he really was. What he desperately needed was a check up…. And she would force him to if need be.

“Are you having any luck over there?”

Sakura almost startled at his voice.

“Hmm? Oh, no. Not really. There’s a lot of schooling stuff over here though.”

Momentarily she scanned the shelf in front, her whole body jolted when she heard his voice much closer than before.

“The genin stats should be around here somewhere then.”

Sakura spied something potentially helpful higher up.

“Maybe this will…”

Stretching as far as her arms would let her Sakura only just managed to touch her fingers to the spine. When she stood on tiptoes she did manage to hook her fingers around the base of the book, intending to flick it out and into an easier position to grab. But she froze again, feeling a shiver run up from the bottom of her spine to her shoulders, and it had nothing to do with being cold. Kakashi had removed her hand from the book, holding it briefly in his before dropping it and pulling the volume out with ease.

“I got it.”

She heard him mumble. The veritable glare he shot at her from the corner of his eye did little to relieve the tension in Sakura's shoulders. Now she felt sunburnt on her cheeks to add to it all. Kakashi stood back and flicked the first few pages open before snapping it shut.

“This'll work.”

Sakura nodded with a meek smile and looked up to find him watching her with an unimpressed gaze and a raised eyebrow. Like he was waiting for something.

“Do I… frighten you or something?”

His question stirred her back to life.
“No, of course not Kakashi sensei.”

“If you don't mind me asking, what is it then? You’re so tense…”

Sakura considered her answer but could see no reason not to tell him the truth behind it.

“I'm just… not used to physical contact that's all. Sometimes when I'm not expecting it my body reacts weirdly. I'm aware of it but it doesn't make it any easier to stop from happening.”

She watched his features soften. If anyone else had asked her that, or touched her without permission, she'd have likely smacked them in the face. That kind of contact she had no trouble initiating. But the fact that Kakashi assumed it was because she was scared of him, and he was still Hokage as well, meant he was safe from her fists. For the moment at least.

He made a kind of exasperated exhaling sound, still regarding her with a soft expression, before both his eyebrows raised. Still managing to look bored despite the glimmer of cheek in his eye. The pause before he spoke suggested he wasn't entirely sure on what he was about to say. He leaned nonchalantly against the shelf.

“Been a while huh?”

The insinuation was dripping through that dulcet voice of his. Sakura was completely gobsmacked. Her jaw dropped and to make matters worse he just sighed and straightened himself, eyeing her open mouth. Her whole body felt sunburnt now as she began to shake her head Sakura swore she heard him almost giggle.

“Yeah, me too.”

Maybe she would need to punch him.

He definitely chuckled as he tucked the book under his arm and stepped slowly out of her reach. He was looking at the shelves but Sakura guessed he probably expected to be hit in the face. Sadist. Maybe being nice to him on her little side mission wasn't necessary at all…

“Well at least we found something here to start with. I can always speak to the Kazekage when I see him next week.”

Sakura was still staring at him dumbfounded and unable to process this interaction. It was starting to become a nightly occurrence with Kakashi, she certainly remembered being confused and frustrated a lot when she was younger, but she'd always blamed that on Naruto and Sasuke. Maybe Kakashi had been the root cause of it all along and she'd never spent enough time with him alone to figure it out.

Sakura shook her head a little violently as if to restart her brain.

Been a while huh. Of course she knew what he meant. And it bothered her that he was right as well. Crafty indeed. So it had been two years since she’d been with anyone. So what? She was a busy professional who had a career and goals to pursue… What was his excuse anyway?

Her mind still in a jumble, when she finally got the gall up to bite back at his impertinent remark, Kakashi was already on his way back to the conference room. Sakura had to walk briskly to catch up.

When she did the sly bastard beat her to the punch.
“So, how long?”

“How long what?”

She was too surprised to put any kind of maliciousness in her tone.

“How long have you been, frazzled, was it?”

Oh hell no. He was really going there. The strategic part of Sakura’s mind dusted itself off and made
the decision for her.

Two can play at this game.

Sakura would put money on the fact that he was probably expecting her to overreact, punch him, or
become so embarrassed she would just stop functioning altogether. She didn’t feel like giving him
the satisfaction. What was it with all men (or at least all the men she knew well) and this strange urge
they felt to tease?

“Two years, maybe. I was pretty drunk the last time.”

At this point he was holding the door open to the conference room as she walked past him. Watching
her with narrowed eyes, Sakura used every ounce of control she had to keep a straight face. Which
was hard to do when he followed her in and made another chuckling noise.

“I’m glad my pain amuses you.”

“Oh no, nothing like that, I’m just pleased I picked out the right book for you that’s all.”

Sakura sat at the table and quietly sighed. How was this conversation even happening? She had
obviously been spending too much time alone if she was sad enough to continue it. There was still a
chance that she could get a little revenge though.

“So how long is a while for you sensei?”

He thumped the book down onto the table, likely dropping it in surprise at her turning the tables on
him, it almost distracted her from the pained look on his face.

“I guess I brought this on myself huh.”

“Mmhmm.” Sakura nodded and crossed her arms. Gleaming a little satisfaction in the way he
crumpled into the chair.

Kakashi held up a hand and hung his head a fraction. Sakura caught the hint that he wanted this
conversation to stop. Or at least she thought she had.

“Oh so it’s okay for you to ask inappropriate questions because you’re a man, but when a woman
does it…”

He shook his head quickly and held his hand up higher, slightly flexing his fingers.

“No, that's my answer.”

Sakura stared at the digits with narrowed eyes and a raised brow.

“Five what? Hours? That's hardly a while…”
“What?” He pulled his hand back like it was burnt and she was so satisfied at the way his voice cracked just a little bit. “Years Sakura, years. Just how much time do you think I have in a day?”

Sakura smiled with a silent chuckle, he was definitely regretting it now. Mission accomplished. It also erased one of her earlier theories about where he disappeared to on that last Thursday of the month.

Sakura forced a pained expression, trying not to burst into laughter.

“Five years sensei, that's rough. Guess that's why you spend so much time reading then huh?”

Kakashi pinched the bridge of his nose looking a little like he was wounded. She was sure she'd won, without a doubt.

“Learnt your lesson?”

“Yeah yeah. No more inappropriate questions, I got it. I can't believe I even asked it in the first place to be honest. Maybe I am going senile.”

Sakura couldn't contain her laughter anymore at that and it hit her in waves. Tears flooded her vision for a moment but she didn't miss the slow shift of his mask in a begrudging smile.

“Oh, no it isn’t. But your face was hilarious.”

*K ***

Kakashi was now facing another problem that was entirely of his own making.

But at least this one, although completely at his expense, was bringing some small joy to Sakura. And as he sat there, a part of him really enjoyed seeing the animated person that he knew her to be, spring to life again. So he smiled and swallowed what little was left of his pride.

Whatever had possessed him to say such a thing in the first place, and send the entire conversation into the gutter, he blamed on the Doctor’s advice. This was what happened when he tried to talk to people more. Sakura wiped a tear from her cheek, maybe it wasn’t totally a bad thing, but she was right in that it was absolutely one hundred percent inappropriate. He should really try and get things back on track even if he didn’t altogether want to.

“You finished yet?”

Kakashi couldn’t help laughing a little himself as he said it, trying unsuccessfully to disguise it by clearing his throat.

“Yeah, thanks for that by the way sensei, I haven’t laughed like that in ages.”

“My pleasure. I’ll deny that this conversation ever happened, just so you’re aware.”

“Ditto.”

Kakashi smirked, enjoyed one last glimpse of her flushed and smiling face, and opened the damned book in front of him that had started this whole thing. Scanning the index he was momentarily distracted when Sakura stood and leant across the table to take a look herself.

“That does look promising, but without specifics on when the Sand’s hospital opened how will any
of it be useful?”

How she went from hysterical laughter to complete professional in two seconds flat was beyond him. Though he was extremely grateful for it.

“Well, I think I’ll know it when I find it. Even if we just use the most recent genin statistics compared with our own it should suffice, the more numbers we have to throw at them the better… If there’s one thing the council listens to, it’s numbers.”

Sakura exhaled a little loudly and snapped back to her chair before speaking.

“Well, I think I’ll know it when I find it. Even if we just use the most recent genin statistics compared with our own it should suffice, the more numbers we have to throw at them the better… If there’s one thing the council listens to, it’s numbers.”

“Would they listen to case studies?”

He looked up at her again to see her rifling through one of the many piles of books she had surrounding her. Withdrawing a manilla folder and handing it out for him to take. It was a substantial report, what surprised him more was that the whole folder was based on one child.

“Sakura there’s a lot of work in this, when did you…?”

She answered while rifling through other stacks for something else.

“I’ve been writing that one up for a while. The child’s guardians agreed to let me compile everything for a case study, and as his doctor I made sure to keep it all pertinent. Shizune has checked it herself… I have one more somewhere here…”

Kakashi flicked through a few pages but could not bring himself to read it thoroughly. This kid had been through some hefty trauma, comparable to his own, perhaps not as extensive though. Closing the file he placed it near Sakura, offering her what he hoped was a reassuring smile that didn’t give away the sudden downturn his thoughts had taken. She paused and smiled back.

“It’s perfect. How many more of those do you think you could get permission for?”

Her smile grew wider.

“Half a dozen, more if I tell Shizune what it’s for.”

“The more the better. Tell you what, you leave these genin statistics to me and I’ll speak with Lord Gaara next week about taking a peak at their hospital plans. For now I think it would be best for you to concentrate on those case studies and not spread yourself too thinly. We’ll look at the sites again once we have that Anbu report. Sound alright?”

Sakura’s expression remained the same, and the speed of her reply reassured him. Strategy was always one of his strengths anyway.

“Sounds like a plan. You leave the medical stats to me, and I’ll leave the boring parts to you.”

Kakashi made some kind of amused grunt that sort of left his body before he could stop it. Boring indeed. If she had any idea how he spent the rest of his day she’d know that this was a walk in the park.

“You aren’t hiding anymore folders, or books, that will unsettle me further right?”

Sakura looked at him with confusion before he elaborated.

“You’ve surprised me twice tonight,” he pointed toward the case study and to the pocket he held that ridiculous book inside of it, “I’m not sure I can handle anymore.”
There was a pause before she broke into a smile again and Kakashi continued to wonder, in the back of his mind, just why he was finding it easier to talk to her of all people. Earlier embarrassment aside he was finding this whole project with her to be more enjoyable that he had anticipated.

Sakura chuckled a little.

“No I’m not hiding anything Kakashi sensei, I promise. You’re getting more fragile the closer you get to forty I’ve noticed, wouldn’t want to unsettle you…”

“I like to think I’m aging more like a fine wine thank you very much…”

The doors to the conference room opened just a fraction in Kakashi’s peripheral vision, there was only the faintest crack as they shut again. Pakkun sat himself up on the chair at the end of the table, placing his paws on the surface. Sakura didn’t seem to notice him until he actually made noise. Kakashi took note that at least his summons stealth skills were not as rusty as his own.

“Hey Sakura.”

“Oh, hi Pakkun, long time no see.”

There was a pause and the pug directed his attention back to Kakashi.

“They’re on the move Boss.”

He had figured as much with the dog’s appearance.

“Want me to tail them?”

Sakura’s face shot between the two of them with a mild kind of nervousness which he recognized. Her tone of voice was resolute though and ready for action.

“Something happen sensei?”

“Oh, no need for that Pakkun. They aren’t running and it’s not like we don’t know where they’re going anyway. Everything is fine Sakura, just a small matter I promised to attend to personally, so I’m afraid that’s it for tonight.”

He stood, offering what he hoped was a reassuring smile, enough to put her at ease at least. It seemed to do the trick and she softened in her reply.

“Alright. Thank you Kakashi sensei,” her eyes flicked to Pakkun and back to him, “and please don’t do anything reckless? I don’t want to have to treat you in the hospital tomorrow. I’m still recovering after that chaos yesterday…”

“Yes, yeah. I got it.” He cast an eye over the table, “I don’t feel right leaving you with this all to put away though.”

“What do you mean? Of course you’re fine with skipping out on the clean up…”

Pakkun huffed in amusement and Kakashi shot him a glare.

“That may be true. Here.”

Kakashi pulled a key from his pocket and tossed it toward Sakura. She caught it and eyed him suspiciously.
“What is this?”

“It’s a key to this conference room. What I should have said before was that I didn’t feel right with you taking all this home.”

“You’ve got to be joking. What if they need the room for something? I can’t just leave it all in here.”

Kakashi smirked and pointed a thumb to himself.

“Hokage, remember? And I already checked, they don’t need the room at all, we can use this as a base of operations in the meantime. So you can just go home and relax.”

The way Sakura spoke after that, it was almost as if he had offended her, or told her to go home and do something unspeakable. Truthfully, he wanted her to rest, and to keep her work life out of her home. Judging by the brief look at that case study she had already spent more of her time after hours working than she should. It just wouldn’t do.

“It’s fine Kakashi sensei, really, I can handle it. There isn’t anything else I have to do…”

He took his chance, even if he was possibly risking bodily harm.

“I forbid it. I wasn’t kidding about sending you on those D-ranks with Naruto. Besides, you have some other reading to do at home, right?”

His eyes suggestively flicked over to her satchel and the book she had stashed in there earlier. The smirk on his face gave away the smug feeling he held at the way she’d been stunned into silence. Sakura finally gave one sharp nod of her head and blushed a little.

“Good. Ready Pakkun?”

“You got it boss.”

Kakashi made to follow the pug out the door, before leaving he looked back to her.

“Oh, and Sakura…”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for dinner.”

It was only when her face broke into a smile again that he felt happy enough to leave her.

Chapter End Notes

You'll find 5 more chapters of this on ff.net btw. For I am an old lady who cannot use the interwebs correctly and AO3 still baffles me. (maybe I'm just stupid, who knows)
Chapter Four

Sakura had never been so glad to get up for work in all her entire career, she hadn’t even counted the hours sleep that were missed. Throwing herself into the shower bang on 5am she felt her mind turning over, again and again and again... Just as it had done the night before. But it wasn’t for any kind of sane reasons.

As soon as Kakashi had disappeared that night her smile had faded into mild annoyance, he was acting weirder and weirder by the day. And now he hadn’t allowed her to take home the one distraction that she wanted to throw all her time into. As she’d plodded (stomped with questionable force) home the feeling had morphed into a kind of unsettling worry. He was just acting so strangely.

By the time she had actually set foot in her apartment her thoughts had shifted again. It had been while washing the containers from dinner that it struck her. The memory of his face when the tables had been turned on him. And suddenly she was laughing, proper belly shaking laughter too. These kinds of mood swings she vaguely recognized as being a sign of some sociopathic disorders, but she just blamed the weirdness. It was catching.

Sakura now towelled herself off, wrapping her hair in the customary way before heading back to the bedroom.

Eyeing the source of her churning mind with all the venom she could muster.

It had been nothing to do with the previous night’s interaction, and all its strangeness. In fact, aside from that moment while she’d been washing up, she hadn’t thought too much more about it. She couldn’t. Her mind had been in a completely different place.

*It was all that stupid books fault.*

It had fallen out of her satchel when the containers were removed. Lying in wait for her on the kitchen table until the moment she turned around from that sink.

Sakura blamed the good mood she had found herself in at that moment, the after effects of too much laughter. It had fallen out at such an angle that it was open to one of the pages… She didn’t mean to read it. It was just a small glimpse as she’d passed by.

But that was all it took.

Now she was stuck. She’d had to physically remove herself from it sometime after midnight, and she was only a third of the way through. It was twisted, but it had only taken one chapter to get her thoroughly hooked. Sakura had huddled on the couch unable to put it down until she forced herself to. And then somehow it had followed her to the bedroom and she’d spent another hour wrestling with just one more paragraph, one more page... one more chapter.

Dressed and ready Sakura began repacking her satchel with vigour as it sat on the kitchen table. Her hand itching to pack the damned thing, not to return it of course, but maybe in her break she could...

No. This was ridiculous. How could such a thing have a hold on her? It wasn't even that good, she conceded however that it was well written, but they weren't even touching each other yet. And she'd consumed a sizeable chunk of it, there was no touching, no kissing, no talking about how the characters even felt about each other. It was maddening. Just lingering looks and tension, Sakura wasn't even sure how you could write tension but it was palpable. And it was infuriating. What was with the intensity of the plot? All they needed to do was get down to business but they weren't.
Sakura pushed down a thought that told her that's what she probably needed as well.

Ignoring her *depressing* urges, she left and made it to her office in record time. Without the book. A single thought ran through her mind like a mantra the whole way.

*Kakashi must never know.*

She would never live it down.

Before she could even consider how to avoid the topic from arising, *ever,* an out of breath nurse burst through her door and the day started with a bang. Several bangs actually. There had been some ancient unmarked paper bombs explode in one of the new expansion areas of the village. It had taken out a few construction workers with minor injuries. Thank goodness the potency of the bombs wore off with time, it had only been enough to burn them, with a couple of broken bones.

Sakura spent that morning tending to them, and after seeing to each one, she walked away with a little more knowledge on the trade. Nothing substantial, but a few pieces to stash away in the back of her mind until she would be in need of it. By lunch she had shut herself in her office with half a mind to contact Kakashi about it. The gist being, construction workers were in high demand *and* there was even more of a shortage after today. Or that’s what she had gleaned at least. It could delay their plans in any case...

*That's right, Kakashi...*

She had no idea what had actually happened the night before after he’d left, if it were serious she hadn't heard anything. Part of her had been keeping a sly ear to the ground for any information, but no news was good news.

With a sigh Sakura shifted the neat and tidy pile of paperwork on her desk to the side so she could eat her lunch while working. Usually this was time she'd use to further her case studies or plans for the children’s hospital, but all of her research was locked in the library. Reluctantly she had to admit, he had a point, and it had shaken her more than she cared to admit. She did spend every minute working and it *wasn’t* healthy, she knew that as a healthcare professional… but still. It was a hard habit to break. It almost felt as if taking that short break from the world as she knew it, in reading that *stupid book* last night, made it unrecognizable to her when she resurfaced. Like it had eased her a little, and now she didn’t so much mind wandering in her own thoughts. Something that had terrified her before.

But damned if she would *ever* let him know that.

When she considered thanking him for the brief reprieve of her own thoughts something stopped her. Maybe she would wait until she’d finished it… She was only a third of the way through after all, who knows what could happen and she might not want to thank him afterward if it ended badly.

Oh she *really* needed to get home to finish it.

Another sigh and she flicked on the computer that sat on her desk gathering dust. The whole hospital wasn’t quite as technologically advanced as Hokage tower yet, but the directors had all been hooked up to the system. Sakura only checked it once or twice a day, there was nothing so urgent that she couldn’t get from the charts she kept at hand. It was when she had taken a rather large bite of sandwich and skimmed one of the discharge summaries from the night before that she heard the little *ping* noise.

There was a message waiting for her.
While this was not unusual in itself, the red markers that flagged it as important was certainly not an everyday thing. Only important documents or urgent mission reports warranted that kind of stamp on them.

*Direct from the Hokage’s office.*

Sakura swallowed the large mouthful in one go, coughing a little and having to reach for the bottle of water beside her. Why was he messaging her?

She remembered the day that Shikamaru had installed the small computer on Kakashi’s desk, and how much her former sensei had *loathed* it. While he couldn’t deny that change was inevitable and not always a bad thing, he was certainly more of a paper and print kind of person, at least Sakura thought so. When she’d dropped her reports in on that day it was one of the few times she’d actually heard him swearing, the thought made her smile, but it disappeared just as quickly as the memory.

If he was messaging her using that computer something serious must have happened.

She opened it with trepidation forgetting the reports on her desk for a moment.

It was short and to the point.

So short that she blinked several times and scanned the screen to see if she had missed anything.

’S

A friendly reminder that you should be taking a break about now.

K’

The man was exasperating. As if she couldn’t take care of herself? Sakura let out a loud exhale in frustration. *This. This* was the weird behaviour that she couldn’t quite understand. She wanted to believe it was out of misguided concern but she still had a funny feeling it was all based in guilt. First about the whole Sasuke thing and now for the inappropriate questions the night before. But she still knew nothing about him, and in that moment she remembered her side mission. He was lonely, like her, and needed some kind of cheering up. Every medical bone in her body was telling her that something was going on with him. Why else would he be acting so strangely?

At least now she knew he hadn’t gotten into trouble last night. Maybe that’s why he sent it in the first place, why hadn’t he just come straight out with it?. Sakura smiled and fashioned a reply.

‘Kakashi,

*Congratulations on figuring out how to use your computer. Also I am a grown woman and I don’t need a man to tell me what to do.*

*What do you want for dinner?*

*Sakura*

She hit send before she could overthink it, because that’s what would happen. At least when she’d penned letters to Sasuke there had been time to think as she wrote, but thinking too much wasn’t always a good thing, at least with how her thoughts were scattered lately.

As she downed the rest of her lunch with a flourish there was no *ping* of a reply, but she didn’t exactly expect one immediately, it probably took him all morning to figure out how to send it in the
first place. So Sakura donned her white coat again and went back into the trenches, though after actual war this seemed like nothing. And no matter how bored she got sometimes, she would always be grateful for that. She could always find something to keep her busy.

Thankfully, for the rest of the afternoon at least, there was not one thought of the stupid book which was waiting for her at home. It was just before five, and Sakura was hanging her white coat back in her office before the book came to mind suddenly. She was appreciative that it hadn’t plagued her thoughts for the entire day as well as night.

A blinking red light caught her eye. The computer needed to be shut off.

Briefly checking her empty inbox with a huff, Sakura hit the power button with more force than necessary. Of course he wouldn’t reply. Picking up the dark blue reports she finally left, deciding that Kakashi could just find his own dinner that night. Her resolve strengthened on her walk to Hokage tower. Sakura had originally planned on heading home before the library, it was on the way anyway, and quickly throwing dinner together. For the both of them. But she could just as easily throw down a snack and be on her way.

The offices inside the tower were empty, a few clerks flitted around the place, Sakura nodded to Shikamaru as he left with a wave. She found the doors to Kakashi’s office wide open, and the man conspicuously absent. Again. She shook her head, maybe he had simply been unable to reply to her message. With a small sigh she went to dump the average sized folder into the tray, but stopped completely.

There was an envelope pegged to the front. With her name written on it.

Placing the folder inside and carefully pulling the envelope free (as if it might explode), Sakura looked around before she opened it, years of watching Naruto’s pranks made her decidedly uneasy.

’S

Your compliments on my computer usage were premature.’

She looked up and scanned the desk to see that the whole device had actually been removed. He really wasn’t kidding, she stifled a laugh and kept reading.

’Chef’s choice is fine with me.

K’

Something was scribbled hastily underneath that made her squint.

’Meet me in the history section’

As many times as she read the scribble, that was all the sentence could possibly be. But it didn’t make a lot of sense. Too bad Shikamaru had already left.

Still, she found herself leaving the tower with a smile, already planning a meal in her head with a spring in her step.

* * * *

Everything was going according to plan.

Of course he expected it to, there wasn’t that much to it, but the fact that it had all come together so
perfectly and to the very last detail was encouraging. Especially when he considered that there hadn’t been much time involved.

Kakashi shifted his weight as he stood, leaning against the wall in the corner. It had been chosen as the optimal viewing point. From here he held perfect vantage of not only the entrance to the library down below the mezzanine, but the history section directly ahead, and the conference room doors to the far right.

While he was paying attention to his surroundings there was also a book in one hand which he lazily skimmed. It was that utterly ridiculous book of Sakura’s. It just seemed to defy the odds and become more ridiculous with each page yet there was no actual plot involved. He had been correct in his original assumption. It was smut, plain and simple. And it wasn’t even good. Anytime the characters came to a decision about anything, or solved some minor issue, they were on each other. He could see exactly why Sakura had been so tense at any kind of contact if this was what she had been reading, heck even he was cringing at the idea of it.

This book made sex seem like a chore. Or some kind of twisted sense of duty. Smut should be the reward for well based plot and character development. It was just all wrong for her, there was no build up or anticipation. Kakashi smirked, he had most definitely chosen the right book to cheer her up with and it pleased him excessively. Although he made a mental note that this was probably not a healthy reaction.

That whole day he’d been chirpier than usual actually, and he could only attribute it to this project, it was the only different factor in his life at the moment. It beguiled him as to why though. His previous projects, this library included, had offered the same feeling but it was decidedly less so.

In a moment of nostalgia, Kakashi watched the genin team slink off to the small table by the history section. He couldn’t altogether picture his own students being so...small. His smirk grew. It was almost showtime. If he had timed this correctly then in approximately two minutes Sakura would be arriving.

This was going to be interesting.

When a glimpse of pink finally entered his peripheral Kakashi straightened and pocketed the book. The last thing he wanted was for her to catch him reading it, he might just go into cardiac arrest if they were to repeat last night’s conversation. Deciding to remain unseen, Kakashi meandered around the rows of books out of sight. Only stopping briefly when Sakura’s face came into view, a week ago he’d known no different, but today she actually looked content. Her smile wasn’t forced, she wasn’t spending every waking minute working on or in the hospital, it suited her.

Kakashi watched her reaction as she reached the conference room to find it unlocked, her pink hair shifted and she stilled, like the kunoichi was expecting him to be right behind her. Physical contact issues huh. She shook her head and entered, depositing the bags she had with her.

Two years isn’t that long... It didn’t escape him that this had occurred after the break up with Sasuke. If it was physical contact that she needed to stop her turning into a less jaded version of himself, Kakashi did not relish the idea of her forming his worst habit. Getting drunk and falling into bed with someone was not the kind of intimacy that could be sustained, or keep anyone satisfied for any length of time. But short of setting her up on blind dates, and he shuddered to think on what her reaction to that would be, there wasn’t anything he could offer to help.

Maybe through this project he could make sure she was at least on the right track. Maybe she would see that she deserved better. The book was a good start, it was certainly better than the drivel she had been reading.
Sakura had rounded the corner and approached the history section, scanning the aisles as she went. It wasn’t until she stopped moving that Kakashi deemed it appropriate to be seen. Tapping her lightly on the shoulder, but instead of going tense (or punching him thankfully) Sakura whirled around and smiled up at him.

“Yo.”

“There you are Kakashi sensei, I half expected this to be one of Naruto’s pranks…”

“I thought he’d grown out of that?”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed.

“When Hinata’s around maybe…”

“I see. Well this is no prank, I assure you. Bet you’re wondering why I asked you to meet here though.”

She nodded, he smirked.

*Show time.*

“Don’t give our position away just yet, but if you were to look to the right at the end of this row,” when he pointed that way her eyes followed the direction, “you will find three very average genin pouring over the historical archives, newspapers to be more specific.”

Sakura raised a brow and regarded him with confusion.

“One of them you might recognize…”

Kakashi nodded, she caught the hint and moved silently to the end of the aisle. Pulling a mirror from one of her pockets and taking a quick look. He watched her head shoot up in recognition before she returned to stand beside him.

“That’s…”

“Your patient, yes. SCRI was it? Do you recognize the others as well?”

She nodded yes, her brow furrowed.

“What’s…”

Knowing she would likely hit him for interrupting her, not just once but *twice* now, Kakashi decided to risk it.

“What’s a bunch of kids doing knocking around the history section? That’s exactly what I thought last night when I came across them. Certainly got me curious, and having been a teenage boy myself long ago I figured they would likely be up to no good. So I kept an eye on them, and you’ll never guess what they are looking at over there…”

Sakura was eying him with equal parts of confusion and irritation. In an attempt to divert the possible wrath he was incurring, Kakashi held up the paper for her to see herself.

“Naruto?”

“Yup, our very own knuckle headed ninja.”
She took the newspaper page and scanned it before looking up at him utterly bewildered.

“You’re not making a lot of sense here, sensei. Why would they be….”

Kakashi took pleasure in watching the light sparkle of her eyes as she finally caught on. With the slightest of gasps she put her other hand to her mouth. He took her stunned silence as the cue to continue.

“I have it on good authority that they aren’t looking at just *any* old picture of Naruto they can get their hands on…”

He tapped the point of the picture where Naruto’s hands were connected, making the signs for his signature jutsu.

“This. This is how they’re learning it! Those morons! They aren’t even worthy of the word moron…..”

Kakashi held his hands up and gestured for her to lower her voice before he realized that he might actually be in the line of fire as well. Another diversion was necessary.

“Apparently so. They weren’t exactly clever about it either, from what they left behind last night I gather they have only managed half the signs for the jutsu. Thankfully Naruto is skilled enough not to need all of them. But that doesn’t seem to stop these guys from trying.”

“This is nonsense. Don’t they realize how much damage they can cause to their chakra networks? It’s *so* dangerous, *so* reckless…”

“Yes I have to agree with you there. Though the clerk was not as understanding when I ordered to have the specific volumes removed from the system completely…”

In an instant he watched the anger on her features completely disappear and replace itself with something he wasn’t so familiar with in her adult form.

“You mean…”

“Of course I had to have them removed, they are now located in a secure location. Except this one here.” He tapped the paper that was still in her grasp. “It took the clerk and I a few hours to find everything but I’m certain we got it all. Though she now claims to need that conference room back by tomorrow so I don’t think she’s entirely pleased with me…”

The sizeable grin on Sakura’s face was also something he was sure he hadn’t seen in quite some time. *Years* even.

“Kakashi sensei! You have no idea… You’ve just *single handedly* saved us *so much time*....”

Reaching up to scratch his head in the usual fashion Kakashi couldn’t help smiling himself.

“Now now, it wasn’t just me, the clerk certainly played a part in this. Though it’s…not quite finished with yet.” He watched her grin falter just a little but it would only be for a moment. “While I’ve taken care of all the rest, I thought perhaps, as their main healthcare provider, you might like to be the one to break the news to the *morons*...”

He *swore* that he heard just the faintest of squeals before suddenly the wind was knocked out of him. But not because of bodily harm, which was the usual culprit, this was from a completely foreign source to him.
Still clinging to the newspaper, he could hear it crinkle as Sakura threw her arms around his middle in the tightest hug he’d ever received. Not that he had a particularly large frame of reference when it came to hugs, she certainly had a tighter hold than the last time Guy had squeezed him. It didn’t last for so long though, she released him before standing back, not registering the mild unease he felt.

“Thank you thank you thank you!”

She repeated it so quickly and an amused kind of grunt escaped him.

“I told you to leave it with me, hmm? Now off you go, just remember you’re a healer, so if you break any bones at least make sure no one can tell who did it later.”

Watching her with a smile, Sakura nodded before her features morphed into what Kakashi knew to be the kind that Naruto had been on the receiving end of a few times. Right before he was blown out of the next window. He closed his eyes with a quiet chuckle to himself.

The next words out of Sakura’s mouth almost winded him again.

“You do realize that every nurse in Konoha will be lining up to kiss you now right?”

He coughed as if choking on the air for a second, Sakura giggled.

“I don’t know about that, it does sound infinitely better than Guy’s taijutsu squad though...”

There was a distinctive eye roll, which forced Kakashi into an involuntary flashback, before she made a show of stretching her arms.

“Allright, show time sensei?”

“You got it.”

* * * *

Sakura shut the doors to the conference room with a flourish, stretching her arms above her head and feeling the satisfying pop of her joints. Working out her frustrations on those genin had done wonders for her mood. She sat herself at the middle of the table and sighed in contentment.

“All finished then?”

Kakashi had been lazily leaning back on the chair opposite her, the book on the Sand village’s genin statistics propped up in his lap. He didn’t look up from it as she replied.

“Yes, we came to a mutual understanding.”

“Understanding huh?”

Sakura smirked.

“Yes, they understand that if they do anything even remotely moronic again, they will be answering to me, and I won’t be holding back.”

Kakashi looked up and gave a kind of huff in amusement, Sakura smiled sweetly.

“If it were up to me alone then they would be stripped of their headbands for their idiocy, and I’d send them back to the academy. But as it stands, we get fewer graduates each year... Well you know all about that actually.”
He flicked his eyes from her to the pile of papers and folders before them. She had reorganized them the night before just after he’d left. Sakura made some kind of unintelligible hum of agreement while she prepared to start on the roster she’d tentatively worked on in her head earlier that day.

“Did you decide on their punishment yet?”

As Kakashi asked her, Sakura found the muscles in her face were starting to ache from smiling so much.

“Well, it was a toss up between a month’s worth of Inuzuka dog washing, walking and cleaning up the compound. Or fertilizing the medicinal herbs field with manure, daily, for the next two months. But for the moment I’m making them wait until I decide. The anticipation should make it worse for them right?”

The last question was rhetorical, there was a proper smile on his face now and Sakura could see it. Only because it changed the look of him so completely, even with that mask on. When he laughed quietly she started questioning her methods.

“You think that’s going too easy on them then?”

“Oh, no. Quite the opposite, I think it’s perfect. I’m a little proud actually that my methods are being passed on to the next generation.”

Sakura laughed a little, but it faded when she remembered the more outrageous punishments he’d doled out when they were younger. It seemed like a lifetime ago. When she looked over Kakashi was regarding her closely, he made that throat clearing noise again and averted his eyes like he hadn’t realized he’d been doing it. He shifted the book from his lap to the table with a soft thud, his eyes back to scanning the pages.

He was being weird again. But at this point, she honestly just didn’t care. Having those stupid genin dealt with meant a huge workload had been lifted from the shoulders of herself and her staff. Nothing was going to burst this happy bubble for a while anyway. And at least Kakashi seemed to be cheerful, so she was definitely not going to worry for the moment.

“Don’t you think it’s a little over zealous to manure the herbs that much?”

Sakura just about snorted, Kakashi seemed dead set on keeping his eyes on that book now though.

“I’m sure I can find other gardens for them to see to. I take it that’s your pick of the two?”

His smile had returned, and he gave a short nod, not looking up.

“I will take that under advisement Lord Hokage.”

Sakura was then too busy scrutinizing the roster to notice much else. This was what usually happened to her when she was deep in something, the world became a very narrow window. It was a great thing when she needed to avoid seeing or feeling other things, and when she finished what she was doing a brilliant wave of tiredness would hit and she could avoid it a little longer.

Most of the time this worked well, *most of the time*. It was, however, not usual for her to have someone else around when this happened. The day before Sakura had made up some coloured cards to categorize staff specifically, it was about the time she was rearranging them on the table for the third time that something else finally caught her attention.

“What?”
She looked up to find Kakashi absent from his chair, instead he was standing near the end of the table, genin statistics in one hand and a folder in the other. He looked at her incredulously.

“Welcome back.”

“What do you mean welcome back, I haven’t been anywhere...”

“Sakura, I asked you a question an hour ago.”

“Oh, really? Is it that late?”

Kakashi shook his head a little.

“Not late, but getting there...” he sighed.

“Sorry, guess I got lost in my own head.”

Sakura had used his own words against him with a soft chuckle, though he didn't appear amused.

“What has you so enthralled anyway?”

Kakashi moved back to his original chair, casting an eye over her work as he sat.

“Well, I was thinking today about the council proposal, and I'm concerned about the budget. Especially when it comes to staffing. So I've been working around the idea of turning this into a teaching hospital of sorts... With the capacity to borrow a few interns from the main hospital on a regular basis...”

“Extra hands without the cost, nice thinking Sakura. That will definitely go down well.”

She tried to ignore the compliment but might have blushed just a little.

“Well, it's an idea anyway. I'm not sure exactly how it will work. But I didn't see Shizune today to confirm further case studies so it's about all I can do...”

Kakashi gave a frustrated sigh.

“Yeah and without that Anbu report requisition being approved we can't plan to scout the hideout either. Sorry, I had hoped to have that by tonight at least.”

Sakura recognized it again, the way his whole countenance shifted at just the mention of that hideout. She wasn't sure why, but now more than ever she felt the need to reassure him. After telling herself she wouldn't let her bubble of happiness burst tonight, now she was worried. A week ago she could have ignored it and continued to work, but not after tonight and the effort he'd put in to lift a weight from her shoulders. And then there was last night and that stupid book... Perhaps it was because she'd started thinking about the night before, and the way they'd been able to talk casually after those inappropriate questions. But Sakura decided just to ask and be done with it.

“Kakashi sensei, if you don't mind me asking, is there something about that hideout that you're not telling me?”

He jerked his head up to look at her.

“No, of course not. I wouldn't have suggested it as a location if that were the case. Why do you ask?”
“Well, every time it comes up, you go all… tense.”

“Tense huh?”

“And weird.”

“Sakura, I’m always weird.”

Misdirection with humour, hilarious. She rolled her eyes and resisted the urge to sigh dramatically. There were a few options on how to extract the information from him, but she decided to follow his lead from the night before. A direct approach would probably work best anyway.

“Did something happen down there?”

Silence. That must be it.

When Kakashi finally spoke it was with a shuddering kind of sigh and Sakura began to wonder if she’d probed too deep.

“Ah, well you see, there’s the rub.”

She watched with queer fascination as he dropped his gaze to his hands, staring steadfastly at them, like it would cause physical pain to move at all while he spoke. Any satisfaction Sakura had about being right vanished, the concern that washed through her replaced any other feeling. This was where she needed to tread carefully, she’d had enough practise with an emotionally stunted Sasuke to know when not to push for more information than he was willing to give. And this was Kakashi, who never spoke about such things, and something was very wrong.

Sakura stayed silent, waiting for him to continue, when it seemed like no words were forthcoming she spoke.

“You don’t have to tell me sensei, it’s alright. You just did something pretty awesome for me tonight, and I want to help whatever’s hurting you right now…”

Reassurance. Constant and unwavering, it was medical practise 101. It was true too, she did want to help him if she could, she’d been semi-successful with Sasuke as well. Eventually Kakashi might open up to her too.

“I wish I could tell you Sakura, I really do…”

She watched him closely, he looked so defeated.

“The truth is I couldn’t tell you, even though may want to. I’ve thought about it and searched every corner of my mind but I come up blank every time. There’s not one thing I remember about that hideout and it’s driving me insane.”

Sakura took the moment of pause to try and reassure him again, adding a softness to her voice that was usually absent.

“It’s just one mission out of hundreds, it was probably just uneventful…”

“Thousands, Sakura. And I’m not accustomed to forgetting any kind of mission details, whether they were eventful or not.”

“You can’t expect to remember everything Kakashi sensei, the brain makes new connections every day and it has to make room for new information…”

His next words froze her. The crestfallen tone was something she had never heard from Kakashi
before. Someone who had always, always, been positive around her no matter what the situation. To put her at ease. Make her feel safe.

“Guess I’m just a useless relic now. I never used to have trouble remembering anything. Or maybe I’m just tired…”

He was talking about Obito’s eye. Of course. He was frustrated, even being a genius he’d never had to try hard to remember anything, it was all copied for him. That word useless seemed to be popping up a lot too, it was a feeling she was all too familiar with herself. This might be the reason he was acting so weird, the hideout had just made it worse. Kakashi shifted uncomfortably as she continued to watch him, and Sakura decided to offer the only thing she could to make him feel at ease. The positive reassurance and caring he’d offered her whenever it was needed years ago.

“Tired I can believe. The useless part not so much, I told you before and I don’t like repeating myself…” she added a mock sternness to her tone, he was very still and quiet. “You’re not some all knowing being Kakashi sensei, I know it’s hard to imagine, but you’re human just like the rest of us. There’s no way I could remember every mission I’ve been on, let alone every detail. Now, do you want your dinner?”

Kakashi looked up at her as she stood. What struck her most was the sadness in his eyes, not because he was hurt or suffering from anything in particular. But a kind of elemental sorrow for the nature of things. He softened a little.

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Sakura nodded with a huff. Trying to work out what to say as she retrieved the containers from her bag. He beat her to the punch, but there was more of his regular tone at least.

“Maybe useless isn't the right word, maybe pathetic is more suitable.”

Now he was just brooding, it might’ve been cute if he wasn't a grown man. Part of her wondered if he was just elaborating on his Sasuke impression. But he had revealed something to her at least, and while she believed his feelings of uselessness were entirely in his own mind, she could now see why. Even now the loss of that eye still plagued him, heightened when his own people didn't want to bother him with things. Or worse, when he failed to notice silly major events in his students lives, like breaking up with a certain Uchiha.

She knew what she needed to do to see him cheerful, though she wondered now if he'd ever been actually happy in all the time that she'd known him. Sakura was determined now not to abandon her side mission, he needed to see how much good he'd done.

“Hmm, I don't know about pathetic either. Bored maybe, and overworked.”

He huffed at her words but she continued unperturbed.

“Mope all you want, Shikamaru says you only take one day off a year, it's not healthy.”

Again there was a distinct shift in him that she recognised. Because he'd already offered more information than she'd hoped to receive, Sakura decided to drop it for another time. He was tense enough as it was. Rounding the table she put the container down in front of him, his mumbled thanks she ignored. It wasn’t the most spectacular of dinners, but sashimi was her specialty (she had mastered it long ago, as it required less actual cooking), she figured he would appreciate it as well.

With a small sigh of her own, Sakura decided to cross outside of her comfort zone a little. It was worth it for his sake. Mimicking his movement the other night when he'd pushed her into the chair,
Sakura stood behind him and put a hand on each shoulder.

“Listen up because I’m only saying this once. You do so many good things for so many people every single day, it’s about time you went a little easier on yourself. Take a step back and see all the good that you’ve done, even what you did tonight for me, it will impact more people than you know.”

Sakura watched as he raised a steady hand to his shoulder, and patted her own hand. The touch was brief, and thankfully there had enough warning not to tense up. She wasn’t sure why she kept her hands on his shoulders, she had hoped that it would add a little more depth to her words. Especially now that he knew a bit more about her physical contact anxiety.

“I didn’t realize you were so good at pep talks…”

She gripped his shoulders a little for effect.

“You do such a good job of keeping us all safe, I just wish you could see it…”

\textit{That’s enough now.} Those were the words that lay underneath his backhanded compliment. When she let go and moved to the side of the chair it was the first time they had made eye contact through this whole exchange. It warmed her a little to see the familiar creases of what she assumed was a smile, even if it was somewhat forced. Perhaps her words were getting through to him, she could only hope. There was a vague recognition of the emptiness she felt reflected back at her through his eyes.

If words weren’t going to get through to him, she knew an action that would. Though it made her feel physically nauseous.

“Thank you Sakura, really. But being a Hokage that needs a pep talk from one of his students still makes me feel a bit pitiful, even if it was a good pep talk.”

“I’m not your student now, I’m a doctor who’s worried about someone important to them. It’s like you said Kakashi sensei, I’ll always care about you, and you should really let someone do something for you for a change hmm?”

She watched him visibly soften. While it felt strange to be using his own words against him, again, it had done the trick.

\textit{That’ll do.}

Offering a smile she was rewarded with a much more sincere crease of his eyes and shift of his mask. But again, she would never know for certain if it was genuine without seeing his actual face. So instead of leaving it at that, and hoping like hell that her words somehow managed to ease him, she decided it was all or nothing. That was enough words for now, but there was still something else she could add to it.

Later on she’d probably hate herself, but she’d hate herself just as much if he continued to slide into the depths of his own mind. Sakura knew how lonely and terrifying a place that could be, and it would be tenfold for Kakashi who had lived through so much.

So without much more thought to it, Sakura watched as he averted his eyes toward the container of sashimi. And went for it.

Leaning forward Sakura touched her lips to the cloth covering his cheek in a barely there kiss. The contact lasted for all of 0.2 of a second, and there was certainly nothing more to it. When she stood back and put her hands on her hips matter-of-factly, it pleased her more than it should that the sparkle
of cheek was back in him. He regarded her from the corner of his eye, not turning to face her. Not moving at all.

“What was that?”

Kakashi said it with an air of scepticism.

“It was a thank you kiss, obviously. I just wanted to get in before all the nurses, it wouldn’t be hygienic to do it after they’ve all had a piece of you.”

Sakura smiled, *it worked*. She wondered back to her chair, a little smug in herself that she hadn’t turned any shades of tomato red after that little display. The sound of his soft chuckle instantly confirmed the theory.

“Pretty sure no one has ever thanked me *like that* before.”

“They probably would if you showed your face… Unless you’re hiding something hideous under there.”

Kakashi raised an eyebrow in her direction. Sakura waited for the retort but there was silence, which she didn’t mind, the mood had been lifted considerably. Opening her own container, it seemed he was just waiting for his moment, when her mouth was too full to bite back at him with any decorum.

“You’re getting better at the physical contact thing I see…”

Sakura just about choked. But damned if she would let him have the satisfaction of seeing it. She was also still claiming victory for the amount of personal information on his feelings that she’d earnt that night. And as she tried to let the anger slide, she had invited it by teasing him first after all, part of her remembered that forlorn look on his face earlier. So she swallowed her pride along with her dinner.

“Yeah I’m working on it. I started reading this *stupid* book you see….”

“Oh, so you *are* reading it then?”

Her head shot up, he had an elbow on the table resting his chin in his hand while watching her. This time she could not hold back the blush.

***

Something *odd* was happening. Kakashi was aware of it, but that being said didn't make the *oddness* any clearer to him. It wasn't altogether simple, it didn't help that this was also an area he was not so well versed in. It wasn't like he had open conversations like this often. And while he'd kept most of it to himself, Sakura had only needed to hear a fraction to understand completely.

It wasn't *right*. A sensei should not burden a student with his own failings. Minato would never have dreamed of such a thing, and he was the pinnacle of kindness, a great leader and teacher...

* * * * * * *

*I'm not your student now, I'm a doctor.*

And at those words suddenly he went from not feeling *right*, sinking deeper into pools of guilt, to something else. *Something odd*. Something not unpleasant. Kakashi started to wonder if this was why he’d been told to *talk to people more*. But maybe it was just because it was Sakura, and everything she did was about caring for other people. For the moment he was selfishly glad that he was one of those people. Because right now he didn't feel terrible, and outside of his *sessions*, this
was the first time he'd opened up about that particular insecurity. As guilty as he may have been feeling for it seconds ago, it felt like he'd made the right decision to be honest about it.

The question hung in the air between them, he watched the blush on her face deepen to the point where he could practically feel the heat radiating from across the table.

Sakura didn't say anything. Which he took to be a yes answer. Smirking now, Kakashi watched her eating, carefully keeping her mouth just full enough so that she would be unable to answer.

“It's okay, I can wait…”

He tapped the table with his fingers for effect. Sakura began coughing while trying to swallow too much, he almost laughed. But the part of him that cared for her was louder in this instance than the part that was eager to tease her back. Kakashi still hadn't quite forgiven the unless you're hiding something hideous under there remark.

“You alright there?”

She nodded yes before finally stuttering out a reply.

“Yes I'm fine.”

“Is that just, yes I'm fine and not choking to death. Or is it yes I am reading the book you picked out, it's amazing, also I'm not choking to death?”

Sakura had no trace of emotion on her face, but there was a darkness that flickered in her eyes. He would recall it later with fondness.

“Kakashi sensei, I thought you'd learnt your lesson about inappropriate questions?”

Despite the voice in his head begging him to stop for many different reasons, Kakashi was getting too much joy out of the exchange.

“Why does that sound mildly threatening?”

Now she was smirking.

“I would never dream of threatening the Hokage… Blackmail on the other hand…”

He raised an eyebrow.

“What could you possibly…”

“Aren't you past due for a physical assessment hmm?”

Kakashi froze.

“I can make it easy or invasive, the choice is yours. And before you ask, yes, I will be the one to perform the physical assessments this year because for some reason,” at this Sakura raised an eyebrow, “Shizune refuses to do it after the last time.”

Covering most of his face certainly had unexpected benefits, hiding expressions was one of them, espionage another. All equally important. Though he was starting to wonder if his own cheeks had reddened past the line of cloth. A change of topic was necessary.

“Noted. So how was your day? You didn’t seem to hear me before when I asked.”
Why he was interested was not so much a mystery now. It had been partly because he’d missed the Shinobi medical reports for the day, so hadn’t been able to check up on what she’d been doing, but more importantly he *wanted* to know. Wanted to make sure that she was on the right track. The way she had completely tuned everything out while she worked had unsettled him slightly.

But judging by the way she was acting tonight, maybe he didn’t need to worry at all. Maybe he’d just been projecting his own pathetic self onto her. Or, more hopefully, some part of his actions had already gotten through. She had always been the quickest and cleverest after all.

“It was just an average day.”

“Oh? Sorry to hear that.”

“It’s better than below average. And even with you trying to embarrass me to death, it ended pretty damn well. What about you?”

While she’d been answering, and distracted, Kakashi had finally managed to eat something. Though she’d long since given up trying to steal glances at his face, after this evening Kakashi wasn’t quite so sure he knew *what* she was going to do. He still didn’t know this adult version of Sakura very well.

“Oh, you know, just the right mix of mundane paperwork and bothering library assistants to make the day go by quickly enough. I think that qualifies as above average.”

“So for you to have a good day, it has to go quickly? Or you have to bother people?”

“Both preferably. The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

She snorted.

“Some things never change I guess.”

Sakura had finished her dinner, Kakashi choosing to hide behind a book to eat the rest of his. She appeared to be waiting for him to finish to resume working.

“Have you found anything we can use Kakashi sensei?”

“Hmm. I think so, call it a hunch anyway. Ask me again later and I’ll definitely know.”

Glancing up he caught the way her eyes sparkled as she smiled, it pleased him.

“Care to elaborate on that hunch? Or are you going to be all mysterious about it?”

“I suppose I *could* elaborate if I wanted to, but where would the fun be in that?”

Her facial expression was deadpan.

“If you want to be all cryptic that’s fine, but if you’re just putting on a Sasuke impression it’s starting to become eerily accurate and I don’t appreciate it.”

Kakashi chuckled before feigning hurt.

“Twice now. That’s twice you’ve compared me to an Uchiha and it really hurts Sakura…”

“Oh I’m sorry,” it was *not* sincere, “would you like me to use one of the other comparisons we have on file? Pervy hedgehog is my personal favourite…”
“You’re very feisty tonight y’know.”

Sakura broke into a grin and quiet giggle at her own comment, she composed herself before she answered.

“Okay, okay, I really am sorry now sensei. You’re just making this too easy.”

There was another quiet titter.

“Uh huh. Are you quite finished now? Or do you not want to hear my theory?”

She shook her head as if to physically shake off the fit of giggles that overcame her. Nodding with an expression of forced seriousness Kakashi found himself smiling now too.

“Right. Now, if this hunch is correct, and let’s be honest, my hunches usually are…”

“So modest…”

He raised an eyebrow at her comment but continued unhindered. She was trying to hold back a grin with not much success.

“…anyway. Basically the genin statistics for the Sand Village only go back so far as the end of the Third Great Ninja War. Anything before then was likely destroyed or not worthy enough to even have statistics on. Immediately after the war however, the numbers start, steadily increasing each year. See here.”

The book was put in the middle of the table and turned so she could look at it. He continued.

“I wonder if you notice the very odd thing about these gradual numbers.”

Sakura studied them closely and unhurriedly. Kakashi found himself paying much closer attention to her features than usual, not that he’d never noticed them, but he’d never had much cause to pay any attention before.

“There’s no spike.”

Her eyes snapped up to him.

“Bingo.” The smile on her face now was one he wanted to copy his small stockpile of happier memories. He’d been doing it regularly since the end of the last war. “You’d expect some kind of baby boom after a war, and then later on a jump in academy students. But there’s nothing. Just this gradual incline, which gets stronger each year. So my hunch is…”

“They built the hospital right at the end of the Third Great Ninja War.”

She finished the sentence for him. He nodded, something akin to pride puffed inside him at her quickness and ability to process information. Had she always been so clever?

“Exactly. Or possibly even before then. Which would not help our endeavour, although like I said, there are enough numbers here to throw at the council anyway, just comparing our genin statistics even in recent years should be enough… I’ll keep looking, leave it to me. My brain could always use a work out.”

Sakura made a kind of huffing sigh before she met his eye. This expression he was not familiar with at all, it was just like before when he’d been telling her about the removal of Naruto’s newspaper pictures. It wasn’t anger or sadness, despite the sigh, but he just couldn’t tell what it was. The
emotions of other people had never exactly been an interesting topic for him to explore.

“You’re still pretty ingenious you know sensei. Useless is definitely the wrong word.”

The smile that tugged her lips was so sweet he found himself instantly returning it without his express permission.

Yes something very odd was happening here, but it was making him happy. He began to wonder if this feeling would extend past the new hospital’s completion, but the thought was short lived.

It was a pity these things never lasted very long.

A sharp bang and a cloud of smoke invaded his senses, the scent putting him on instant high alert. Sakura had jumped up ready, unsure as to what was happening, but Kakashi knew in an instant. This was a flashy Anbu entrance indeed.

“What’s going on?” Sakura’s attention shifted to the agent.

“Lord Sixth...“

The Anbu agent in question was already on one knee before him. By appearance alone he could tell that this one had come straight from battle. It looked like trouble had surfaced again.

“Report.”

“Five people have broken through the first barrier to the Village sir. All male. Team Kuma have intercepted them half a kilometer from the south east border. They appear to be rogue shinobi sir of indeterminate strength.”

Kakashi was up.

“Contact Team Kumo for backup. I’ll go directly to assist.”

“Sir...”

“What is it?”

“Two guards have already been taken down by the enemy. We were too late.”

An anger rose in his chest. A bubbling and simmering kind of anger that he was all too familiar with, it would only dissipate with exchanging blows with the heinous individuals who dared to attack on his watch. Barely registering the command he issued to the Anbu agent still kneeling on the floor, Kakashi turned briefly to look at Sakura before forming the hand signs. She had that glint in her eye, that one he was growing fond of, it gave him more energy than he anticipated.

“Go get em’”

There was just enough time to nod in reply before the jutsu formed.
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

This is a rather dark chapter for me. If you need help, any kind, I implore you to seek it. It is not a sign of weakness it is a sign of strength, of survival.

Thump. Click. Thud.

Sakura more or less threw the hefty bag of scrolls and books into her apartment, redressed herself in appropriate hospital wear, and made her way out again. She was not prepared to just sit around waiting to be summoned.

The streets were dimly lit through the darkness, though she didn’t need to see to find her way. The hospital practically shone like a beacon, calling her to it.

This was where she was needed most.

Kakashi had not asked her to follow him, and after learning a little about his feelings she understood. It was something he had to handle on his own, something that he could handle, she was sure of it. It was an attempt to prove himself, even if only to himself. She understood.

Rushing through the double doors Sakura very nearly collided with the medic nin on his way out.

“Sakura sensei, I was just on my way to get you…”

“I know. What have we got?”

They were moving fast, Sakura instinctively heading in the direction of the larger emergency triage theatre.

“An Anbu agent delivered two guards to us, approximately five minutes ago, both unconscious.” He spoke quickly

“Just unconscious?”

Sakura remembered distinctly hearing the words taken down earlier.

“They appear to have been hit with an unfamiliar jutsu which knocked them out.”

“Genjutsu?”

The younger medic nodded.

“Lady Shizune is attempting genjutsu reversal on one of them…”

“I’ll take the other.”

Things moved in a blur after that. Sakura took a very quick physical assessment of the guard as she entered, casually shoving some of the surrounding medical staff out of the way. She didn’t recognize this one in particular, but there had been so many added to the expanding village over the last five
years. Long gone were the days when Kotetsu and Izumo were enough to man the gates at the standby station.

Shizune hadn’t even been able to acknowledge Sakura’s presence she was concentrating so hard on the other man. The guard really looked deathly pale, but there was no obvious injury. Sakura got to work. This was not some obscure Anbu agent, this was a chunin guard, one who might have a family waiting for him at home…

Hours passed. Finally, with a sizable chunk of relief, Sakura determined that it was not genjutsu alone that had caused it. And it was only clear once that had been dispelled. The genjutsu itself being a front for what was actually happening, and it hadn’t been an overly difficult one to reverse. But underneath was something more sinister.

Sakura determined it was a kind of airborne chakra toxin, that once inhaled slowed the blood flow and pressure to dangerous levels. Which is probably why they were presumed to be dead at first glance. Even their heart rates were slowed enough to almost feign death, but there was nothing else physically wrong. The genjutsu just made it impossible for them to communicate what was happening.

It still took time, but once Sakura was pleased that there was no trace left of toxin she took over for Shizune. Everything was in a blur as she concentrated, vaguely registering a small commotion before Shizune left the room, being careful not to disturb the reversal technique. The second guard came-to much faster than the first. There was a moment's pause as she collected herself, nurses and other medics rushed to take over and Sakura was able to leave the theatre. Her patients could now be taken to recovery.

With a quiet resolve she stepped out, expecting chaos, rushing staff, wounded people littering the hallways, *something*. But all that met her was an eerie quiet and an orange hue in the darkness through the window. It was utterly confusing. Rambling through the corridors eventually she found Shizune at one of the nurses stations pouring over a red file.

“Oh, Sakura, all finished? Thanks for your help, I’m not sure I’d have managed it on my own.”

“It’s fine. Do we know what happened yet? Are there any more wounded?”

“Sakura, it’s all fine, calm down now. Apart from those two guards, and one other, no one else was harmed. The situation was contained not long after you managed to work out what the jutsu was doing. Nothing to worry about.”

Sakura stared at her, tired and frustrated, wanting more answers.

“Nothing to worry about? But what happened? Just what kind of idiot is brazen enough to wonder into the Leaf Village, knockout some guards and….”

“Sakura, listen. There’s not much more information I can tell you, but trust me when I say that everything is under control. We received word from Lord Hokage himself, and he even sounded bored about the whole thing. I’m not sure what exactly happened but it could all just have been one big misunderstanding, and now it’s taken care of.”

With a mitigating sigh, Sakura finally allowed the adrenaline fuelling her system to subside as she stood there in solace.

“Well, that’s a relief. Oh, but you said one other was injured? Do you need assistance? Who was it…”
Shizune put a hand to Sakura’s shoulder, she tensed up immediately.

“It’s alright, really. It’s classified now anyway,” she held up the red report, which meant one thing, Anbu. “Why don’t you go home and get some rest?”

Sakura looked to the clock on the wall.

“There’s only a couple hours till my shift starts anyway. I’ll try get a little rest and then you can go home.”

In the privacy of her own small office, with a soft click of the door behind her and a humming of fluorescent lights, Sakura enjoyed the momentary quiet. Slumping into the desk chair she closed her eyes and tried to willfully force out the dull headache that was threatening to grow with every second she remained awake.

It was going to be a long day.

Using her arms as a pillow, cushioning her head on the desk, she finally allowed sleep to claim her. It was anything but quality sleep and only just restful enough to banish the headache for a while anyway. But it would have to do.

She woke with that terrible feeling as if she’d only just closed her eyes, but three hours had passed, and she didn’t feel like any energy had been restored to her. But now there was a lot to do. Caffeine would have to temporarily sustain her.

First things first, before her usual rounds, Sakura checked up on the guards. They were recovering nicely, with no more of the toxin in their system their natural healthy colour had finally returned. She was satisfied at least that her treatment had been a success. She could not help but wonder what the other injury had been, but with so much to do there was little time to dwell on it. And red files were always sealed.

Around lunch time Sakura caught her second wind of energy, she was not so old yet that one almost all-nighter would render her incapable of doing her job. And she did it well. It was about the same time that she remembered that tomorrow was her first whole day off in a while, and it couldn’t have had better timing. While the afternoon passed slowly, Sakura indulged herself more than once in planning exactly what she would do with her free time.

Which was nothing. Blissful nothing. There was a medical textbook she wanted to flick through to prepare for next week’s surgery, but that was about all. Her mind briefly thought of the other stupid book in her home and she wondered if she’d finally been freed of its spell. Perhaps she would do a little case study research for the children’s hospital, but otherwise she only wanted sleep.

An hour earlier than usual, Sakura hung her coat up in her office. Done. Finally.

There was just the small matter of dropping the considerable pile of reports off to Hokage tower, and then she would be home free. While scrambling around on her desk for an errant piece of paper Sakura bumped the bulky computer monitor, turning it on but not purposely. She sighed. It wasn’t like she’d forgotten to check her messages today, she just couldn’t be bothered in the slightest. It could all wait until Monday.

Ping.

A message. Maybe it couldn’t wait until Monday.

Flagged as urgent, direct from Hokage’s office. Not even bothering to sit down she hastily flicked
This computer works much better.

That was the entire message. Sakura bit back the volley of insults she almost typed back in response. It was just another instance of his increasingly weird behaviour. Her eyes landed on the message from yesterday briefly. He was just letting her know that he was okay, in his very roundabout (and weird) way.

Sakura quickly sent a reply that was just as short as his message, shut off the monitor before she could get even more distracted and made her escape. The small stack of dark blue folders under her arm couldn’t even weigh her down now. Freedom.

It was just a pity that the weather was not on her side. Halfway down the long familiar path to Hokage tower the sky grew dark in an ominous way before the first drops of rain fell on her head. It turned to a downpour by the time she reached the entrance, coming down in thick sheets of rain it was nearly impossible to see ahead.

And she was drenched.

It was the final straw in a definitively below average day. In a growing rage she barely recognised Shikamaru stepping aside so she could get in and under cover.

“Hey Shikamaru, you all finished?”

“Yeah. It's been one long day.”

“You can say that again…”

She’d meant to say it under her breath but it was a little louder than that. Shikamaru regarded her with a quirked eyebrow before sighing and scratching his head.

“I forgot, it was probably even longer for you. Here, let me take those up to the office. I'm pretty sure Lord Sixth has clocked out for the day anyway.”

It was begrudging, but still helpful. Sakura shook some of the rain water off the files before putting them in his outstretched hand.

“Really? Thanks Shikamaru, I do really want to get home, and dry.”

“Yeah, don't mention it... Seriously though, don't tell anyone, I have a reputation to keep. Catch you later.”

He'd turned and headed back up the stairs with a wave. Sakura smiled sweetly before heading back out into the suddenly waterlogged Konoha.

The apartment she called home had never been a more welcoming sight. Down to the dumped bag of hospital research by the kitchen table. The door shut swiftly behind her. The rain wasn't so bad when she wasn't actually standing in it and could only hear the patter of it on her windows.

First order of business. Shower. Warmth. Clean and comfortable clothing. She took her sweet time too, hopeful that the warm water would wash off the last of her day. It just about did the trick. As
soon as she found her coziest pair of pijama pants and baggy shirt the look was complete.

Although feeling monumentally better there was still one thing she needed to do before she could completely relax. It was a trait she blamed her mother for. But that bag she’d thrown so haphazardly earlier wasn’t just going to pick itself up. And as long as it sat there Sakura wouldn’t physically be able to unwind, there was also the small pile of sodden clothing to be dealt with. Her mother claimed that she could not sit down until she knew that everything that needed doing was done, and now Sakura appeared to have inherited that habit. Though it hadn’t formed until a few years after she’d moved out of home, it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

The piles of scrolls and papers had been carelessly packed the night before, they would need sorting again. Sakura sighed. She put the rest of the reports in a stack on the table, smirking a little that she had accidentally packed the book from the Sand section of the library. As if that librarian needed more reason to dislike her and Kakashi, handing the key to the conference room back hadn’t exactly been a pleasant experience itself. And now she’d taken a book home without taking it out through the proper channels. Sakura shrugged to the empty room, she was a ninja after all, stealthily sneaking it back in wasn’t out of the realms of possibility.

Throwing all the wet clothing into the washing machine, Sakura almost startled when she heard a sharp tapping noise that had nothing to do with the rain outside. It came from her front door.

“Hold on a second!”

There were only a handful of people that turned up at her door unannounced, and they had all seen her pajamas before so there was no need to rush and cover up. Throwing it open to reveal no one there was a moment where she wondered if Naruto was back to his oldest prank, or if she was slipping into insanity and actually hearing things.

“A gruff voice spoke to her from closer to the ground than she anticipated.

“Pakkun?”

Before she could ask what he was doing here the pug called out to something behind her.

“See, told you a little rain wouldn’t stop my nose Boss.”

“You’re not as rusty as I thought. Good job Pakkun. Call it a draw?”

“You wish Kakashi. See you later Sakura.”

The summons puffed out of sight before she whirled around to address the grown man with his head poking through the half opened living room window.

“Kakashi sensei! What are you…”

Before she could finish the question he held up a bag.

“Dinner?”

Sakura regarded the man with a kind of queer fascination at all his weirdness, she couldn’t stop the smile spreading on her face.

* * *
The afternoon was almost enjoyable, Kakashi appreciating the monotony for a change after a night of bedlam. This good mood he found himself in was dangerous, he didn't even protest much when Shikamaru plugged the new computer in. This one was smaller than the last. He twirled a red scroll in his hand while he waited.

“Right, that should be working now.”

“Just because you say it's working Shikamaru doesn't mean that I'll be able to work it.”

“What, don't be ridiculous. You just need to play around with it more, why don't you test it out?”

Kakashi hid a smirk behind his mask. Composing a message to Sakura while Shikamaru observed. With an amused huff Shikamaru shook his head.

“Did you tell her you threw the last one out the window?”

“Well… No. She knows me well enough though so I'm sure she has her suspicions…”

Ping.

They glanced to each other before Kakashi opened the reply to his message.

Kakashi,

Stop cheating.

Hi Shikamaru.

Sakura

That was it. Kakashi didn't even bother hiding the smile on his face, standing and stretching. Shikamaru held back a chuckle while shaking his head.

“You done for the day Kakashi sensei?”

“Yup. Very much so.”

“Good, I wanna head out before that rain sets in.”

With a wave and a nod Shikamaru exited the office. Kakashi wasting no time in ridding himself of the white robes. Stretching again he felt a niggle of pain brewing in his shoulder from the nights exercise, but that wouldn't deter him. That message to Sakura had served dual purposes. One being to check the computer itself. The second was to gauge whether or not Sakura was still at work, and with a reply that quick he guessed that she was on her way out too.

While there had been precious few moments for his mind to actually wonder today, when it did he invariably found himself wallowing in a kind of guilt for not taking Sakura with him the night before. The fact that her help at the hospital had been invaluable was small consolation. From what he'd heard she had worked most of the night too, the guilt returned. Forming a plan of sorts, there was only one way he could think of to make it up to her a little. He pocketed the small red scroll.

Expecting her to arrive any minute now, he made to leave himself before pausing. The rain had started. Also, today of all days, he should probably read the shinobi medical reports. Halfway out the window the rain came down in a sudden deluge which decided it for him and he climbed back in.

“What are you still doing here?”
“Oh, forgot something. What did you come back for Shikamaru?”

The younger man held up a small stack of dark blue reports, putting them straight on the desk.

“Consider it my good deed for the day. Sakura looked exhausted. Great, that rain has really set in now, guess I'll take the shortcut home.”

“Thanks. See ya Monday Shikamaru.”

Alone now, Kakashi stole a look at the medical files. It'd been a very long day for Sakura indeed. The major details of it he was already aware of, but to see the specifics written down strengthened his resolve for the plan in his mind. He had to make it up to her somehow, and also, there was something else he had to do. Though it made him decidedly uncomfortable.

He would have to thank her. She had done more for him with that pep talk than she realized, and he really should tell her. He felt obligated to, especially after sidelining her last night… though Sakura had ended up seeing more action than him arguably.

Kakashi left the reports on the desk and scrambled in the cupboard where he thought he'd once seen an umbrella. Finding nothing but poorly stored scrolls and ledgers, luck it appeared would not be on his side this evening. So with all the speed and dexterity he could muster in his tired state, Kakashi took to the streets, utilizing more than one awning on his way.

There was a particular stall that only opened on Saturday's, usually catering to those heading to a raucous night out, but it was exceptional quality. As he purchased two decent sized bento boxes, he started to speculate on whether Sakura would try to thank him for dinner in the same way she had the night before. For some reason just the idea of it happening again terrified him. The side project had been successful so far at least, but he hadn't intended for Sakura to renew her physical confidence with him. Maybe they were less alike than he'd thought, Kakashi would certainly never dream of thanking someone like that.

As he turned to step and take cover underneath another store front, Kakashi had to pause. It was nothing to do with the torrential rain, or the feeling of ice water coursing through his blood at the thought of being thanked like that again. But he also came to the sudden realization that he had no idea where Sakura actually lived. He guessed it wouldn't be the same house she grew up in that he vaguely remember.

Pakkun didn't wholly appreciate being summoned in this kind of weather but the pug had perked up as soon as food was offered.

“What do you say Pakkun? Think you can find her in this?”

“Huh, what do you take me for Kakashi? Some pathetic human? It’ll be tough with all the rain but I’ll manage. You got anything with her scent so I can refamiliarize?”

“Not exactly…” Kakashi scratched his head absentmindedly. “Sakura did hug me last night, will that work?”

The pug sniffed at him with a bemused look. It always interested Kakashi that the dogs adopted human expressions from time to time. How Pakkun managed to look smug, as he raised the dog equivalent of an eyebrow at Kakashi, was beyond him.

As Kakashi now stood outside of Sakura's window, he wondered if Pakkun had secretly relished the challenge. It certainly appeared that way with the speed in which they got here. Sliding the pane open quietly as she answered the door he regarded the exchange with a smile. More at the fact that
he'd been correct about Sakura wanting a night in, the pajamas she wore were definitely cozy ones.

“Dinner?”

Pakkun now returned, Sakura's smile was enough to affirm his decision. She shut the door quickly.

“You're a lifesaver Kakashi sensei. I didn't realize dinner delivery fell under the Hokage’s jurisdiction?”

“That's what you pay taxes for…”

Before he could elaborate she'd snatched the bag off him and deposited it on the table. Turning around to pull the window open wider.

“Get in before you slip off the roof. I'll just grab a towel.”

She spun on her heels toward a cupboard. It hadn't been his intention to actually stay. He'd just meant to bring dinner as an apology.

“I don't want to intrude on your Saturday night Sakura, really…”

“Don't be stupid.” She called out from the cupboard, he stared at her back. “Get inside and eat while it's hot.”

“I really don't want to get in your way…”

“Nonsense.” She approached him with an armful of towels, throwing one down on the floor for him to step onto. “Does it look like I'm going anywhere tonight? Besides, I want to know what happened.”

He clambered into the window gingerly. Maybe he was getting a little old for this… also, a Hokage probably shouldn't be climbing into young ladies apartments at night. But it only occurred to him as an afterthought. Minato had done it to him too right?

“You mean with Pakkun?”

Sakura made some tongue clicking noise of disapproval as she threw a towel on his head and rubbed it over his hair.

“Not exactly. But I am curious about that too.”

Kakashi knew she meant last night's misunderstanding but the urge to tease was ever present.

“Well, I grabbed dinner before realising that I didn't actually know where you lived these days.”

“So you had Pakkun sniff me out huh?”

He nodded. Sakura stepped back with a smirk.

“So, let’s see how dry you are…”

“It’s fine. Just the top half…”

With a strange look, she turned and stormed off before he could finish. Kakashi stared on at her bewildered. Her tone of voice alone was not to be trifled with.
“Not fine. There’s no way I’m going to be responsible for the already mopey Hokage getting a head cold… You remember the last time…”

The last part he pretended not to hear as she disappeared down a hallway. This was the moment he took the chance to actually look around. The place was certainly nice, large enough, if it weren’t for the furniture cluttering up the living room. It looked out of place in an apartment at least, as if it had come from another house. He smirked as he spied the bookcase. She really hadn’t been kidding the other day, it was all medical journals and textbooks. It was tidy too. Not that he hadn’t expected that from Sakura, but it was an odd detail he noted for someone who worked as much as she did.

“Found it. Here.”

Sakura appeared from nowhere, throwing something to him before ducking into the archway to the kitchen.

“What is…” he didn’t get the opportunity to respond.

“Just an extra. It was probably Naruto or Sasuke’s that was left behind.”

She had thrown him an old standard long sleeved uniform shirt, calling out from the kitchen. Kakashi raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and decided that he should probably just do as he was told. This was her house after all. Though the idea of wearing the thing was slightly off putting. The idea of her fists throwing him through the window was also a persuasive argument.

Sakura returned with cutlery which she laid on the table as he removed his damp flak jacket.

“So before the curiosity kills me, what the hell happened last night?”

While she began setting the table, removing the bento boxes from the bag, and taking his jacket to hang over the heater, Kakashi considered his answer.

“It was just a little trouble, nothing too hard to handle.”

The petulant look she shot at him was enough to force communication without words. Elaborate.

“Consider it a lesson in what happens when inebriated shinobi don’t pay attention to the map and try to take over the wrong village.”

“Ah.”

There was a queer little smile on her face before she rounded into the kitchen again. Kakashi took this chance to remove his shirt and replace it with the ‘new’ one. Deciding to leave the vest and mask attachment in place. It wasn’t wet, but he wouldn’t put it past Sakura to use this as a chance to take a peek underneath the mask.

“So what happened to them? That jutsu of theirs wasn’t so great to deal with.” This time as she spoke she reappeared with two cups and a steaming kettle.

“Well, currently they are taking a little vacation in T&I. But as they’re quite remorseful, and it appears to have been a genuine error of judgement, we’re quite happy to ship them back to the villages they deserted from. Let them deal with the punishments. It could take some time though, so a few more days in T&I will be in order…. It would be nice to get the specifics of that peculiar jutsu as well…”

He didn’t pay her much attention as he spoke. Pulling the old shirt over his head quickly but leaving
the headband in its place, he hadn’t been too soaked by the rain but trust Sakura to worry about that
detail. She was already taking his other shirt and laying it next to the jacket, nodding to whatever he
was saying. When he trailed off at the end of his sentence he stood frozen to the spot, Sakura was
now standing directly in front of him with a strange expression on her face.

“You hurt yourself.”

It was a statement more than a question. He regarded her oddly, her eyes were fixed on his left
shoulder.

“Not exactly. Just a bit stiff. I think I took a glancing blow at some point…”

“...and hurt yourself. Sit down.”

She finished the sentence. Kakashi found himself almost pushed into sitting on the chair at the end of
the dining table, Sakura pulled up a chair and sat closely to his side. Not looking at his face once,
only at some point on his side.

“Sakura, really, it’ll be okay. I’m not so fragile that every niggle needs to be seen to.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Kakashi sensei. What if there’s an actual threat to the village and you’re out
there favouring your right side hmm? It could be deadly.”

He was able to study her face a little more closely in this position.

“You’ve had a busy day Sakura, I wouldn’t want you to exhaust your chakra just for this…."

There was a way her features set in concentration that had a calming effect, highlighted by the green
glow of chakra in her hands. She was quiet for a moment before she shushed him.

“My chakra isn’t as fragile as yours. You’ve wrenched the ball and socket joint in your shoulder you
know. Did someone throw you by the arm?”

Kakashi stayed silent for a while, nodding slightly. The memory of the fight from the night before
ran through his head just a bit, the frantic chase had been somewhat anticlimactic. But the tussle with
the five other shinobi was enough. Especially in the dark, with drunks, whose combination of jutsu
was the perfect mix of frustrating and chaotic.

So instead of going into detail, he just watched Sakura work. Revelling in the warmth building in his
shoulder, not that it had been particularly sore, it was just more noticeable now that there was no
distraction. She looked softer than usual dressed in what were obviously pajamas with her hair tied
back.

“So, how was your day?”

“Below average. Not much longer, then you can eat Kakashi sensei.”

“It doesn’t usually take you this long does it?”

Why he decided to tease her, now of all times, was beyond him. Her brow furrowed imperceptibly.

“Well I have to go a little slower than usual because someone hasn’t had their physical yet and I
don’t want to overload your chakra network. It has also been a very long day.”

That was enough to silence him. It went against why he was here in the first place, teasing her, he
was meant to be thanking her. For the now multiple pep talks, for working so tirelessly, and then for
healing him after all that. *And apologizing,* he added as an afterthought. She continued to talk but he wasn’t so much listening as he watched her eyes shine, then her lips as they moved.

“You bringing me dinner is nice and all, but don’t think that will save you from that physical, and I wasn’t a joking when I said it could be invasive…”

He would have to thank her in another way, one that she would understand was heartfelt and meaningful. The only way he could think of was not desirable in the least. It went against every fibre of his being.

“While we’re on that, what is it with men and the need to disguise injury? Hmm? It doesn’t make you look tough y’know, it makes you an idiot…”

It would have to be now. *To hell with it.* At least he knew that she was comfortable giving that kind of contact, so receiving it shouldn’t be too much of an issue.

“Sakura…” he interrupted her.

“What? Did you hurt something else or….”

His action completely stunned her into silence. Leaning forward, it was easy enough with her sitting so closely to bridge the gap, he very briefly touched his lips to her cheek. It was a fast but unmistakable kiss.

“Thank you.”

The words he spoke forced her lips into a smile. They were all he could manage to get out, not feeling exactly confident that anything he could add would help. He’d never been especially successful when it came to words. Sasuke was enough proof of that. Rather, he watched the dusting of blush on her cheeks and hoped like hell that he hadn’t completely shattered her view of him.

“You’re welcome.”

Sakura was still smiling, her eyes flicked up to meet his briefly. The exchange wasn’t awkward as he expected. Instead it was simply *reassuring.* No lines had been crossed, she had understood his meaning in repeating the gesture. With a bit of flourish Sakura finished her healing and stood, catching his eye again with a smile.

“Now, eat your dinner before it gets cold. I want to hear more about what’s happening to these *morons* who wandered into the village too…”

As she spoke she shifted off again into the kitchen, retrieving napkins, before pouring tea. And it was then that Kakashi noticed another *oddity.*

The contact had been brief between them, to be sure, but she *had not tensed up at all.* Not once. There were only smiles and normal conversation.

*Interesting.*

* ***

It should have been awkward, sitting there in her pajamas having dinner with the Hokage. It *should* have been mortifying. But it wasn’t.

“So when you say they were inebriated…”
“I mean absurdly drunk, yes.”

Sakura had been able to get a little more information on the night before, but the more she heard, the more ludicrous it all sounded.

“And they really weren’t combining their jutsu on purpose?”

“Nope. I’m entirely certain there wasn’t enough intelligence between all five of them to come up with something like that. Though it was definitely an interesting side effect, so it’s worth exploring.”

The food itself had been delicious, which was also surprising. Kakashi had somehow managed to down his at a lightning speed which should give him indigestion later. She wondered how he coped with it honestly. When Sakura began clearing the table she was taken aback a little by his help, he stood and collected the mugs and empty kettle. At least now as he stood he was holding himself normally. His shoulder was back to normal obviously. Mentally she congratulated herself on noticing that minor detail when he'd switched shirts.

Kakashi had deposited the kettle in the kitchen, Sakura barely noticed as she began reorganizing the hospital research back into an acceptable order. Leaning over the table she almost startled at the very loud sigh that erupted from behind her.

“You’re not seriously going to work tonight Sakura?”

She pretended to be thoughtful.

“Well, it’s not like I have anything else to do, but it would get in the way of the twelve hours sleep I was hoping to get in.”

Kakashi scoffed from behind her and moved to the side of the table.

“It looks like you’re working Sakura.”

“Just getting things back into order. I was in such a rush last night everything got messed up. I won't be able to relax until it’s sorted.”

She wasn’t paying too much attention when he started moving files from the stack of papers and books. All her concentration was focussed on putting everything precisely back in the right place. It was that tunnel vision again, the one that took over whenever she was deep in something, surgery, cooking, whatever. Except this time when her eyes glanced upward and broke the focus she was simply too tired to continue.

It all seemed like it was back where it belonged, right down to Kakashi sitting at the end of the table with a book in his hand, though this time he was not reading.

“That’ll do for now.” She spoke with a sigh.

“Finally.”

He’d said it with such a moody tone Sakura was instantly annoyed.

“You didn’t have to stay Kakashi sensei, if you’ve got somewhere else to be…”

“No, not at all. It’s just… and now it wasn’t moody at all, it was weird. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t overdo it.”

“I’m an adult, and a doctor, I can take care of myself perfectly fine…”
“I’m aware of that Sakura, believe me.” He exhaled loudly. “I’m not making much sense, am I?”

She shook her head no. Putting the book back on the table he stood with a little more speed than she expected. Nothing about his behaviour tonight was what she would expect from him but he’d been doing that all week. The confusion had set in as a permanent state for her, the fog had lifted a fraction the previous night but it didn’t make all of his actions clear.

He had thanked her, in a way which made her blush just thinking about it, but there was something else. Sakura decided that he deserved her patience at least. He had earned as much the night before. Kakashi had been meeting her eye, but shook his head a little and averted his gaze as if he wasn’t so sure of himself. He gave a mitigating sigh before he spoke.

“Well, I guess there's no use beating around the bush about it. I’m... sorry for last night, I should have taken you with me, things would have gone quicker and there might've been fewer injuries…”

It was that guilt again. Ridiculous and unfounded. Sakura interrupted him.

“There’s no need to apologise Kakashi sensei…”

“No, no there is. It wasn't right of me to sideline you, again. It was wrong of me as your teacher before and it’s wrong of me as your Hokage now…”

Concern mixed with frustration began brewing within her.

“You didn’t sideline me. I run the hospital for goodness sake, I hardly go out in the field at all anymore because I’m needed here. The guards were injured before your even got there anyway right? It's not your fault sensei…”

“It is though. I acted before thinking…”

“And you handled it. Just like the Hokage is meant to. I thought I told you to go a little easier on yourself hmm?” She’d put a hand on her hip for effect.

With a small huffing noise he softened visibly, shaking his head.

“Alright, I get it. But that’s not the point I was trying to make,” Kakashi reached into his pocket and withdrew what appeared to be a red scroll, “but maybe this will work better. What I have here is a small consolation prize, to make it up to you. Except you have to promise me that you won’t do anymore work tonight before I give it to you. Got it?”

How he went from downtrodden to magnanimous in two seconds was beyond her. When Sakura nodded he simply raised an eyebrow at her. Verbal confirmation was required apparently.

“Sure, I promise. I’m too tired to think anymore as it is…” she didn’t admit that his confusing nature was adding to this tiredness.

“Here.”

Sakura resisted the childish urge to snatch it from him.

When the small red scroll was opened it revealed a complex summoning seal that had already been broken. The familiar poofing smoke dissipated and left behind a single file with a red cover.

_Anbu._

“This is?”
Opening it the very first page told her all she needed to know.

“The mission report from that old hideout, yeah. They dropped it off this afternoon.”

Already the gears were turning in her head scanning the first page. The Anbu, ever careful in whatever information they guarded, had blacked out certain words pertaining to the agents on the mission. There were a few other specifics that had been removed, it was a little pointless seeing as she knew who had been on that mission anyway. Anbu liked to waste time with pointless bureaucracy.

“Did you read it?”

“Yeah, the first three pages anyway.”

“And you remember?”

Kakashi nodded in with a smirk.

“It all came back to me. Including the reason I had no recollection of it in the first place…”

He shifted, standing next to her, and used a finger to flick to the next page.

“You got knocked out huh.”

She hadn't meant to sound so unimpressed, but that's how it had come out. Despite this he softly chuckled.

“Don't sound so disappointed Sakura.” He was moving again, this time collecting his shirt and jacket from the heater. “What I do remember is Tenzou and I having a hell of a time recording the layout of the rooms in that place. There was just so many, it was on our way back that we inadvertently set off the one hidden trap in the place we'd missed…”

Sakura had been listening intently, but her eyes were still glued to the folder as she carelessly flicked through the pages. Nodding along as he spoke.

“I'm just glad I'm not as senile as I thought. If the date in that report is accurate then it was the eighth hideout in the Leaf village that we investigated…”

Not paying particular attention to what she was looking at exactly, Sakura only paused when she reached a page toward the end of the folder. And that was when his voice faded out like white noise. It was a blue sheet of paper that only captured her attention because she recognised it.

Immediately her eyes jerked up to Kakashi, still talking and pulling on his own (now dried) shirt. Sakura tried with all her might to remain impassive, but there was no doubt on what she’d seen, down to the code in the top right hand corner. Nothing about the form had changed in all this time. An unsettling anxiousness began brewing within her. Taking the opportunity while he was still talking and distracted, Sakura stole another look at the blue paper before he could notice.

_Psychiatric form MR13B._

The name of the patient was blacked out but she already knew who it was for. Shock was making it harder to remain emotionless. Her eyes quickly darted back to Kakashi as he finished zipping the jacket, he’d also stopped talking.

“Sorry, what were you saying?”
Kakashi made an amused kind of huffing sound.

“You got lost in your own head again, right? It’s fine, it was nothing important anyway. But you did make a promise not to work tonight…”

Sakura snapped the folder shut when he stepped closer, it was reflex. He hadn’t read the whole thing, he didn’t know what was in it. And she sorely didn’t want him to take it from her now.

Though misguided in her intentions, Kakashi nodded in approval at the action.

*Act normal.*

*But get him out of here fast.*

“Yup, I promised. Even this won’t keep me up tonight.”

*Lies.* At least it sounded believable in her own ears. It wouldn’t do though, she needed to sound less suspicious, and get him out of the apartment so she could study that form properly. With more of a show than necessary, Sakura yawned, pretending to hide it with the back of her hand.

“I’ll take that as my cue to leave then.”

In his outstretched hand he offered her back the shirt she’d let him wear. It almost startled her mind back from whatever plain it had ascended to. She tried again to act as casually as possible putting the folder onto the table and stepping forward to take the shirt. It was almost too hard to meet his eye, like he would be able to see through her.

So she pretended like all was normal. Smiling sweetly.

There was a lingering moment when she put her hands on the shirt, reluctantly looking into his eyes as if seeing the painful truth for the first time. It was unfathomable. The strong person in front of her had always, *always* been just that. A rock, a pillar.

*But it made so much sense now.*

In the last few days alone she’d learnt that even Kakashi, who she regarded as the most strong-minded of all her acquaintance, was not without problems.

His eyes creased in the usual way, and it tugged at her chest more than it would have five minutes ago.

“Goodnight Sakura.”

*How could this have happened?*

“Goodnight Kakashi sensei.”

Thank goodness her voice didn’t betray her feelings.

He turned and headed not toward the door, but the window. Staring at his back now, printed with ‘Sixth Hokage’ so boldly on his jacket, Sakura had to fight back a stray tear. And then her body reacted without her express permission, stepping forward quickly and hugging him around his middle. Still clutching the shirt, she pressed herself tightly to his back, feeling him tense a little in surprise before he softened. Placing his hand on hers lightly as it squeezed his abdomen.

“Hey now, what’s this for?”
She bit back a tear.

“Just… You don’t ever need to apologize to me sensei.”

All she could think of were his own words. The contact probably made him uncomfortable but at that moment she didn’t care if it did. She needed him to know that he didn’t need to seek absolution from her. He huffed a little, patting her hand. It was a silent request to release him, and so she did. Offering the best fake smile she could at the glance he shot over his shoulder at her, and with one of his own he was gone.

Waiting the appropriate three seconds, knowing that he would be out of sight and ear shot, Sakura rushed back to the table and the red folder. Throwing it open to the blue page.

No mistaking it.

MR13B.

A form that Sakura herself had used a few times in her medical career. A form they used in very specific circumstances for shinobi and civilians alike.

A form they used when a patient posed a significant physical danger to themselves.

There weren’t many readable words on the paper in front of her, a lot of the details had been removed, and she had to wonder how it got in there in the first place. But there was one sentence that caused bile to rise in her throat.

*Probable attempted suicide, evaluate and monitor.*

She snapped it shut again, reminding herself that the man that was just in her apartment eating dinner with her was *alright*. Not normal by any measure of the word, and *weird* was probably a better descriptor honestly, but he was *okay*. Staring resolutely at the red cover with the date of the mission scrawled on the bottom, she realized something else.

*He had been only twenty.*

With more force than necessary Sakura pulled a chair out and sat, her eye wondering over all the piles of paper and reports. Now more than ever the resolve to see this hospital built as soon as possible burned within her. Kakashi’s own words echoing in her mind again.

*If something like this had been built in my time…*

Of course. It all became a little clearer.

If it hadn’t been for the promise that she’d made to not work Sakura was certain she would’ve spent the next twelve hours at that table. Something had sparked within her and it took a lot just to ignore it for one evening. But a promise was a promise.

Storming out of the room, turning the lights off as she went so she wouldn’t be tempted to look at the research again, Sakura flopped herself unceremoniously onto her bed. Wishing with all her might that her brain would just turn itself off for one second. *If only.* Worry, along with confusion, was apparently her other permanent state of being.

The downward spiral of her thoughts was unavoidable. Her view of Kakashi remained the same in a sense, he was still strong and caring and *there*. When it counted anyway. Perhaps that hadn’t always been the case, but now certainly, he was there when she needed him always. Kakashi was Kakashi.
But that was where the thoughts bottomed out.

He was acting weird. He was alone. He needed help.

Why men felt it necessary to avoid all emotions other than anger truly astonished her. The only time a lot of them got help was when it was forced upon them. Maybe that was the solution here too.

With a sigh she reached over to shut her lamp off, certain that sleep would not be forthcoming in the slightest. But something made her stop. The sight of a stupid book.

Suddenly the darkness didn’t seem so all encompassing as she remembered the mischievous glint in his eye when he’d picked it out for her. Followed by the inappropriate questioning which had broken the funk of her terrible day. Maybe things weren’t so bad. There was still a little joy there when they were together, and that made her smile. It was odd to be thinking about, but it was true.

As Sakura lay on her bed reading she felt odd in a few ways.

The turmoil that had been spiralling in her mind moments ago was now, not forgotten, but not so bad. The book had succeeded in distracting her again, and almost as if it knew she was feeling a bit odd, the book seemingly rewarded her with something. A good something. Actual physical contact between the two lead characters. Finally.

It wasn’t the raunchy kind of debauchery that they needed to get down to. It was only lingering hand holding and a peck on the cheek… Sakura’s eyes flicked up to the alarm clock at the end of the chapter. It was after midnight, and she couldn’t keep reading suddenly, even though she wanted to. Turning the light off she lay there in the dark, holding the closed book to her chest. There was a kind of tingling in her cheeks like sunburn, and her heart was beating weird.

After everything that night Sakura had ignored one pertinent fact, and it had taken that stupid book to jog her memory. Kakashi had kissed her. It was the slightest of kisses she’d ever received, but it had happened. The weirdest part was that it hadn’t bothered her at all. Not one bit. The usual anxiety over being touched was absent.

It was odd.

And it made her happy.

With that thought she placed the book back on her side table and closed her eyes. Kakashi was not the kind of person to change behaviours flippantly, giving her a thank you kiss was not something he would usually have done. It was hopeful.

Maybe she really could help him be okay.

Maybe they would both be okay.

Surprisingly, sleep greeted her with open arms, and for the first time in a while Sakura didn’t flinch.
Years ago, Kakashi firmly believed that there was a very special circle of hell reserved for those with copious amounts of energy in the morning. This belief stood firm until recent years, it was an unforeseen and unwelcome part of aging, but with age came the inability to sleep past 7am.

Eventually it had reached a sad point where most of his better work was done early. Though he put in every effort to hide this (there was a reputation he had to keep after all). Now he'd arrived at a happy medium where his mornings were reserved for the small personal things he needed to maintain to keep sane. Or as close to sane as he would ever be. As he sat at his dining room table, reading that ridiculous book, Kakashi began to doubt if he'd ever been sane in the first place.

It was unclear, at least to him, why he felt so odd about the last few nights interactions. And if he honestly had to pick a reason, he blamed this damned ridiculous book. It was shockingly terrible. He ignored the very small part of his brain which acknowledged that there were other more disturbing factors to his odd feelings. But avoidance was also something he'd mastered.

A buzzing at the door distracted him.

So close to finishing the book (and finally ridding it from his life altogether) Kakashi was equal parts glad and frustrated by the interruption.

But with an unsettling thud he knew exactly what was coming.

There was silence for approximately thirty seconds before he broke it.

“Good morning Guy.”

A squeak of wheels, another thud, and the man himself appeared next to him.

“Goddamnit Kakashi. Well, at least age hasn’t dulled your senses I see!”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

Guy snickered while Kakashi feigned putting a hand to his ear. With a sigh, Kakashi determined that the book would not be finished this morning, he snapped it shut before pocketing it. It was not uncommon for Guy to let himself in if the door wasn't answered immediately. The attempts to sneak up on him were also not uncommon, the thud of his cast against the door frame had given him away today.

“To what do I owe the pleasure Guy? Don’t tell me you’re rescheduling our climbing session this afternoon?”

“No, I wouldn’t dream of postponing, dear rival, I’ve been looking forward to it all week!”

“Oh well, it was worth a shot.” Guy shook his head at the remark, Kakashi would never actually let on that he also had been looking forward to it. He suspected the Leaf’s Green Beast knew this as well. “So what brings you here so early hmmm? If it’s for a friendly match I’ll have to pass. I, unfortunately, have other places to be this morning.”

“Well that’s just the thing Kakashi. Where the hell have you been all week? Usually I can pinpoint
your schedule like clockwork, and I know there was that little tussle the other night, but I haven't seen you at any of the regular spots at all this week. What's going on? You got a lady friend on the side that I don't know about?"

As soon as Guy had begun talking Kakashi had stood, collecting his coffee mug to the kitchen. It didn't deter his wheelchair bound friend from following him in the slightest.

“Nothing like that Guy. I've been working all week, just like always.”

“So you've picked up another project?”

Leaning back against the kitchen counter, Kakashi raked a hand through his hair. Trust Guy to figure that one out straight away.

“Am I that predictable?”

Guy smirked.

“Yes. Only to me, and only because I've known you forever. So what are we looking at this time hmm? Are you still augmenting your own jutsu? Or did you finally make some headway on Lady Tsunade’s anti aging technique?”

“Shh Guy, that's meant to be a secret project.”

Guy laughed loudly anyway, if any Anbu were stationed at the doors they would likely have heard it. Not that it really mattered.

“So, what is it?”

“It is a children's hospital. Here in Konoha.”

Guy looked thoughtful for all of two seconds. But Kakashi was fairly certain by now that his friend had very few thoughts that were silent.

“Seriously? A children's hospital? That's a pretty big undertaking, even for one of your projects. How did you come up with that?”

“I didn't. Sakura did. She approached me with the plans she'd been working on, right down to the layout. And now we're about to scout potential locations.”

As if on cue for comedic purposes, Guy shed what appeared to be an emotional tear. Guy's over the top emotions were apparently very much active at this time of the morning.

“So you're working on a project together with one of your beloved students. You must be so proud of her Kakashi, for coming up with something as monumental as this…”

“I don't know if pride is the right word. It's not any of my teachings that made her the way she is. That was all her own hard work, and she’s all grown up now… I suppose I am grateful to her.” For many reasons, but Kakashi kept that detail to himself.

“Grateful? You're not going to just take all the credit for her work right? Because I don’t think anyone will believe you came up with this on your own…”

Kakashi perhaps hammed it up a fraction in mock hurt.

“Of course not, why does everyone think that? And I am grateful, really, for all that she does. But
For some reason he couldn’t bring himself to utter the words out loud. He’d never exactly voiced this particular thought, it was something that had been simmering all week though. And he did fear that once it was actually out in the open there would be no escaping it. Guy looked at him expectantly with a quirked brow. When Kakashi met his eye the words still wouldn’t form.

“This… it’s really something Guy. I wish there had been something like this around when we were kids.”

Guy nodded with closed eyes and a hand to his chin in thought, probably thinking of comrades lost. Kakashi omitted the truth. That this particular project was just what he needed for many reasons. The chief of which…

“So you think this will be enough to retire then?”

Kakashi’s head snapped to look at Guy directly. Trust him to figure that one out too. Ever since he’d admitted to himself just how tired he was of the white hat and responsibility, Kakashi had felt, in a word, defeated. It had all become like a last mad dash of effort to get as much good done as possible so that he might be worthy of being released of his title of Hokage.

And then Sakura had turned up at exactly the right time.

It was all wonderfully coming together, and he’d so sorely needed the distraction on top of it all. The company had been pretty stellar as well, he found himself looking forward to their exchanges at the end of the day. Actually having dinner with another person, wanting to hear about her day, and her asking about his in return. In all, he was enjoying himself for the first time in a long while, and not as lonely. The next thought that dashed across his mind was uninvited and bothered him so much that he had to physically move. Now it had entered his thoughts it couldn’t be avoided.

It wasn’t the project, it was Sakura that was making him happy.

“I don’t know if I could ever retire Guy. You know me. Besides, we’re far too young to be talking about that kind of thing.”

His companion laughed in reply, but Kakashi was shifting uncomfortably out of the kitchen. The sudden turn of his own thoughts was disconcerting. Perhaps it wasn’t that ridiculous book at all at the source of the odd feelings within him, perhaps it was just Sakura. And it wasn’t oddness at all, it was happiness. A concept so foreign and far removed from him that he could only describe it as odd.

But that didn’t make it right.

Enjoying someone’s company was one thing, but relying on another for happiness only lead to hurt. Kakashi had all the evidence he would ever need to back that up, and their names were inscribed on the cenotaph. Emotional distance was the only form of self preservation he knew.

Guy left fairly quickly while Kakashi pretended to be busy readying himself for the quick scouting trip they had planned for today. Though they’d never exactly organized a time, things had gotten a little weird before he left her apartment last night they’d never discussed it properly. That was another thing causing him discomfort.

Sakura had been acting weird.

Originally he’d attributed it to the shock from the physical contact, however brief, but she hadn’t really reacted to it at the time. And then she’d hugged him out of nowhere. It was weird. Yet it still
made him feel a kind of light heartedness that she’d been comfortable enough to do so. Combined with the relief he had felt at her accepting his apology, the moment their eyes had met Kakashi had felt so odd he’d left as quickly as his legs would allow.

Maybe he could just play it off as happiness that she wasn’t really like him at all. Instead of feeling happy simply because she’d touched him. Though he’d be lying to himself, coincidentally that was another thing he was a master of.

Kakashi left his own home via the window. The Hokage’s quarters were a great place to live, spacious and well furnished, but the one thing he missed most was being able to come and go as he pleased. It had been a hard thing to get used to. Not that he was ever urgently required for much in the last seven years. Today he got a little enjoyment at being able to sneak past the Anbu guards on the perimeter. The good mood he was in continued to be dangerous.

Walking the streets with his hands in his pockets, Kakashi cast a glance at his sensei’s likeness on the mountainside. While sometimes it acted as a comfort, today it solidified his guilt and reminded him that it would be dangerous to let Sakura get any closer. The whole point was for her to find her own happiness, and not be like him. Though he was starting to doubt if she’d ever been like him at all, it really could have all been projection on his part. She was her own person, and still the good and kind girl he’d once known.

Again, it felt like he was underestimating her. Sakura was Sakura. And she was only doing what she did best, which was care for others. She’d told him as much, and with every subtle touch, even though it didn’t always make her comfortable, she proved that she cared. Every meal, every hug, every pep talk…

As he came to be standing outside her apartment complex Kakashi decided that maybe this closeness wasn’t a bad thing. Maybe he could make himself more worthy of that closeness. And it was making him happy after all.

For now at least he drew the conclusion that if Sakura initiated the contact, and was comfortable receiving it, then it could continue. And if he felt guilty about it, then it was only a reflection on how useless he was at not seeing Sakura for what she really is. Caring, kind, passionate, smart, feisty….

While making that list in his mind, Kakashi almost went to jump up onto the rooftop of the complex below Sakura's apartment, intending to enter through her window again. But in the light of day, although relatively early for a Sunday at 8:30am, there would be witnesses. No Hokage should be seen climbing into young ladies windows.

Young lady.

When it had happened still perplexed him, but she was definitely very womanlike. Which only fuelled the oddness of his feelings. The few decidedly adult conversations they’d had added to this too. Perhaps it was part disbelief at his own aging. He made a mental note to ask at his next session before making another note that he still needed to up those sessions to fortnightly. Talking with others more was revealing more issues about himself than five years worth of check ups.

The entrance to Sakura’s apartment was easily found. There were no other apartments on this floor to make it easier, pressing the buzzer he observed that there was no way for her to actually tell who it was at her door.

Thump.

When no other noise was heard he pressed it again.
For a moment he thought he’d heard footsteps but all fell silent again, he started to become apprehensive as to what he was walking into. Patiently he thrust his hands back into his pockets so he wouldn’t hit the buzzer for a third time, there was obviously some ritual taking place here that men weren’t privy to. Like when women went to the bathroom in packs or deemed it necessary to have more than one type of shampoo. And while he’d never been particularly interested in solving the mysteries of the opposite sex, he was definitely curious as to what was going on in there.

At about the same time he decided to physically knock on the door there was an unmistakable click sound, and a whoosh as the door opened. Revealing a very flushed and unkempt Sakura. Kakashi was intrigued in an instant. Her usually tidy hair was dishevelled, her cheeks were rosy and it was almost like she was recovering her breath. It was a very telling smile, that she was more shocked than pleased to see him.

“Oh, Kakashi sensei! Hi!”

“Yo.”

The way she proceeded to blush into another deeper shade of crimson should have held his attention, instead he was drawn to what she was wearing. The baggy sweatshirt and very short shorts revealed far more leg than he was used to seeing, and it screamed to him that she’d simply thrown on whatever was closest. It was also not her pajamas from the night before. Interesting.

“Let me guess, you completely forgot about our little scouting expedition hmm?”

Sakura pinched the bridge of her nose before she replied, a soft whine in her voice.

“Of course, that was today. Yeah you got me, must have slipped my mind.” The nervous laughter made her sound almost relieved about something.

“I know we never really discussed a time…”

“Oh no, it’s fine really! Just give me five minutes and I’ll be ready.”

Sakura stood back a little, holding the door open for him to enter.

“You sure? I’m not interrupting something…”

It was this particular shade of blush on Sakura that Kakashi was most fond of. The one where it travelled her entire face and emitted a kind of glow that let him know he’d won whatever teasing bout they had been engaged in.

“What? No of course not…” her tone was not at all convincing.

Smirking as he stepped inside Sakura quickly shut the door behind him and sped down the hallway.

“Five minutes! I swear…” she called out as she went, “make yourself comfortable!”

“Uh huh.” Kakashi had a solemn feeling of deja vu.

He cast a quick look at the table to see if she’d kept her word last night and not continued to work without him. It was pleasantly surprising to see everything still in its place, down to the red Anbu mission folder. He had mixed feelings about reopening that hideout, but it was for a good cause at the end of the day. Another thud and the sound of muffled curse words met his ears and he smiled.
“So did you get your twelve hours sleep?” Kakashi called out while scanning the small map of Konoha that was on the table. She waited until she entered the room before replying. Looking more like the Sakura he was accustomed to seeing.

“So not quite, but eight hours uninterrupted was pretty great.”

*Eight hours huh?*

“Good, I’m pleased to hear it. You didn’t do any more work after I left either?”

“Oh no, I couldn't have even if I wanted to. I was wiped out…”

“So how come it was only eight?”

“Huh?”

Sakura appeared genuinely confused which only added to his amusement.

“How come it was only *eight* hours not *twelve*?”

Kakashi wasn't so sure what he expected, but again it was something other than reserved silence. A blush, a telling off for being nosy, anything. All she answered with was a shrug and an attempt to hide her face.

This was the weirdness from last night all over again. Maybe he'd been wrong in his assessment, perhaps she wasn't comfortable around him at all. Or he'd just probed too hard into her personal life. Either way he wasn’t going to press her for information she wasn't going to give freely. They had grown a little closer, but it was still wrong. Instead he could salvage the day and do what he did best. Distraction. Projects. Busy work.

“Okay then. Well the potential locations are marked out here…” she stood next to him to see where he was pointing, Kakashi decided she smelt *odd*. “So if we take this route around the village, we will actually see five of the shortlisted properties instead of three. It shouldn't take too much longer, an hour or two tops maybe.”

“That sounds like a good plan sensei.”

“I do come up with a good one every so often, if I do say so myself. Alright, we’ll go from here... “ he indicated to some vague point on the map.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to start from over here?”

Leaning across him Sakura pointed to another area, and she wasn’t wrong. Closer now Kakashi decided that the *odd* smell was a mixture of soap, perfume and something *else* that wasn’t unpleasant.

“It would. But trust me, we want to be starting here.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where the coffee is. I don't know about you but I could certainly use one.”

Sakura scoffed but made some reluctant noise of agreement. Kakashi waited by the door while she gathered papers and things into a satchel, not paying much attention to her, he looked around the room curiously. In the light of day the apartment seemed even more peculiar with its bulky furniture. He noted the box of children’s toys by the sofa, Naruto or Ino must visit often enough.
Back on the streets of Konoha, it was the usual Sunday morning hustle and bustle. They'd wasted no time in making their way to the coffee shop, and apart from their takeaway order, no words had been spoken between them. Kakashi gave the usual nods and polite smiles when it was necessary.

To Kakashi the silence was not uncomfortable, and if he started reading Icha Icha about now it would be downright nostalgic to their days as Team 7. Pity he hadn't brought one with him. Stealing a side glance to Sakura it was crystal clear that this was anything but comfortable silence for her. She looked worried. It was such a look that it compelled him to ask if she was alright.

Instead he downed what remained of his coffee while she was distracted, adjusting his mask back into place. The action was enough for Sakura to break the silence.

“How you manage not to get stomach ulcers with the way you eat and drink is a medical mystery sensei.”

It was a snide comment as she surveyed him from the corner of her eye. Her tone was devoid of all it's usual mirth, but perhaps just a hint of foreboding mischief still lingered.

“I'll take that as a compliment.”

“You shouldn't.” Her reply was so quick he snapped his head to look at her better. She met his eye with a straight face. “You know it's not healthy to down coffee like that right? Not to mention actual food.”

“I'll have you know that it's only in certain company in which I might adjust my eating habits.” He watched her eyebrow twitch. “And it's usually pretty rare for me to be eating with another person anyway.”

Kakashi could practically see her soften. He hadn't meant to sound so pathetic but that was how it had inadvertently came out. To be honest he wasn't even sure why he had felt the need to justify himself and keep talking in the first place. She looked even more worried now, averting her gaze to the road ahead and taking a sip of her own.

“It is good coffee.” She was quiet, and weird still.

“It is. One of my better ideas. It did help that Guy interrupted my usual morning ritual, so I had to toss it and run.”

It was small, but the faintest of giggles could be heard from Sakura's direction and Kakashi decided that being a little self-deprecating might just lighten her. Who cared if it was at his own expense.

“Wait a minute… you don’t even let Guy sensei see your face?”

“Nope. Gotta keep some of the mystery alive.”

She giggled quietly again.

“You two should just make it official and get it over with sensei.”

“And I think I preferred it when you were comparing me to an Uchiha, Sakura.”

They fell into silence as they walked out of the busier streets and onto one that was shaded and quiet. The existing hospital situated just beyond the treeline. While Sakura’s quiet laughter had faded Kakashi was not oblivious to the way her hands nervously shifted at her sides to grasping the coffee cup. It was lucky he was a patient man. But he also owed Sakura that time and patience.
Deciding to keep a firmer focus on the task at hand, Kakashi tried to curb his current thoughts. But just before they arrived at the first location, discarding the coffee cups, Sakura froze. When she was no longer next to him Kakashi turned and observed her.

This was weird. The Sakura he once knew had not been one to hide her emotions so readily, her heart had always very much been on her sleeve. This woman, was entirely different.

“You said I could always come to you with anything, right Kakashi sensei?”

“Of course.” He tried to add a softness to his tone but it came out more bluntly than intended, he’d never been so good at these types of conversations.

“There was a reason, that it was eight and not twelve…”

Sakura began to untie the satchel at her side, it took Kakashi a moment to register exactly what she had meant in her words.

“You weren’t working right? Because you promised…”

“No, no it wasn’t anything to do with the hospital. I swear.”

Okay, now he was curious.

* * * *

It was eating her alive, that damnable Anbu file and the misery it contained.

While one minute she thought she could be professionally indifferent, the next he would surprise her with kindness and suddenly it got harder to ignore.

It was confronting, but she had to know, or she’d worry herself into an ulcer.

“Sakura, you don’t have to tell me if you’re not comfortable…”

“I was reading.”

She blurted out, interrupting him, somehow she had to push the words out. There was a moment where he raised an eyebrow and cocked his head a little in confusion. Then his features relaxed.

“Oh. I see. Did you get to chapter seven?”

It was now Sakura’s turn for confusion, her brow furrowed and then she finally realized what he was referring to.

“What? No! Not that, don’t be absurd… Wait, what happens in chapter seven?”

She could practically hear his smirk. Not only was he now completely aware she was reading that stupid book, he was taunting her with spoilers, and she was only halfway through chapter six. The words had come out fast so he didn’t have time to reply, not that she would let him now at this point. She needed to get this out.

“Nevermind, don’t tell me. I wasn’t talking about that, I was talking about this.”

Finally retrieving the red folder she held it out for him to observe as he stepped closer.

“The Anbu report? As boring as that one is, it doesn’t make good bedtime reading Sakura…”
“I’m only talking about one page.” Her voice was starting to waiver and she didn’t care now that it did, it sufficed to silence him at least. “Just one page Kakashi sensei.”

With a heavy sigh she watched his features contort to a kind of concern mixed with confusion. It always appeared as if anything he didn’t immediately understand actually caused him physical pain. She opened it to the blue form, knowing exactly where it was located.

“Do you know what this is?”

He stood just in front of her and raised an eyebrow.

“I wasn't expecting a pop quiz in paperwork, do you know how much of it I see in a day?”

She ignored his rhetorical question studying his face as he took the folder and scanned it. He met her eye, now looking just as worried.

“No, I can't say I'm familiar with this one…”

“This…” she pointed to the code with an edge of impatience, not needing to see it to know where it was. “This is the form that's used when a patient is admitted for psychiatric assessment. We still use it…”

“Okay, I take it this is not a test to see if I actually read those medical reports you keep dropping off…”

She continued to watch his face as he took a closer look at the form. When his eyebrows both raised slightly and his voice trailed off she was sure he'd figured it out.

“Sensei, we only use that particular form if there is evidence of an attempt at self harm. And even though most of that one is censored…” her voice cracked, “I can tell who it was for.”

She watched him concentrate, flicking the form up to check underneath it. He didn't need to say anything, but obviously he was trying to figure out how she knew. Sakura glumly put him out of his misery, her voice came out dull and listless.

“The age of the patient isn't blacked out”.

She shifted uncomfortably, he nodded. There was an air of seriousness between the two of them which felt physically heavy. She waited with bated breath for his reaction, mentally preparing what she would say. There were only two people on that mission, one being Yamato, and she knew who was the older of the two.

“This. This is what's had you acting so weird?”

The question threw her, as did his action of snapping the file shut. The queer little smirk also didn't help.

“What do you mean weird? I haven't been weird, I've been worried sick Kakashi sensei!”

“No, no you've been weird. Last night and this morning. Well, this certainly explains it.”

“So it's true?”

“In a way, yes.”

He held the folder back out for her to take. There was a moment's pause as she put her hand on it and
met his eye. There was a concerned look written on his features.

“Sakura, please try not to worry. It was a long time ago.”

“But sensei…”

It was that same gentle voice he'd used that night at Ichiraku’s. So that she felt like the only person in the world able to hear it.

“Anbu used to take certain...measures that you won't be familiar with. I was young, and took any mission I could get my hands on, dangerous, solo, you name it. I had nothing left to lose and I ran myself ragged...”

Sakura didn't shift her gaze from his face, even when she returned the folder to her satchel. Perhaps it was because of all the other reading she had been enraptured with, but the way he spoke like it was some dramatic novel had her just as captivated and unable to respond.

“So, and I suspect Tenzo had something to do with this, a story was embellished to *force* me to stop. Anbu did that a lot back in the day. It was a good method when someone refused to take a break or after a particularly gruelling mission. They claimed that I activated that booby trap and took the brunt of the blow on purpose to end it all. Which is only partially true, I was shielding Tenzo from the worst of it. Do you see now why I don't like the idea of *you* working so much hmm?”

Sakura processed the information as quickly as she could. But all she managed was a nod in reply.

“Good. Now come on, we've got a job to do.”

They started walking, Sakura falling into step beside him. All the while she observed his expressions with curiosity. She *should* leave it be, but she still had questions, and he wasn't often in the mood to freely give information like this.

“When you say you had nothing left to lose…”

He sighed.

“I meant there was no one waiting for me to come home. No family, no comrades. But don’t look so down about it, things got better eventually.”

“They did?” She hadn't meant to sound so skeptical, but it came out that way regardless. He still lived on his own as far as she knew.

“Well yeah. I got put in charge of three delightful little troublemakers didn't I?”

She huffed a sigh. It was a sweet sentiment coming from Kakashi but it didn't make her worry dissipate. He still needed help. It wasn't like he had many others to take care of him, not that Guy didn't count, but she imagined the kind of help Kakashi needed was not in that man's capacity.

“That doesn't sound better. We were horrible, *and* we all went our own ways.”

“Maybe you guys were a little horrible, but I can guarantee that I was far worse at that age. Besides, one of you always seems to be around and pestering me about something so I’m kind of lucky. Lucky as in you're all alive and well, thriving even, through little to no effort on my part.”

Sakura walked quietly beside him for a few steps. It felt odd to be talking about it, but she was glad the line of communication was open. Maybe that was all she could do for him.
“Kakashi sensei, you know you can always come to me for anything, right?”

He paused, eyeing her before smiling a little in a familiar way. At least she thought it was a smile.

“You're really something Sakura.” He said it with a soft chuckle in his voice, like perhaps he thought she was kidding.

“I mean it.” She added a stern look for good measure.

“I know, so do I.”

Somehow they’d managed to stop walking altogether, standing there simply regarding each other. Despite her feelings Sakura found herself smiling just a bit. How she never noticed the loneliness affecting him before this week astounded her, perhaps she had just figured he was alone on purpose. Or it had just never bothered her so much. There were many facets to the man behind the mask.

“Sakura, I’m not that person anymore, I won’t be doing anything quite so reckless or stupid. So you have to stop worrying alright?”

Kakashi had said it with an air of importance, and Sakura knew what he was trying to tell her. But she wanted that verbal confirmation. She pointed to the diamond on her forehead.

“Just like I spent three years constantly channeling chakra to this very specific point, I will always be worrying about you on some level.”

“I’m not that pathetic am I?”

“Your eating habits alone are cause for concern, then there’s the working too much, overdoing it and not seeking medical attention…” she jabbed the shoulder she’d healed the night before for effect, “not to mention the inappropriate questions you ask. One of these days you’ll get slapped sensei, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I might just be into slapping, you never know.”

At that Sakura felt her eyes grow wider, and she just barely resisted the urge to punch him into oblivion, but it was the sound of his actual laughter that stopped her. Just like when he truly smiled, this genuine laugh changed him completely, and it was now that she realized it was only because she’d never seen him like that. So she found herself smiling instead despite the improper remark.

“You finished?” She asked as he nodded a little in reply, eyes still closed and smiling. “Anyway, you can help me worry a little less. Just promise, you’ll come to me if you need to.”

Sakura watched him tense a bit now that he’d stopped laughing. When Kakashi finally answered it was with a tone she wasn’t familiar with from him, almost like it hadn’t meant to be said out loud at all.

“A sensei shouldn’t burden a student with their own failings…”

“Good thing I’m not your student then. I’m a doctor, and a friend.”

Logic would work well with him, and she knew that he wouldn’t be able to fault it. *It had worked before.* Very slowly he softened, and then jerked his head in a nod.

“Right. So it’s a promise then?”

Kakashi nodded again, the threatening aura she gave off forcing him into actual words.
“Okay, I promise.”

It was quiet, but it would do. Sakura folded her arms with a sigh of mild satisfaction. Her point had been made, and he had understood. Just like the way he’d made it so very clear to her that there wasn’t much he wouldn’t do to see her happy. Coffee, dinner, hunting down idiot genin, books… It was weird in all ways, but it was kind, and he deserved that kindness in return.

Kakashi made that soft chuckling noise before he spoke.

“I don't know what I was so worried about.”

It was that weird look again, the one where she was sure he was smiling but his eyes were open and meeting hers. When he didn't elaborate she questioned him.

“What do you mean sensei?”

“Well,” he scratched his head, “with all the work you've been doing, and since you're no longer with Sasuke, I was worried you might end up...like me.”

It wasn't easy for him to admit that, and she could tell. Was that where part of the weird behavior was coming from?

“What? Don't be ridiculous, I'm nothing like you.”

“I know.” The speed of his reply threw her. “Like I said Sakura, you're something else.”

What was so bad in ending up like him she couldn't be sure of. He obviously didn't think very highly of himself, as usual. So she offered him a small smile and patted his arm affectionately.

“If I start reading trashy novels in public then you have my permission to be concerned. Come on, we're almost there.”

They were walking for all of five seconds before Kakashi broke the comfortable silence.

“Hey Sakura…”

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

“Does that mean you're reading trashy novels in private instead?”

Another inappropriate question, and she really should have seen it coming. But hindsight was a fickle thing. Of course he would come back to that detail. She didn't have to reply, it wasn't necessary and she could attempt to save some of her dignity. But in light of their conversation today it didn't bother her as much.

“Ha ha, very funny. I’m a grown woman and I’m allowed to unwind at the end of a hard day in whatever way I choose... “

“Unwinding huh? Is that what you call it…”

In a knee jerk reaction she almost playfully jabbed him in his ribcage for the comment, but she held back. Injuring the Hokage wasn’t something she wanted on her record and if someone invariably asked why it had happened she’d have to relive this damned conversation.

“Don’t be rude. Yes it’s unwinding, sometimes when I have a hectic day, or if I can’t get my head out of the game, reading something helps. It doesn’t even have to be good, it’s just so I can get out of
my own thoughts for a while. Helps me sleep…”

“You have trouble sleeping?”

Kakashi asked it quickly, hoping to keep her talking probably. It worked.

“A bit. It’s either trouble actually getting to sleep, or trouble staying asleep. After reading that file last night, that stupid book is probably the only reason I got any sleep at all I was worrying so much.”

“While a disturbingly large part of me is glad that you’re reading it, it’s a fickle coping mechanism at best.”

Sakura snapped her eyes from the pathway to his face.

“Coping mechanism? What makes you think…”

“Trust me. I’m the expert when it comes to that one in particular.”

Oh. He was talking about himself. And he always had a book with him. It was only as Hokage, when he was too busy with village matters, that she ever saw him without some unseemly novel in his hand.

What was even more peculiar was that Kakashi was aware that it was a coping mechanism. Weird.

“I wish I’d known before recommending that book to you. It’s probably not the kind to help you sleep at least, more the kind that makes you stay awake half the night to finish it…”

“You’re telling me…”

The snide comment had come out under her breath, she forgot his excellent hearing. He gave an amused kind of huff before continuing.

“In any case, I hope that you’re not easily scared by haunted houses. We’re here.”

Sakura had completely forgotten that the first property they were scouting was the abandoned manor house. Its imposing structure only just visible through the vegetation that had overgrown after years of neglect. The windows on the second storey were all boarded up, part of the roof had caved in on one side of the enormous building, the plants looked to be taking over the rest of it.

“There’s not as much actual land to the section is there, it’s just this giant monstrosity.”

How Kakashi went from inappropriate to completely focussed in two seconds made Sakura’s head spin a little. But she was exceedingly pleased that the focus had been shifted from her reading habits.

“It really doesn’t look safe. Do you know who it belonged to in the first place Kakashi sensei?”

“Mmm. Well it's a point of contention really, no one's quite sure. A lot of theories have been thrown around, my personal favorite being that this one of the houses Tenzo built after the village was destroyed and no one wanted to live in it. But in all likelihood, it just belonged to someone who died in the last war and there was no family left to inherit the place. So, here it sits.”

It was a glum thought, luckily Sakura would not have time to wallow in it for very long. Kakashi had pried the rusted gate open, with no real effort as the hinges all but dissolved at the movement.

“What are you doing?”
“We can’t exactly inspect the property from all the way over here now can we?”

“Yes, yes we can. I have an important surgery next week and I’d rather not have a roof collapse on my head in the meantime.”

“It’s not going to collapse…”

Sakura eyed him, deadpan. The look was enough for him to scratch his own head as he turned to glance at the already caved in section of the building.

“Okay, well no more than it already has, I’m sure. Besides, there aren’t many properties that come cheaper or closer to the existing hospital inside of Konoha. If we get nowhere with the others we may well have to come back to this one.”

It was logical and she was aware of that. Following him slowly, so she wouldn’t be prodded or snatched by the overgrown shrubbery, Sakura thought out loud.

“The council will probably ask how thoroughly the property was surveyed…”

“Exactly.” His voice startled her, “we’ve searched worse places for missions before.”

Another thought suddenly sprouted in Sakura’s mind, uninvited and inappropriate, she was glad it hadn't voiced itself. And it had everything to do with that stupid book and the last few chapters she’d been reading. The main characters were travelling and stumbled across an abandoned house in the midst of a storm, that was where she had left them, the anticipation had been killing her all day.

Clambering their way to the entrance, the door itself slightly askew before them, Sakura released a deep breath. A sigh to anyone else's ears.

This was not going to be some quick scouting trip.

But it was all for a good cause, the best of causes really. With a new form of resolve she cracked her knuckles, stepping up onto the porch and trying to push out any thoughts of the brief but exhilarating kiss the characters from that book had shared in a similar place.

* It was one hell of a kiss.

She’d been reading that part when the buzzer had gone off this morning, in a desperate attempt to distract herself from renewed worry when she’d woken up. It seemed ironic that now she was trying to distract herself from the thing she’d been using as a distraction. Her brain was also refusing to process the small peck she had received last night. And how warm and happy it had made her feel immediately afterwards. Until that damned Anbu report ruined it all.

In all the back and forth within her own mind, she didn’t notice just how closely he was watching her. Kakashi brushing past on his way to remove the door from its hinges. The contact caused her to tense completely, in such a jarring way that she would be surprised if he didn’t notice. Sakura blamed it on the downward spiral of her thoughts. Thankfully he said nothing about it.

“You realize that none of this is usable so far?” She spoke with an edge, trying to get her focus back on track. Damn him and his stupid book.

“I’m aware. Believe me…” Kakashi’s eyes darted around the door frame and to the darkness within. “So, ladies first?”

* * * *
Kakashi wasn’t entirely sure that the structure would hold out as they walked in. His eyes adjusted to the dimness inside relatively quickly, the various holes and gaps in the framework let the light trickle in just enough. He kept close to Sakura, not out of protectiveness as he might have done in the past, but out of morbid curiosity.

While he attributed many of his odd earlier feelings to the happiness that Sakura had unknowingly nurtured within him, now that he was aware of it, things had gotten progressively more odd.

It started the moment she’d confronted him with that Anbu folder. The fact that she was willing to talk with him about that incident and her own worries had caused this current feeling of oddness. Mostly he was happy, that she cared enough to worry, and then to make sure everything was okay. It had been a strangely cathartic experience for him at least. So much so, that just like that, his own worries vanished.

Sakura, even in her adult form, wouldn't hide her feelings or concerns from him. She would come to him. It had released Kakashi from all doubt, he had worried for nothing.

She was nothing like him. And somehow because she trusted him with her own worries, he had even voiced his own. Actually saying it out loud made it sound even more ridiculous, and it put the matter to bed so completely.

She was something else.

“So, how do you want to do this?”

She kicked the floor as she spoke, likely testing to see if the board could hold their weight.

“It’d be quicker if we split up. I’ll take this side, you take that one, we’ll decide afterward if it’s even worth attempting the upstairs…” the staircase itself was crumpled and missing a few essential parts. “If I’m right and this place follows standard architectural layouts, we should meet up somewhere around a kitchen at the back.”

“Got it.”

Sakura was already moving off in the other direction, oddly eager. Or just keen to get out of this depressing place. He waited until she was out of sight before moving himself.

That was the other oddity. Today specifically, Kakashi was getting some kind of perverse enjoyment in just looking at her, and he couldn’t place why. It had started the second she’d opened her door that morning with that flushed look on her face. There had been something about her that beguiled him.

After hearing that she was reading that particular book he made an educated guess as to what caused it. Just that thought made him smirk.

A loud creaking noise above startled him into thinking clearer.

This house was as hair-raising as they came. With a large foreboding foyer that might have commanded some awe in its former glory. Now it wouldn’t be entirely surprising if bats, or some other winged creatures, descended upon them. Sakura was right, nothing was usable, the cost of clearing this place out alone would put many of the older council members off the idea. Size wise it was perfect, at least so far. Ducking through another precariously warped archway the hallways it lead to were narrow.

At first Kakashi had at least tried to peek into each of the adjoining rooms to that hallway. They were all small. Too small for a working hospital, even if it was refurbished, nowadays the equipment for medical care was so bulky and expensive it would be impossible to keep it in such a place. So he
stopped looking so fastidiously.

Somehow he’d gone back into ‘mission mode’. This was far from life or death. This was property appraisal. There was no need to be so serious about it all, and there really had been no need to split up like that as well. At least that was the excuse he was going with. The truth was one of those disturbing things he didn’t want to admit to himself because then it would take root. But just like the difficult admission that his days as Hokage were wearing him down, this disturbing thought needed to be addressed.

_He had been looking forward to seeing her._

That was all it had been, just a single thought like that. But the disturbing difference was that it had nothing to do with Sakura’s company, and everything to do with being able to _look_ at her. As soon as he’d suggested splitting up to save time Kakashi had felt a tinge of regret, which had lead him to attempting to block that train of thought.

Five years of _sessions_ had taught him that pushing things out of mind was not the healthy way to deal with them. He wasn’t about to repeat destructive behaviours, not after he’d needed to reach out for help those years ago.

Kakashi sighed. Loudly. The old building sighing itself under his weight.

He _really_ needed to up those sessions.

In an unusual act of rebellion Kakashi didn’t even bother looking into the rest of the rooms in this wing, instead finding the largest hallway which inevitably lead to the kitchen. There was no way this place would be the winner in any case.

Devoid of any furniture throughout the rest of the house, what he had seen anyway, Kakashi was pleased to see a breakfast nook in the corner of the room. It was built in to the wall, so without much thought to it, he removed the layers of dust with a quick sleight of hand and sat. A vague part of his brain reminded him that this was a lot like sulking, and he was only sulking because _he couldn’t see her._

It was weird.

For a moment Kakashi tried to process the sickening thought, hating himself more with each second, but then he remembered something. That something was in the form of a ridiculous book inside his pocket. Distraction. That could work. It really was a fickle coping mechanism though, he knew it to be sure, and he hoped like hell that this poor excuse for a novel would suffice for the moment. It had been one of the first things he’d learnt in his _sessions_. All the books he’d read over the years, memorizing some of them, it was all an escape. One he’d even called upon _during missions_. Ever since his father’s death.

Like Sakura said, it didn’t even matter what they were most of the time, it was just to keep the brain busy and distracted.

It was disturbing that she was employing the same tactic. But, like she said herself, it was only at home, after a hard day and never in public. Besides, by her age he had rarely been seen without a book in hand. She was _so much better_ than him in many ways.

Far from distracting him from his thoughts, Kakashi discovered that this book was only fuelling the fire of his confusion. It didn't help that the climax of it was probably the most cliché and vapid thing he’d ever read. With three pages left there was no hope in it redeeming itself in any way.
A flash of pink distracted him, Sakura walking in through the other door to the kitchen with a cautious gait. Kakashi pretended to ignore her, but he wasn't really reading at this stage.

He had felt a terrifying instant relief as soon as she walked in. Terrifying because it was just so wrong. Regarding her closely while she examined the dreary room Kakashi couldn't believe the stark contrast. She was bright, and colorful. Standing out in this grey and dark place. Feeling his gaze on her, Sakura turned to him with a wide smile. He returned it before forcing his eyes back to the opened page.

There was a reason the smile on his lips refused to fade after that, he'd finally figured it out.

Just like Sakura was the brightest thing this kitchen had ever seen, she was easily the most vibrant thing in his own grey and dreary day. It was no wonder he felt relief just by looking at her. The sight of her smile in this dilapidated place had triggered the realization.

“I can’t believe you’ve almost finished that…” Sakura indicated to the book.

“Yeah, I’m forcing my way through it. Much like young Gideon is forcing this poor young woman into marrying him…”

Kakashi had meant to pocket it before she’d seen, it was possible he could still go into cardiac arrest if she started asking questions again. He was perfectly fine with the teasing, so long as he was taking the lead with it, and it didn’t probe too deeply into the workings of his own mind.

Sakura sat next to him on the bench seat, peering at the pages he was pretending to read.

"Have they had sex in the church bathroom yet?"

He snapped it shut with a sigh.

“Yes. It was every bit as disappointing as bathroom sex usually is…”

From the corner of his eye he watched the blush creep onto her face. She was still smiling though, at least until she sighed herself.

“So sensei, what’s the verdict?”

Resting an elbow on the table, Kakashi turned slightly, leaning the side of his face into his open palm. Facing Sakura a little better to watch her reactions, as he started talking she mirrored his action in a teasing way.

“Why don’t you tell me what you found first?”

“Oh ok.” Her features went back to all seriousness. “Honestly, apart from its location there is nothing else going for this place. Some of the major rooms are okay, the rest of it is too pokey and small. And that’s only the parts that aren’t already rubble. What about you? What did you find?”

“Three things. The first, you were completely right to start with. This place is entirely unusable, for what we need anyway…”

“Told you so…” She mumbled and he raised an eyebrow.

“Secondly, and this isn’t so pertinent I suppose, but I believe I’ve figured out exactly why this place is empty to begin with.”

Sakura’s eyebrow twitched a fraction, when she didn’t speak he assumed she wanted more detail.
“I was curious at the lack of furniture to start with, moving around it became apparent that the floor itself wouldn’t even hold the heavy kind of furnishings you’d expect with this kind of house, even in its prime. So, and this is just a hunch, I suspect that this was never meant to be a permanent residence in the first place. Likely a temporary establishment for a lord or dignitary after the village was destroyed during Pein’s attack. Then they’ve moved off. Some of the rooms looked too small even for servants so my guess is they were for storage.”

“Things were so hectic then, it doesn’t really surprise me that something could have been forgotten like that”. There was a tinge of sadness as Sakura spoke, likely in remembering the day the village was wiped off the map. “That sounds like a pretty solid hunch sensei.”

“My hunches usually are.” Kakashi shrugged, earning a huff and an eye roll in return.

“So what’s the third thing?”

The mask hid the smirk, he’d been looking forward to this part.

“Lastly, and most importantly, if my calculations are correct, you are somewhere between chapters four and seven.”

**Bingo.**

It was the instant reddening of her face that confirmed the theory. While he had verbal confirmation that she hadn’t yet reached chapter seven, there was something about her odd behaviour as they entered the building that made him curious. Kakashi might have actually smiled at the way her eyes widened, though she made no attempt to hide her obvious self consciousness.

Teasing her **had** always been a favourite pastime of his after all.

“It’s fine. I’ll take your silence as confirmation. Now, shall we move on to the next before the rest of the roof caves in?”

With a wink he stood, Sakura giving him a curt nod in reply before slowly getting to her feet.

Completely and oddly satisfied with himself, Kakashi ushered Sakura out of what was left of the doorway. The smile on his face becoming somewhat of a permanent fixture as the blush still stained her cheeks. Again the silence to him wasn’t uncomfortable as they fought their way through the plants and back to the streets of Konoha.

Just like the rest of the week though, Sakura maintained the ability to surprise him.

“Six and a half…”

She murmured glumly when they were well out of sight of the manor house.

“Pardon?” He’d heard her, and he’d also understood her meaning. But it was too tempting an offer to resist.

“I’m halfway through chapter six. And if you even think about teasing me with spoilers I’ll make sure that physical is the most painful and unpleasant experience of your adult life. Do I make myself clear?”

He really should have seen it coming.

“Crystal.” He watched her walking beside him with arms crossed and a petulant look on her face.
“What was that you said the other day? That you would never dream of threatening the Hokage?”

“It wasn’t that threatening, think of it more as incentive…”

“Noted.”

She smirked in his peripheral vision. While a week ago he might have been a little bothered by this mildly intimidating conversation with her, seeing Sakura walking boldly in the scrappy and confident way that she used to made it worthwhile. It astounded him that he’d never noticed how it had dimmed in the last few years, or maybe she was just growing up. This adult form of hers was an enigma to him at least.

They rounded the corner to stop square in front of the next property on the list. Seeing it up close Kakashi had to admit it was a dismal option as well.

“Well this is the most overgrown field I’ve ever seen.” Sakura spoke while putting her weight on her toes to see over the grass.

“Yup. The piles of trash certainly complement the...uh, dense vegetation. So, what do you think?”

He regarded her thoughtful expression as she spoke.

“Well. I think I’ve found a new punishment for those moron genin, but even this section looks to be a little on the small side.” Sakura had placed her thumb and forefinger to her chin and now watched him from the corner of her eye with mischief. “I also think it strange for someone as busy as you to finish that book in just a couple of days. I thought you said it was trash sensei?”

His throat made an involuntary clearing noise at the suggestion. Thankfully his mind was still able to act quickly even if his body was failing to handle the insinuation.

He could have ignored the question, ignored it and continued on in a professional manner. He really should have. But something had sparked in him that couldn't be extinguished.

“Well I spent a lot of time sitting around the office yesterday waiting for a line of nurses to show up. Had to keep myself occupied somehow. While we’re on that, you didn’t scare them away did you? I was very disappointed.”

“Hay, don’t look at me. But maybe you should have behaved yourself during your last physical with Shizune hmm? Pretty sure I’m the only one of the medical staff she allows to see you directly nowadays.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I gotta know sensei, what the hell happened in that exam?”

Kakashi thought back, it must have been close to two years ago, he’d been dodging it actively for the last year at least. And it had been a completely normal and routine procedure. The only thing that had been out of the ordinary…

“She saw my face.”

Sakura’s whole head whipped round with wide eyes, her mouth slightly open. Kakashi smirked, deciding in an instant that perhaps this was his favourite expression on her. The split decision to answer her question truthfully was well worth it. He didn’t offer her the opportunity to reply.
“Well, looks like this one is a dud too. It’s more pricey than the last as well, but at least we have options if we can’t find anything else.” He’d already started walking away, she appeared to shake herself out of a daze to hastily follow after him. “And while we’re asking questions we probably shouldn’t be, you were halfway through chapter six when I showed up at your house this morning right?”

Casting an eye over his shoulder, he could practically see the aura of doom surrounding her.

“Guess I walked right into that one…” she mumbled. “Yes, alright. I woke up this morning and needed to distract myself.”

A chuckle wormed its way out of him.

“I thought I’d interrupted something.”

The innuendo was not lost on her.

“What?! No, it’s not what you thi…”

“You should’ve just finished what you were doing Sakura, I wouldn’t want you to be frazzled all day because I interrupted you.”

It was entirely inappropriate, but utterly hilarious. It was the second bout of laughter of the day for him and it wasn't even ten in the morning.

“I can't believe this conversation is happening. It really is a miracle you don't get slapped more for talking like that y'know sensei.”

“Now now Sakura, I'm not gonna go around asking inappropriate questions to just anyone. It's only fun when it's you.”

The words came out before he could check them, and even if they were the truth, they revealed more than he was comfortable letting on at this point. Although he was arguably happier than he'd been in some time, and far less alone, he still hadn't reconciled in his mind whether it was right to feel that way. Though it was increasingly appearing as if he had no control over the matter. And that bothered him so much more than anything else.

“So I'm the lucky one who gets to watch your descent into madness. I'll tell you one thing, if you do manage to embarrass me enough to slap you they'll have a hard job prying your body out of the great stone faces…”

She hadn't noticed.

It's only fun when it's you. What the hell had he been thinking?

Sakura continued to talk her anger out while his mind wandered to dangerous places. He really was completely terrible. What he needed was to pull his focus back to the task at hand, even if he didn't want to entirely. Her flushed cheeks as she spoke, the way her smile spread across her whole face when she thought she had the upper hand on him... it was a pleasing sight. It was addictive. And he hadn’t realized just how much he had missed it over the years.

Unsure exactly how much time had passed it was when her tone turned to concern that his attention suddenly snapped back.

“Sorry, did you say something?”
She eyed him deadpan, but softened as she spoke.

“Got lost in your own head there again huh?”

Kakashi nodded, it was something that was happening more and more in Sakura’s presence.

“Yeah. Maybe you really are watching my descent into madness as you kindly put it. So what were you saying?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Doesn’t matter. Just estimating how much more you’d be in the hospital if you started asking inappropriate questions to other people.”

“But Sakura, you were the one who started it…”

“Yeah, I get that. You don’t have many conversations outside of village business though, do you?”

There was that concern in her voice again, and for some reason Kakashi found it easy to talk to her, just like before. The answer to her questions always seemed to come out unhindered, whether he wanted them to or not.

“Not particularly. Which is another reason I didn’t relish the idea of you turning out like me. It’s quite boring actually.”

“Sounds lonely.”

As they walked she watched him closely.

“Can be, but after thirty years I’m more than used to it by now. It’s not something I would wish for you though Sakura.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re being too hard on yourself again, there’s nothing… well it wouldn’t be so bad to turn out like you I mean. You are Hokage, and you take such good care of all of us.”

“Maybe not, but you deserve to be happy.”

It came out without his express permission and hung in the air between them. Implying many truths that had been bubbling under the surface that Kakashi himself had not been aware were simmering so close. If he’d had any inclination they could slip out like that he’d never have opened his mouth in the first place.

She studied him like she would one of the medical textbooks in the library, closely and with complete concentration. It was unnerving to be on the other end of it.

They were now stopped in front of the next property, the vacant plot of Nara land, but were turned to face each other.

Her hand reached out and grabbed his. In an instant he’d startled at the contact but she retained her hold on him undeterred. Stealing a quick glance at the point where they were connected his eyes then found hers, and in them a resolve that was so reassuring. Coupled with the smile on her face it made him really want to believe what she was saying.

“Kakashi sensei, you know, I am happy right? You don’t need to worry about that.”

“But you’re…”
“Alone? Is that it? I’m allowed to be happy, and be on my own. Without the risk of turning into someone who reads morally suspect literature in public.” She smiled a little wider while he huffed amusedly.

“You deserve so much better than that though…”

“And you,” she squeezed his hand for effect, “need to stop taking care of everything and everyone else. And take more time for yourself. You deserve better alright?”

Under her fierce gaze he nodded, finally reciprocating the physical contact. When he couldn’t find the words he wanted to say to her, she continued.

“Don’t forget we’re not really on our own, we have friends. And it’s by choice that I’m single at the moment. So there’s no reason for me to be unhappy in the slightest.”

Finally he managed to force some words out.

“You’re very proficient at putting people at ease, Sakura.”

She shook her head.

“It’s true, I promise, all of it. I wish there was a way to show you.”

Their eyes were still locked. The warmth of her hand in his was so utterly foreign, but not unpleasant. He felt closer to her than before, which is why the question slipped out.

“Why did you make that choice, to be alone…”

It was not something he would have chosen for anyone, himself included, but especially for Sakura. Whose only dream had been loving Sasuke for many years.

“I told you I was tired of living with a ghost, which is true, but I was at fault as well… I was never in love with him, I was in love at him. From afar, and when we finally had the chance to actually have something real, he was afraid he wouldn’t measure up, and I still held on to the fantasy. I was scared that if it didn’t all go perfectly, I’d have wasted all that time chasing an illusion… and I’d lose Sasuke all over again. So I clung to it until I realized it wasn’t really what I wanted at all anymore, or what he needed. And decided it was time I worked out exactly what I do want… to do that I needed to be alone. It was the only way.”

When she finally stopped talking, a understanding passed between them without words. Enough words had been spoken already, this was something intangible. And Kakashi knew without any doubt that Sakura had made the right decision.

“Sorry for rambling. I bet none of that makes any sense…”

“No, no it makes perfect sense. And I told you, you never have to apologize to me.”

He was rewarded with a smile for his words.

“You really are something else Sakura.” He watched her blush at the remark. “Most people don’t reach that kind of self awareness until well into their thirties. Trust me. And you don’t need to show me anything, I believe you one hundred percent.”

Now it was his turn to squeeze her hand a little for reassurance.

*****
Sakura was unsure how much time had passed as they stood in that vacant field. Unable or unwilling to sever the contact between them, she wasn't sure, she kept ahold of Kakashi's hand even as they slowly wandered around the perimeter.

It didn't bother her in the slightest, and no one was around to jeer at them anyway.

While he might have been uncomfortable with it at first, now he had relaxed into it, even shifting his fingers to lace them with hers.

*Exposure therapy.* The longer they held onto each other the less tense she felt, and it was the only way she could ensure that he understood her words. With the physical contact, it put a depth to them that she felt she couldn't achieve with only words.

Except now the conversation had drifted easily back and forth between them about all manner of things.

*Nothing* to do with why they were actually here in the first place. It wasn't lost on her, but she just didn't mind at the moment. It started with him asking if she was enjoying the *stupid* book.

“It's infuriating. I don't understand why they aren't touching each other, it's so intense but then nothing happens. It just goes into this long tangent about *feelings* and then no action!”

“It's not *all* about action Sakura, there has to be a foundation for it. You can't just dive right in there, the *action* would be terrible if you did that…”

He was right, but she made every effort to argue her point.

Once they had been around the entire property they moved back onto the main path. It was around this time she'd had to relinquish his hand, and while she wanted to recapture it instantly, Sakura kept in mind that wasn't *all about the action* so to speak. Exposure therapy was all about little steps at first. She wanted him to know that it was *okay* to be close to someone. And she wanted to show him that not all contact made her tense.

Somehow the conversation had shifted from that book to cooking, and they walked *right past* the next vacant property without stopping.

“I'm just saying, you don't need to douse *everything* in soy sauce, it's not healthy Kakashi sensei.”

“Uh huh. Just like not *everything* needs to be followed with dessert…”

“The dessert is the best part!”

It went on this way for a long while. Kakashi going so far as to tell her about his afternoon rock climbing adventure with Guy. She could tell he was putting in a lot of effort to make it *sound* as if he was dreading it.

It had been a strange morning. Almost, but not entirely, erasing her earlier concern about his mental health. That damned Anbu folder deserved to be set alight for all the worry it had caused her.

Sakura had been talking about the surgery she was due to perform in the next few days when Kakashi abruptly stopped walking. He was looking far off into the distance of what appeared to be an empty training field, save for a few trees. As she was about to ask what the matter was she suddenly clicked. This was the fifth property.

“Oh, this is the hideout isn't it…”
“Yeah, you can see the entrance cordoned off with seals and tags at the tree line there.”

He pointed off in the direction as she stood close next to him to see.

“Right. I think Lady Tsunade and I might have trained here a while ago.”

“It has been used on and off for that kind of thing. There is a lot of room here certainly…”

There was a monotonous timbre to his voice, a distance as he likely remembered the last time he had been here. She felt that need to put him at ease.

“We’re not going in there today, right sensei? And we could always have Yamato scout it out later. It doesn’t have to be you…”

“Huh…” Kakashi shook his head, like he’d just remembered where they were. “Oh, it's fine. Don't you start worrying again. I just realized how late I am for a meeting with the cipher division. Not that there is anything to be meeting about…”

“Of course you are.” Sakura crossed her arms with a huff before it broke into a chuckle, which he returned with one of his own.

It was just as well because she was starting to get hungry. Which reminded her…

“Alright, I'm heading home then.”

“We didn't exactly achieve anything did we?”

“Not really, but we can debrief about it later? What do you want for dinner?”

“Oh. Well…”

Maybe it was presumptuous to think that he would be working with her tonight as well as this morning. Even if they hadn't actually done any work. Just those two words for him caused a flutter of disappointment that surprised and concerned her all at once.

“It's fine if you don't want to sensei…”

“Oh no, I would love to. It's just, I have that consult with the Kazekage this week and we're leaving tonight.”

“Oh.”

“It doesn't take so long to travel there like it used to but it'll still take a day. The sooner I leave the sooner I can come back. If it weren't for that surgery of yours I'd have you come with me and check out their children's hospital…”

“Right, well maybe next time Kakashi sensei.”

He shifted uncomfortably.

“Gaara originally was going to come here, but something came up…”

Sakura interrupted him.

“Kakashi sensei, you really don't have to justify yourself to me. It's fine, I understand… it's just…”
The next words that sprung from her mouth were an honest kind of truth that she didn't mind admitting. Even if it felt strange to do so. *In a good way.*

“It's just… I'll miss you, that's all.”

She wasn’t so sure why she said it, but it was true. With a wide smile she watched the way his eyebrows raised in a slight look of shock. She was going to miss having someone ask about her day for a change, and someone to eat with. Maybe it went deeper than that too. Kakashi scratched his head nervously.

She enjoyed the shocked look on his face more than she ought to have. It made her curious as to what else she could do to cause it. He huffed with a smile.

“I'll be back before you know it.”

“Right. Of course.”

Kakashi’s hands were back in his pockets, and suddenly she saw an *opportunity.* His voice was laced with concern.

“Just promise me you won't work too hard on this while I'm gone? I don't expect you to stop altogether, you probably wouldn’t be stopped anyway…”

Mid sentence she took the chance, stepping forward quickly, placing a hand on his arm and leaning up to place a kiss on his masked cheek. He froze for the entirety of it, unable to speak. And there was no mistaking that this was not a quick peck, she lingered. *And it was intentional.*

What she hadn't anticipated was their bodies lining up in certain places to add another element to what would have been a perfectly innocent kiss. And that other element was fire, at least for her, she certainly felt warm as she pulled her lips away.

It couldn't have lasted more than ten seconds really but Sakura swore that toward the end he'd started leaning into her just a fraction.

“What was that?”

It sounded like his voice had dropped a few octaves, hearing it this close to him, and said almost salaciously into her ear as she pulled back a little more.

Kakashi didn't look as shocked as she would've liked, but there was *something else* there, something darker mingled with the surprise. She kept a hand on him, grinning widely at the first signs of redness creeping up over the edge of his mask. He couldn't hide everything obviously.

“You've never been kissed goodbye before? I guess *most* people aren't sorry to see you leave… Anyway, I'll see you later sensei! Thank you for today!”

She'd turned to speed away, hearing him very faintly.

“Thank you Sakura…”

But she was going too fast to properly hear him. With a wide grin she cast an eye back to catch him just standing there stunned and she fought not to laugh to herself.

It was *odd,* wanting to be around him, the idea that *she would miss Kakashi.* It was utterly confusing, to top off an extremely confusing week. Perhaps some time away from him was just what she
needed…

It was a pity that it didn't last long, she was beginning to miss his company as soon as she walked through her own door. So, to avoid her own thoughts for a while, Sakura promptly turned around and walked out. Heading to Ino’s without another thought.
Chapter Seven

CHAPTER SEVEN

The days were beginning to feel much longer than Kakashi would dare to admit to anyone other than himself. But from the start, it had promised to be a long and frustrating visit, so he wasn't surprised. The heat only added to the frustration.

The first night he'd been suspicious, by the second Kakashi had confirmed it.

He missed her.

It happened at almost every meal, starting with the memory of her face the first time she'd cooked dinner for them to have in the library. Then it would progress to very nearly speaking to her as if she were present, like he expected her to be there and his mind couldn't process her absence.

All this had come to be after just one week of having dinner together most nights.

The oddness of it was never far from his mind, even as they forged ahead on the third day of pointless meetings and walking tours. As if he hadn't seen it all before.

There were only two things about this visit that had actually been worthwhile, the first being a detailed conversation with Gaara regarding the drop in academy students. Which, for the first time since Gaara’s turn in office, was being felt in the Sand village as well. Despite the rise in population here too. Kakashi had used the opportunity to mention the plans they were laying in place for the children's hospital. Which lead to the second thing, an actual tour of the children’s hospital in the Sand village.

The entire time he couldn't help but feel it was wasted without Sakura there. He endeavored to take very good notes so that it might please her. Then, while sitting in another board room with more council members on the fourth day, his restless mind began to wonder how her surgery had gone, or if she was working too hard again.

That was the first time that his thoughts had strayed to her during a time he was actually meant to be working and focussed. It unsettled him badly. It was so very not leader like that he'd put in a lot more effort to remain present in all senses of the word after that. And inadvertently it made the time go faster, which was an added bonus. By the end of that day it was decided they would leave early and Kakashi had never been more relieved.

Minato sensei would never have treated his work so lightly. While it had been different times back then, he would still have maintained that complete professionalism. Boarding the train Kakashi finally allowed his mind to wonder again now that it was acceptable to do so. It had been a struggle to actively not think about her that day and it really was troubling.

He blamed her for that obviously.

As if the 'I'll miss you' part wasn't bad enough she'd kissed him again. And touched him.

Staring out the window as they rolled on and into the approaching night, he watched for the first signs of fire country for as long as he could. Even if this had been an uneventful trip, he was exhausted. Mentally, not physically. His body hadn't been acting normally since that damned kiss. Like his blood had been turned to electricity, sparking every time he thought about the way her lips had lingered on him that day. It made him restless, which had been fine in the Sand village where
there had been plenty of distractions. Now, sitting here doing nothing, it was not so fine.

With a tired sigh Kakashi withdrew an equally tired copy of Icha Icha from his pocket.

It felt good to be back reading the classics after his brief interlude with The Bride of the Demon Prince. Kakashi hoped that some of his sanity might be restored to him through it’s familiar pages, and perhaps he could hold that ridiculous book accountable for all the oddness.

Instead he found himself rereading the same passage, or his eyes wandering off the page entirely to stare into the distance as his thoughts distracted him. The pink hue to the sunset wasn’t helping his pensive mood.

“You alright there, Lord Kakashi?”

He refused to look up from the book even as he replied.

“For the second time Tenzo, I’m fine. Just eager to get home.”

Kakashi felt just a tinge of regret at his reassignment of the wood style ninja to his personal detail for this trip. Only because it seemed like he was in one of those chatty moods this afternoon, usually he wouldn’t have minded, but right now Kakashi was not feeling very talkative.

“Grumble all you want. I can tell when something’s bothering you.”

For a moment Kakashi considered answering. Remembering the doctor’s advice to talk more, and while Tenzo was someone he trusted, he just couldn’t bring himself to voice exactly what was bothering him.

It must be starting to show outwardly if Tenzo had picked up on it as well. Another terrifying thought, although the man had known him a long time.

He needed to work better at distracting himself from his own thoughts.

Focus.

“It’s been a long and boring trip that’s all.”

“Shouldn’t you be used to that by now? Or are you just eager for the boredom of your own office?.”

Kakashi knew what he was getting at. He huffed in amusement, Tenzo sitting across the booth regarding his every reaction.

“Yup. Nothing beats the drudgery of home.”

Tenzo smirked before resuming his watch of the scenery passing by. It had been good enough to fool him obviously, because the truth was polar opposite, to Kakashi at least. Home would never be quite so boring as it had been just a few weeks ago.

Because she was there.

Kakashi might have smirked to himself, something Tenzo thankfully missed. It was a brief moment of indulgence, and Kakashi swore that it would be the last. Whatever this oddness was, whatever queer kind of happiness he felt at just being near her, or thinking of her, it was something that needed to be contained. Especially if it was going to distract him from work, as mundane as it was, he still needed to pay attention.
Keep everything running smoothly. It was all on him.

So he made a conscious decision to push those feelings back, until it was completely safe, until he was alone with his thoughts.

It especially needed to be contained around Sakura herself.

And it might work in his favour, like it had during this trip, and make the time go by quicker. By forcing himself not to think of her he’d inadvertently gotten more work done and faster. There was an added but secret incentive now to getting work done. _Then, and only then, he could think of her as much as he liked._

That last thought caused a quirk of his lips in a semblance of a smile, one Tenzo definitely saw but mistook it’s meaning.

“Finally into Fire Country huh Lord Hokage?”

Kakashi nodded, not even rebuking him for the pointless honorific. Tenzo had always enjoyed torturing him like that, in a strange passive aggressive kind of way.

The sun was making its final descent as the train pulled in. Darkness taking hold by the time they’d all piled out on to the streets of Konoha. Out of some disturbing reflex he wasn’t even going to try to understand, Kakashi headed straight for Hokage tower and his awaiting office. No doubt there would be mountains of paperwork after almost a week, if he got some of it sorted tonight that would be less to do tomorrow.

It sounded a lot like he was throwing himself into his work but he considered the reward to be well worth it at the end of the day.

Unfortunately his hunch had been correct, the lights turned on illuminated the horror. Walking through the open door, he didn’t even bother to take off the bulky white robe as he started shifting piles. Whatever order Shikamaru had them put into he assumed the most pressing concerns would be on or close to his desk. Kakashi leant over it with a sigh, immediately relegating the ‘urgent’ complaints from one disgruntled library assistant to the ‘sort out last’ pile.

He hadn’t sat down, just continued to shuffle through whatever was closest. Finding a pen to sign off the odd thing that didn’t require so much scrutiny. There wasn’t a _lot_ here really. Just more of the useless bureaucracy he found himself engaged in most days. It seemed counterintuitive to comb through every little thing, but that was the job.

All of it _could_ wait, he was sure.

The T&I report was about the only interesting thing on his desk. The drunken would-be invaders were growing more apologetic by the day, he silently chuckled.

Absorbed as he was, Kakashi jerked his head up surprised at the soft but hurried footsteps into the office.

“Oh, Lord Kakashi! I didn’t realize you were back so soon.”

Shizune had sped into the room, only to freeze at the sight of him. He smiled briefly.

“No need to sound so disappointed Shizune. We just wrapped things up a lot sooner than planned.”

She raised her eyebrows a fraction in surprise and probably disbelief that he would get any kind of
work done quickly.

“Well that’s something. When did you get back?”

Unfrozen now, she shifted to the corner of the room to dump a file on an already precarious stack. Kakashi only needed to see it’s colour to know what it was.

Deep blue, shinobi medical report.

*But that was Sakura’s job.*

“How long ago? Where’s Sakura?”

Not moving from his desk he nodded toward the file she had just unloaded, Shizune followed the gesture but looked suddenly sullen.

*He didn’t like this.*

“Oh, she’s off work for a while, so I’ll be coming in for her.”

“Off work? Is she alright?”

Kakashi didn’t even bother to disguise the concern. And Shizune wouldn’t count that as suspicious he guessed, he was *allowed* to be worried about his former teammate and friend.

“I’m sure she will be. But this morning I had to send her home, she had a fever and was really in no fit state to work.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, but it appears to be some kind of viral infection that needs to run its course. I looked over her myself and could see nothing else physically wrong with her. She just needs to rest.”

Shizune had said it in such a manner that meant he really *shouldn’t* worry as much, but it appeared to be an instant reflex. Made worse by the fact that he couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so sick she’d missed any kind of work.

He nodded his head and tried to remain impassive, saying polite necessities to Shizune before she left. He then cast his eye toward the clock on the wall. It wasn’t so late yet, it had only just hit 7:30, there was still enough time.

Waiting an acceptable minute or two after Shizune was out of the building, Kakashi found himself moving before he could ask if this was the right thing to do. His body, it seemed, was working of its own accord, knowing exactly where he needed to be.

Part of him vaguely registered that Sakura might not be so welcoming in her current state, she may not want his attention at all. But at least then he’d be able to make sure that she was alright… it wasn’t as if she had anyone to look after her anyway. Outside of Shizune’s professional care.

Kakashi stopped briefly at the end of her street, gathering a few of the sickness supplies she’d always dumped on his desk or doorstep whenever he was under the weather. For some reason he couldn’t shake an unpleasant feeling of guilt, penitence for not thinking of her more. It was illogical, he hadn’t *made* her sick. But she definitely took better care of him than of herself…

The light was dim inside Sakura’s apartment, and he could discern no movement from his spot on the ledge. The window was conveniently open just a fraction. He knocked on it first anyway.
It was bad enough that the Hokage was climbing into a young ladies window, for the second time in a week, at least he had knocked first.

“Uh, Sakura?”

No answer.

There was one light on in the kitchen and a small lamp illuminating the dining table. He couldn't see much, just the usual tidiness and bulky shadows of furniture. Scent wise there was no doubt that Sakura was home. It was that pleasant minty fragrance he usually associated with her shampoo.

“Sakura?”

Trying to make his presence known so that he wouldn’t be in danger of her startled fists, Kakashi didn’t bother to tread lightly. In the dim light he cast an eye over the table, the hospital research still neatly laid out. She had obviously been compiling another case study, it caused a smile to tug on his lips when he realized that she hadn’t done much else.

Thank goodness she hadn’t also been trying to work whilst sick.

It pleased him to see how she had delicately placed anything that he’d been working with in a neat pile at the end of the table, waiting for him to pick it up again. A quick glance into the kitchen proved she wasn’t there. Though there was a lone mug with a tea bag hanging over the rim, she must’ve forgotten to pour it for herself.

Kakashi deposited the bag of supplies in the kitchen, sighing quietly.

At least his hearing hadn't failed him yet. A soft shuffling sound came from the living room. He didn't have to look too hard to find her, curled up on the couch, fast asleep.

“Found you.”

He mumbled, rounding the end of the sofa to look at her properly. The furniture was so bulky it had been impossible to see her, she looked so small huddled up on it like that too. But at least she was resting. In a reflex he couldn't control, Kakashi lightly placed his fingers to her forehead. She still felt warm, and even in this light he could see the unmistakable redness on her cheeks from fever.

Sakura shivered when he withdrew his hand. He huffed a sigh. She must have been so exhausted, she'd just sat down and fallen asleep. Leaving the window open and the tea half made in the kitchen.

Kakashi could have left then. It would have been the appropriate thing to do. But being able to look at her like this with entire impunity was just too tempting an offer. So, before he could overthink things, Kakashi was moving. Quickly shutting the window he'd climbed in through properly and shrugging the white robes off his shoulders.

It was a strange compulsion, his next action, and one he didn't want to think too much about. Not tonight anyway. Instead he very carefully draped the white robes over her, going so far as to tuck her in slightly.

Sakura's expression relaxed a bit more and she continued to sleep. If her sharp kunoichi skills weren't alerting her to someone's presence she really was sick. Or she trusted him. Kakashi chose the latter.

It wasn't necessary to cover her with those warm bulky robes, and he could have found a blanket around the place somewhere. For some reason the idea of going through her things while she lay there asleep was more deplorable than actually climbing through her window. A savvier man may
have even been brave enough to carry her to the bedroom. And while that was a good premise for Icha Icha, it was probably akin to signing his own death warrant with Sakura's temperament. He just hoped she was comfortable enough.

*He should be leaving. But…*

There was no way he could physically bring himself to do it. Even though he could see her, and knew that she wasn't in any remote danger, his brain would not supply the connections to allow him to leave. Besides, it was probably a good idea to wait until she woke up anyway. That would be the only rational way to gauge her actual well being. It was a good enough excuse for his mind for the moment at least.

It was bothering to Kakashi that his eyes remained fixed steadfastly on her sleeping figure. While he’d felt a bubbling and disturbing kind of happiness at being able to watch her, after missing her for days, it felt ever so slightly lecherous. Even if his intentions were entirely pure.

At least pure in the sense that he only wanted to make sure she was okay, and that having her so close finally eased that restless part of his mind was just an added bonus.

Before he sat himself down on the vacant armchair Kakashi decided to forego Icha Icha, if Sakura woke up at some point he didn’t want her to think too terribly of him. And he already felt a little terrible, like he was trespassing there in the first place, even if she had shared a lot of herself in the last week. So instead he gathered some of the statistic books he’d been perusing last week. There was still a presentation that needed to be prepared after all. Flicking off the lamp by the table, he turned on the small one close to the armchair and sank himself into it.

Kakashi could have sat himself at the dining table, where all the rest of the research was, and that would have made more sense. But here was so much more comfortable, and here he could see Sakura.

It appeared as if she was deep asleep now, the creases on her brow vanished, looking far more relaxed than when he’d first found her.

With a sigh he cracked the book open to roughly where he’d last been reading, pulling up a memory of the page number, but he needn’t have bothered. A small white square of paper fell out of it. At first he thought it blank, and regarded it curiously, flipping it over revealed its secrets.

It appeared to be a hand written recipe for some kind of miso marinated salmon dish. In Sakura’s own scribble no less.

_Not bad._ He thought as he deciphered the majority of the ingredients. It took a moment for him to finally be able to read the last line of scribble.

*What do you think?*

That was all it said. She had left this for him specifically to find. The thought forced a smile out of him, he glanced up from the paper back to her sleeping frame.

It appeared Sakura had been true to her word after all, _she had missed him too._

* * * *

It had been a long time since Sakura had felt so much resting on her shoulders. The morning of the surgery she had managed to find that necessary professional calmness before speaking to the families of the patient.
The risk was still there, but she was prepared. She had been prepared for days. Spending all her waking moments from the minute she had found herself alone that Sunday afternoon, reading anything she could about the procedure. Even if it was one that she had performed a couple times before, it didn’t hurt to be over prepared for anything.

This fixed, yet exhausting resolve, had served its purpose.

Sakura had only felt a small tinge of loneliness in her free time. The minute she threw herself in the bath that Tuesday evening, her patient now recovering with arteries all intact and working, it started to niggle at her. And then it started to nag, as soon as she sat down for dinner.

So, she continued to do what she did best. Distraction.

Any reading of that stupid book only made her feel his absence a little more keenly. And she didn’t want to think about that at all. At least for the moment. The problem being when she was in one of these moods, there was only so much she could do to occupy herself.

Naturally after dinner she'd cleaned the entire apartment. It hadn't taken as long as she would have liked. Then she'd done some baking just to pass the time, if she took it to work someone would surely eat it and then it wouldn't waste. Sakura had also busied herself with her latest case study, she'd gained instant approval from Shizune for further research earlier that week.

Then she went into that tunnel vision mode.

Suddenly it was after midnight and she was exhausted.

Throwing herself into the middle of her bed, face down, Sakura felt the familiar tug of her thoughts into the terrible anxious whirlpool that so often appeared before she worried herself to sleep. It was a constant downward spiral that repeated itself incessantly. So, for a change, she decided not to let that happen, to stop it before it went too far.

And she knew exactly what to do.

Rolling onto her side, Sakura glanced briefly at the face down novel sitting under the bedside lamp, smirking a little in anticipation for the seventh chapter. But her focus instead went to a sealed envelope that lay beside it. Her name neatly printed across the top. His handwriting was always neat.

It had been waiting for her yesterday afternoon when she dropped off the medical reports to Hokage tower. Taped to the front of the tray just like he’d done last week. But instead of ripping it open then and there, Sakura had decided to wait until the inevitable happened.

The inevitable being when all the worthwhile distractions ran out.

There was only so much of that stupid book left and she may need the rest of it for tomorrow’s distraction from her thoughts.

She’d placed the letter by her bed when she arrived home in anticipation of this moment.

Sitting up she tucked her legs underneath her, cross legged and reaching over for the envelope. Sakura didn’t hold any hopes as to what the message actually contained, nevertheless she did not predict the fluttering nerves in her stomach at simply opening it. But she had to wonder if this had been written after she’d kissed him. It was something she refused to regret doing, there was just no way to gauge how Kakashi would react. He was still completely and utterly unpredictable. And weird.
Despite herself Sakura smiled, remembering the creeping of blush over his mask that day. The butterflies in her stomach resurfaced, she could feel her heart pounding as her breathing grew shallow. It shouldn’t be so nerve wracking, but it was.

And she knew why despite her attempts to deny it.

Obsessive by nature, Sakura guessed that had something to do with the downright weird way she now looked forward to seeing him, spending time with him, anything with him. Embarrassing conversations included.

It might’ve been because of loneliness. Or because he was another puzzle she had yet to solve after so many years. Maybe it would disappear once she did, like it had with Sasuke. But she did acknowledge that Kakashi didn’t hold any false images of her, didn’t expect her to be something she wasn’t. Conversely he was already the best man that she knew. So it wasn’t exactly the same kind of obsession she’d had with the Uchiha.

It was new.

Whatever it was also made her smile.

She tore the envelope open and pulled out a single piece of paper, there wasn’t a lot on it. But it didn’t matter. He’d obviously intended for her to read this the night before.

S

Hope dinner wasn’t too boring without me.

I’ll make it up to you Friday.

K

Now she was full on grinning. Above most things Sakura listened to her heart, or at least she was more aware of it than other people. Even if scientifically she could write it off as chemical reactions of the limbic system. Right now it was telling her that she couldn’t ignore whatever this happy feeling was, it wouldn’t have come on so strongly if she could.

She might try to deny or refuse to acknowledge it all she liked, but it wasn’t going to go away.

This was only magnified the following day.

Somehow she’d managed to slip into an undisturbed sleep that night. One moment she’d been trying to come up with an idea on what to cook for him when he returned, the next had been blissful slumber. Somehow she still felt tired when she woke but she put that down to post-surgery adrenalin wearing off.

The whole way to the hospital Sakura began to notice something odd. Everywhere she looked made her think of Kakashi. From the coffee shop to the vacant field they had strolled around, holding hands and very much not surveying the property. Even as she reached her office and switched the computer on, the thoughts of him continued.

But it was not unpleasant. It was quite the opposite. All these things made her smile and as she went about her day she found herself thinking of him at odd times. Enough to make it all go by just that little bit faster. She was in such a good mood, almost light headed even, by the time she dropped off the reports to Hokage tower. Kakashi’s office filing with paperwork in his absence, she sighed to the room before heading out.
Sakura realized two things on arriving home that evening. One being that she wasn’t so sure if she would be able to actually get any work done that night, the second being she was a lot more light headed than she’d thought.

Dangerously so.

As in it took all her effort to pour a glass of water, down it in one go, and make it to her bed.

The night passed in a blur of strange dreams and stumbling trips to the bathroom. For the first time since her teen years, she had instantly fallen asleep on hitting the pillow. Waking only to hurl her guts out occasionally. The sound of her alarm startled her awake, depressingly it felt as if she’d only just closed her eyes, at least her stomach was holding out for the minute. She was just so tired.

As a medic, and a professional, she knew the cause of this was probably a minor infection. Viral or otherwise. Perhaps it was making her irrational in this state, but for some reason she started to get angry with her own bodies limitations.

She was not calling in sick. She could brush it off just fine. There was no way in hell she would handle sitting around home all day, even if it took all of her remaining energy to get out of bed.

While showering and getting ready for her shift, a lot slower than usual, Sakura summoned her own chakra. But there was nothing physically wrong with herself to heal. Instead she tried her best to disguise how tired she felt, making her way to the hospital at a snail’s pace. Perhaps when she got there and threw back a coffee (or two) it would make her feel a little better.

It was such a contrast to yesterday when she’d felt that bubbling happiness within her. Now what she felt was an all encompassing tiredness that made it impossible for any tangible thought to cross her mind.

Sakura had hidden it all well, until her mid morning run in with Shizune.

Two seconds into what was meant to be a brief conversation, Shizune had completely interrupted her, asking if she was okay before putting a hand to her forehead. Finding it harder to think today than usual, Sakura struggled with her answer for a moment.

“I’m fine, really. It’s nothing I can’t work through…”

But Sakura had been unable to pull off a convincing argument. She felt a little like a rag doll in the way that Shizune pushed and pulled her into a vacant room before conducting a routine exam. At the same time it passed in a quick and hazy blur of glowing chakra.

“Go home.”

The order came with a tone that wasn’t to be trifled with. Though she did make a halfhearted protest before conceding defeat, she just didn’t have the strength or will to argue today.

“And I don’t want to see you tomorrow either. Get some rest.”

Part of Sakura appreciated the concern, even if it was misguided, she really did feel fine. Just tired, and a little dizzy, maybe a tad exhausted as well. It probably wasn’t a good idea to be treating those with compromised immune systems while she could potentially make them more ill. So she found her way home. In a literal sense that she found herself at her apartment with no actual recollection of how she came to be there. The fever was beginning to play tricks on her. It was all she could do to make it to the bedroom after that.
The next few hours passed in a fog of confusion so bad that if Sakura were able to think clearly she would have considered herself to be clinically insane. It started off all right after she lay down, not even bothering to close the blinds, in a few moments she’d been asleep.

But a dream so vivid and terrifying had caused her to wake.

With shakiness Sakura got herself a glass of water in an attempt to push the nightmare from her conscious thought. There had been lightning, and rain, and she’d felt so scared. It took a little longer to fall back to sleep, and sleep seemed to be the only thing that she was capable of doing in this state.

The dream came back, that same palpable fear shocking her awake, though this time she decided to be proactive about it. So she focussed her thoughts on nice things, things that made her happy. Blearily she cracked an eye at the book face down on her bedside table, the envelope still next to it. She closed her eyes and willed herself to only dream of the last week.

All the memories of dinners with Kakashi, laughing at him, the stroll they had taken around the village. Holding his hand, earning those rare glimpses into his mind, the emails and messages. As sleep claimed her, the memories went back even further. Things like Kakashi praising her (in that very sleight way that he used to) for mastering something before the boys. Or fighting alongside her. Patting her on the head like he would his ninken.

It was restful sleep. Finally.

But the confusion was firmly settled in her mind it seemed. While all these memories were good and happy, that rainy nightmare began to bleed into them.

This time in the dream there was lightning and rain but Kakashi was beside her, and they were running. Her strong will wasn’t enough to break the nightmare now, but the fear was considerably less while he was with her. Turning his head so she could see the familiar smile.

They continued to run, Kakashi shouting something over the storm she could barely hear. Before she got a chance to ask what the yelling was about, he snatched her by the wrist and dragged her through a line of shrubbery. Only letting go once they had reached safety undercover.

Hair obscuring her eyes, when she cast it aside she finally got a look at what she’d thought was a safe shelter from the rain. Instead she was met with an all too familiar sight. The dilapidated porch of the abandoned manor house. In a second of panic she looked to Kakashi, who was now holding her hand, standing much closer than socially acceptable. Eyes trained on her face in an unsettling way.

They stood there, both saturated and watching each other, the fear beginning to rise within her again.

“Well, at least we’re out of the rain.”

For a moment, just hearing that dulcet voice of his broke her panic. A nervous kind of bubbling laugh escaped her, and Kakashi chuckled in return. The tension broken in a second. Even in her dreams he was able to find a way to put her at ease.

At least until his next sentence. When his other hand rose to gently cup her face.

“Don’t worry Princess, I’ll get you there...”

It was nice having him this close, so warm and inviting the way he was drawing her closer…

*Wait a minute... Princess?*
It was so jarring, and so recognisable she instantly knew what was happening.

*Oh hell no.*

Sakura sat up quickly in bed, her eyes wide open and escaped from the dream, she shook her head and pinched herself just to make sure.

*That stupid dream. It was all the fault of that stupid book.*

In all honesty Sakura wasn’t sure which she preferred, the hopeless fear of the nightmare, or the disturbing fever dream starring Kakashi. *Kakashi as Alejandro.* Jesus. She really must be sick. It had been the part of the book right before the character’s had kissed too, the part she’d been thinking about all week… If it had kept going…

She shook her head and stood, forgetting that her body wasn’t one hundred percent. The head rush that accompanied was unpleasant, but the sleep had made her feel more lucid than before, or the shock from that dream. She couldn’t tell.

Slowly making her way to the kitchen and a strong cup of tea, Sakura realized any more sleep for the afternoon was out of the question. One word playing through her mind.

*If.*

If it had kept going… Would it have been the same as the stupid book? Tenuous at first before building into a demanding force, leaving them both breathless and grasping at each other…

Sakura felt warm for reasons entirely separate to the fever.

Warm because she wanted it to keep going. Wanted it to happen with *Kakashi.* And she wasn’t certain if that only applied to the dream. Was she allowed to want that?

The circling turmoil of her mind caused a surging of nausea so powerful she switched the boiling kettle off and sat on the nearest comfortable surface. Slinking into the couch that was too large for her living room.

Lying down made it better marginally. Now it was just the matter of calming her scattered thoughts.

Perhaps it was unwise, but Sakura could only think of one way, and she was too tired to resist it. The memories came up automatically as if she had admitted defeat to them. But these were a bit different to the souvenirs of the past she’d used before, nothing of the innocent praises of her genin days.

They still starred Kakashi, but it was all from the last week, and only visions of his face. Reacting to their inappropriate conversations, laughing, blushing when her lips touched him. That warm look in his eye the night he’d pecked her cheek…

Sleep claimed her again. But it was absent of any dreams. Instead she lingered in a strange inbetween place. Drifting in and out of memories and images of Kakashi.

*Calm, warm, safe.*

She felt all of these things with him. It was reassuring, and though she was bordering on the edge of consciousness it was a very singular thought that never faltered.

*She wished he was here…* It wasn’t just a wish, it was a *want.*

*She wanted Kakashi. And all the things he made her feel.*
Even confusion, embarrassment, warmth. She wanted it all to keep going, to progress in the easy way that it felt with him. It was so unlike anything else she’d experienced, not difficult or heart wrenching like it had been with Sasuke. It felt natural, if a little exasperating at times. It also made her happy.

Sakura came to a decision as she lay curled up on the couch, somewhere between sleep and awake, that when he came home she’d find another way to thank him. For all the things he probably didn’t even realize he’d done to help her.

He really had changed something within her, she just wished she could help him see…

A comforting warmth washed over her and finally Sakura slipped into a sleep that was unplagued by dreams, nightmares or her treacherous thoughts. Blissful nothing.

There was darkness when her eyes fluttered a little. She shut them immediately, they felt too heavy to stay open for very long. But damn, she did feel so much better. So comfortable and warm, no pain in her head or stomach, it was the biggest relief.

Sakura shifted and stretched. Where had this blanket come from?

She sighed. It smelt good too.

A rustle of paper.

Someone is here. There was no panic for some reason. She fought her lids to stay open a while. That was when she saw the blanket of white tucked around her, blurry eyes wandered over the lettering on it. Could this be…

“Kakashi sensei?”

She tentatively called out, blinking hard a few times to steady her vision, when she tried to move and sit up she was stopped.

“I’m here. Don’t try and get up, just get some rest…”

Sakura couldn’t help the sigh at the sound of his voice. Willing her eyes open, his face came into view, crouched over and tucking what was definitely his own robes back around her fully. He was such a sight for sore eyes. Sore literally as well, it grew harder to keep them open and awake for very long.

He was so close, she could see the lines of tiredness in deep circles, she watched his profile turn towards her. The beaming smile of relief and happiness on her face was slowly mirrored in the shift of his mask.

The reassurance, the tiredness, the aftermath of thinking of him so much, it all contributed to her next action. She only needed to lean up a fraction, she just wished her eyes could have stayed open to watch his reaction. She settled for the sharp intake of his breath.

Without a single thought to the consequences, Sakura slowly and gently pressed her lips to his masked ones. Revelling in the way their noses brushed together. She held her breath, lingering, there was definitely no fish lips underneath that mask. They were soft and surprisingly pliable, as much as she could tell through the fabric. With a sigh she felt him reciprocate just slightly toward the end, moulding his lips to hers. It might have only been seconds but everything else, including time, faded out like white noise.
This kiss was not a cursory peck but it held the same innocence and heart pounding reverence as her very first probing kisses with Sasuke.

It made her warm. And it was so much better than that dream could ever have been. This was real, the heat was enough to confirm that.

Not wanting to scare him terribly with such a bold action, she leaned back a bit to speak. Breaking the connection that had sent bolts of electricity throughout her body.

“Welcome home.”

So close, she could feel his smirk rather than see it. Dropping her head back fully onto the sofa cushion Sakura felt all kinds of tingling warmth spreading throughout her. It was so good. Too good.

Sleep was beckoning again and she was content and powerless to resist. Before slipping off completely, she felt the brush of his fingers against her cheek. Felt the heat of his body shift. The last thing she heard before succumbing to sleep…

“No one’s ever welcomed me home like that before.”

* * * *

Dumbfounded, Kakashi all but fell back into the armchair.

What the hell had just happened?

Sure she was still feverish, and he could blame it entirely on that if he wanted to. But he would be lying to himself. The grin that had spread across her face just before she’d kissed him, that was a look he wanted to remember always. It also confirmed at least one other suspicion, they both felt it.

Rather than short circuiting his mental faculties, like Kakashi thought was sure to happen, the kiss had succeeded in jumpstarting his brain. Just in time for him to relax enough to kiss her back ever so slightly. So he continued to watch her, with a smirk that refused to fade. He just felt so content.

It was mutual.

They didn’t need to say it out loud to confirm that they both felt this happiness. Or whatever it was.

But it wasn’t without some measure of guilt. As he sat there watching her now steady breathing, Kakashi felt the ominous pull of this thoughts in less than desirable directions. How Sakura deserved better, and joy he was sure he could not provide for her, despite this current feeling. It was starting to torture him that as her former teacher, someone she’d trusted, he was allowing himself to test the boundaries of their relationship. And enjoying it.

Maybe it was just because they were both a little lonely, maybe it was because of their proximity with this project. Maybe it was just because it was Sakura, who still cared and loved for all of her people.

He had to give her credit, she was certainly making him feel better, allowing him brief reprieve from the loneliness that had suffocated him for a long time now. And making some considerable strides with her physical contact anxiety, though he’d never intended for her to use him as a test subject.

This contentedness he was basking in could easily become addictive. Just like how the soft, small touches she bestowed upon him were starting to become a compelling highlight to his day.
Sakura sighed in her sleep and nestled further into the white Hokage’s robes.

*So much for leaving.*

It could have been an hour or two before she next moved. In that time Kakashi managed to tear his eyes away to some of the research he had in hand. Allowing himself a minute’s break at the end of each page just to sit and watch her sleep. It was that same calming effect he’d noted the night she had healed his shoulder.

Close to midnight she began to stir. In a preemptive move Kakashi boiled the kettle as soon as she’d rolled fitfully to her other side, brewing tea just in time to hear the timid voice call out from the sofa.

“Kakashi sensei?”

She was sitting up as he entered. The robe falling off her shoulders revealing the baggy hospital scrubs she was still wearing.

“Here.”

He handed her the steaming mug and sat on the couch beside her. Unsure of her strength he kept close, though as she readily sat herself and took the cup eagerly he sat back again.

“Thank you…”

Her voice was still a little weak, she didn’t look terrible, but she never looked terrible anyway. At least not to him. A thought that suddenly struck Kakashi as very odd.

“You’re welcome. Feeling better?”

She nodded yes while taking a sip.

“Good. You had me worried there Sakura.”

She cleared her throat and took another mouthful. It was obvious that she was not completely back to her normal self.

“Don’t worry sensei, I’m alright. Did I sleep for two days though? Is it Friday already?”

“Uh, well, no. It’s *almost* Friday.” He pointed toward a clock on the wall. “But we wrapped things up quickly, so I am back a day earlier than expected.”

Sakura raised an eyebrow over her mug toward him. Apparently *everyone* seemed to be suspicious of his getting anything finished early. But Sakura’s incredulous look faded into a smile before she set the mug down on the coffee table.

“Well it’s good to see you.” She said it in a confident matter-of-fact way that she might to Naruto or Sai, but Kakashi knew for certain that she wouldn’t welcome either of those two home with a kiss *on the lips*. He smiled back at her.

“Likewise. So how did your surgery go?”

She wriggled back into the couch before she answered. A spark returned to her eyes.

“It went well. I think. It bothers me that I haven’t been able to monitor the patients recovery as closely as I normally would, being *sick*….” she spat the word out like it pained her, “... but the procedure itself went as well as can be expected. So I’ve had to trust Shizune with the rest. How
come you wrapped things up so quickly?"

“Why is everyone so suspicious whenever I finish something before it’s due?”

Again she raised an eyebrow in reply and he huffed in amusement.

“I get it. And believe me, I was as surprised as you are. But…” Kakashi actually considered telling her the real reason he’d bolted back to the village as soon as it was permissible. “Well, something weird happened, and I was compelled to finish things up with a bit more speed than the usual pointless visit requires.”

“Something weird huh?”

He had expected her to adopt a tone of ‘well you are weird’ or some other kind of sass filled remark thrown his way. But she appeared to be genuinely curious. Which decided it for him.

“Yup.”

He would tell her if she asked.

“What was it?”

Kakashi wished she wasn’t looking at him so intently as he went to say it, but found his own resolve in time to meet her eye.

“I missed you.”

There was that smile again, it flickered back to life on her face as soon as the words fell from his lips. It was instant. There was already a dust of blush on her cheeks from the fever but he still felt satisfied that he’d added to it. Even more satisfied that he had been the one to cause the smile in the first place.

“You're such a sweet talker Kakashi sensei.”

Her eyes nervously flitted from her cup to his face. Kakashi watched her undeterred.

“Perhaps. It is true though.”

“I know.” Now she met his eye, still smiling. “Me too.”

Kakashi exhaled loudly, almost a sigh of relief. Sakura's expression seemed to be fixed in genuine contentment.

“I hear you won’t be working tomorrow?”

She sighed, her features faltering just a little.

“Probably not, Shizune was pretty clear on that one. I feel fine though, just tired. Did she say anything to you?”

“Mmm. Well, she did say you’d be off ‘for a while’. I wasn’t sure how long that would be. There’s soup in the kitchen by the way, when you’re feeling up to it.”

Sakura coughed with a splutter into the almost finished mug of tea.

“Seriously? Thanks Kakashi sensei.”
“Not sure I appreciate the tone of surprise, I think I remember telling you that I wasn’t a complete
asst. It’s that same one you leave on my desk from time to time.”

She nodded with a tired smile.

“By time to time you mean every single winter, when you get sick and refuse to stay home?”

“It’s not every single winter surely.”

Sakura nodded again.

“Yup. Sure is. For the last four years I’ve been the hospital assistant director anyway.”

Kakashi sighed and frowned.

“I don't know if I like being so predictable.”

The word was even abhorrent for him just to speak aloud. While being predictable itself was not a
bad thing, it definitely made him feel aged. And tired.

“You are anything but predictable sensei, truly.”

“Oh?”

“Mmhmm. Reliable is a better word. I can always count on you”.

Kakashi felt an oddness again, a repeat occurrence whenever Sakura deemed it necessary for a pep
talk. It did wonders for putting certain insecurities to rest, but it did bring more guilt to the surface.
Gods she deserved the absolute best, and he was anything but.

“Now who's the sweet talker”.

A soft chuckle then she continued.

“I mean it. We all count on you. But I’d never think of you as predictable. I mean, I thought you’d
have run for the hills after I kissed you before.”

Her eyes narrowed toward him issuing a silent challenge, a look of mischief about her. Kakashi
raised a brow in reply before the words managed to form themselves.

“Why would I run? I’ve got to make up for the lack of nurses lining up somehow. Besides, there was
certainly enough here to keep me occupied. We have a presentation fast approaching after all.” He
enjoyed the upturn of her lips, he enjoyed everything about her lips these days. It was a mystery how
he’d never noticed them before. “Which reminds me, I have a souvenir for you from Wind country. I
don’t think it quite measures up to the ‘welcome home present’ you gave me. Before you get too
excited, just know it's in the form of more statistics, scrolls and notes.”

She looked excited anyway.

“As long as it's not another Anbu report, that sounds good to me.”

Kakashi didn’t miss the tired way she rubbed her eye. An urge to force her to rest began to simmer,
as well as a niggling sense of self reproach for keeping her awake and not resting. He almost
couldn’t believe himself at actually referring to that kiss as a ‘welcome home present’.

“Good. We can look at it tomorrow maybe if you’re feeling better.”
He stood, watching the mild surprise that crossed her face.

“You taking off then?”

Kakashi nodded and offered a smile.

“Yup. You need to get some rest…” He’d meant to add, ‘don’t get up’, but she was already standing and handing his white robes out for him to take.

“Thanks for watching over me sensei.”

There was a kind of fascinating gleam about her smile tonight, it could have been to do with the fever, but Kakashi’s mind leapt to other impure conclusions. It caused such a pang of his conscious that it was all he could do to take the white cloak from her with another nod. He really needed to book more sessions.

He took a step toward the window before his voice found him again, feeling suddenly guilty for leaving her without a word after being thanked like that.

“I think I’m the one who should be thanking you for doing all the research this week. But I did promise to make it up to you Friday so…”

“I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Yup. Anything you want for dinner?”

He turned his head in time to catch how the grin on her face grew into something so contagious he found himself returning it with equal fervor. Sakura shook her head.

“I don’t know. Surprise me?”

He nodded, internally debating what else he could do to surprise her.

“Goodnight Sakura.”

“Goodnight Kakashi sensei.”

At full tilt, Kakashi exited the building, finding himself in the now deserted streets of the village. He cast an eye over to the Hokage monument, as if imploring his former sensei for advice on the current tumultuous thoughts circling his mind. This time of night at least allowed him to think a little more clearly. There was no noise, no one approaching him with urgent business, no insufferable heat like in the Sand Village.

Maybe he was overthinking things, like usual. Just because they had acknowledged a mutual feeling of comfort felt in the other’s presence didn’t mean…

Kakashi really wasn’t sure he wanted his mind to wander that far.

A shiver ran up his spine, the cold night air penetrating the thin clothing he hadn’t bothered to change since arriving from the Sand Village. With a sigh he threw the white robes back over his head. Suddenly his feet had stopped moving.

The scent of Sakura still clung to those robes. And now his mind was conjuring up images of her wrapped up on the couch, her snuggling into them, that smile. The one right before she’d kissed him.

It was like he’d stumbled across an ever expanding mystery with her. While she was the one
claiming *him* to be unpredictable it was entirely the opposite for Kakashi. He felt utterly flummoxed around her lately.

Feet finally moving, Kakashi felt his guilt begin to ebb away with each step. Tucking the robes around his frame tighter and inhaling deeply.

Now he just had to find a way to make it up to her tomorrow.
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Sorry it takes me so long to cross post to AO3, I get more readers on ff.net and I feel like there's no point posting here a lot of the time.

Sakura woke around noon the following day. Opening her eyes to brilliant sunshine cascading through the windows, and no sign of headache or fever, she exhaled a sigh of relief so sizeable it was as if all the air had escaped her lungs at once. Her body was back to normal at last. No, not just normal, she felt good.

It was a rare and happy occasion when she had the chance to sleep through an entire morning so she savoured it. But once awake there was no time to be lying around even if she did have a whole day off.

It was just one of those things. As soon as her eyes were open, Sakura was up and stretching the remnants of sleep away. If she wasn't meant to be recovering she would have taken the chance to head to a training field somewhere and let off steam. As it was, she found plenty to do in her own apartment, research, case studies, even a mock outline of the presentation points. In between moments of busy work Sakura found herself something to eat, hummed along to some tune on the radio, even went through her wardrobe.

Occasionally she would catch her reflection in the mirror or glass. And each time the smile that she found permanently fixed to her features was an usual surprise. Not that her smiling was an odd thing itself, but the genuine happiness and contentment reflected back was certainly uncommon enough.

Sakura had expected to feel horrified and appalled by last night’s actions but there was no trace of it in the light of day. And she had now fully acknowledged the reason why, it just took getting sick for her to notice it.

Some kind of feelings had developed for Kakashi.

Years ago, even just months ago, it would have been a preposterous concept. But she recognized her feelings for what they were, content to let them grow, though she suspected it was out of her control at this point in any case.

If she really wanted to, there was still time to pass off last night's kiss as completely innocent, a moment of delusion from the fever. But Sakura didn't want to do that. It had been anything but innocent and that had been completely intentional. She smirked at the thought. The kiss had been returned, he hadn't run, he had felt it too.

It seemed utterly childish, and not something any self respecting twenty four year old woman should be doing, but Sakura couldn't help it. With a sigh of contentment she flopped herself into the middle of her bed and started reading. Who cared if she was lying about, in her pajamas, reading questionable literature on a sunny afternoon?

She was already a few pages into chapter seven. The tension was killing her. At one point it had risen so high that she’d needed to take a break from the book entirely. Choosing instead to actually
venture out into the sunshine. It would probably do her more good anyway.

Before leaving Sakura decided to take a small detour to the hospital. It was still a little early, but she could at least take the shinobi medical reports over to Hokage tower for Shizune.

Sakura made sure to wear civilian clothes, just to be sure she wouldn’t get roped into working. That was the idea anyway. Just two steps inside the building and she was approached by an intern. An hour had passed by the time she made it to her own office. The paperwork on her desk surprisingly not at the towering level she thought it would be after a day and a half absent.

It was of great comfort to see her surgical patient recovering so well. She could also practically feel the relief wafting from Shizune when she offered to take the medical reports to Hokage tower. Sakura felt a novel kind of excitement at the thought of surprising Kakashi, just the idea of going to see him causing a flutter in her stomach.

It had been a very long time since any man had caused her to feel butterflies.

Thankfully what she thought must be a stupid and uncontrollable grin on her face went unnoticed. Or at least no one mentioned it.

She enjoyed the stroll over to the Tower more than usual. The only major differences being, that she hadn’t worked herself to the bone that day, and it was earlier than the normal time. But Kakashi was the real reason for the spring in her step, in part because of the excitement at this project of theirs, and how great it would be once it was completed. Sakura knew she would be lying to herself if she said that was the only reason.

The roads were crowded, it was about the time that children made their way out of the academy and took their games to the streets. But when Sakura reached the fence to Hokage tower she could tell there was a different kind of commotion going on.

There were people *everywhere*. Running, carrying messages, shouting to each other. Ninja and administration alike attributing to the chaos. In her tenure as Tsunade’s apprentice Sakura knew that this kind of ruckus was caused by one of two things, an unexpected attack or a ticked off Hokage. The second option could be for any number of reasons but she couldn’t exactly see Kakashi throwing a chair from a window because the sake supply had run out.

She suppressed a giggle at the thought. This good mood she found herself in was starting to get dangerous, a chunin guard giving her a dubious look as she entered the building.

Sakura tried to fix her features in seriousness. Aided by the overall cloud of doom surrounding the place as she ascended the stairs. The closer she got to his office the more her ninja senses went into high alert. She hadn’t seen the place this chaotic since the Akatsuki.

For the second time in as many weeks Sakura almost plowed her way into Shikamaru as he exited the Hokage’s office.

“Oh, hi Shikamaru. What the hell’s going on?”

“Sakura, hey. Aren’t you meant to be resting?”

She could see through the open doors into the office, Kakashi with his back to her, looking out over the village from the window. There were advisors and people all over the place. Arguing, tossing paper back and forth, yelling into phones or shooing messenger birds from the other windows. Her attention divided between Kakashi and Shikamaru, eyes shifting between them like a game of tennis.
“You heard about that? I'm fine, all better and rested. Now can you tell me what on earth is going on here?”

Shikamaru shifted and scratched his head, narrowly avoiding a blur of papers entering the office.

“Yeah I heard about it alright. Kakashi actually had someone check the hospital just to make sure you hadn't gone back to work…”

The Hokage himself seemed to finally register her presence amongst the chaos, looking over his shoulder and eyeing Sakura with a tired smile, which she returned. Shikamaru continued on through the exchange, distracted by the mess around him.

“But this ridiculousness you see before you is the aftermath of the Tsuchikage’s retirement announcement. Everyone seems to have lost their minds.”

Sakura tore her eyes away from Kakashi to look back at Shikamaru.

“You can’t be serious. The man is in his nineties, his retirement shouldn't exactly be a shock to anyone.”

“It is when he bypasses his son as successor in favour of his granddaughter.”

Sakura understood in an instant and fought the urge to roll her eyes. Suddenly they all felt the need to panic because they were threatened by a woman. She also understood the apathetic look in Kakashi’s eyes. Clearly he was not pleased.

“Well they'll have to stop being such big babies and just get over it.” Sakura did not bother to disguise the bitterness in her tone.

“Tell me about it. Part of me believes old man Ōnoki did this on purpose y’know. Just to mess with people.”

If there hadn't been such a frenzy around the place Shikamaru might have smiled a little. But the sound of some aggressive verbal communication from down the hallway made them both wince. Sakura held up the medical reports and quickly darted into the office to leave them in the tray.

Kakashi had turned to face her, his eyes never leaving her in what might be considered an unnerving way, if it wasn't for the thrill it sent down Sakura’s spine. Everyone else was too busy to notice. He held up a hand in a sort of wave and she waved back before heading out the door again. She knew better than to disrupt what was already bedlam. Shikamaru was still there biding his time probably before having to deal with the next form of chaos.

“Oh Sakura, I meant to say something earlier. Kakashi’s been telling me about the children’s hospital you're working on. It's a great idea. If there's anything I can do to help you just let me know.”

Sakura felt some of her earlier joy return to her and she smiled widely.

“Thanks Shikamaru. I'm pretty excited about it. Just hope we'll get it together on time. I'll let you know, thanks for the offer.”

With her hand raised Sakura had already turned to leave before she’d finished the sentence. Something about the way Kakashi had been looking at her, reduced her entire being into a pile of jelly, and she suddenly felt too warm to be indoors.

“Oh, Sakura…”
She turned, pausing before reaching the stairs. Expecting to see Shikamaru but instead finding the object of her current tumultuous thoughts standing right in front of her, clad in white robes. Though she couldn’t see much past him, her eyes were locked with his again in that same heated unfathomable look from before, she could distinctly hear a gaggle of people waiting behind him.

“Are you feeling alright?”

Kakashi’s sudden question was in that tone he used seldomly for her benefit, so that she was the only one who could hear him. Combined with the look in his eye Sakura felt even warmer. It had nothing to do with illness though and everything to do with the promise that his eyes were making. That he wanted her to stay in his sight as long as possible.

“Yes, I’m feeling much better now Kakashi sensei. Thanks for the soup by the way.”

She smiled sweetly but he was dead serious.

“Please tell me you didn’t actually work today.”

“Looking like this?” She broadly gestured to the baggy jersey and tights she had thrown on. “No, I stayed home reading.” The quirk of his brow broke the grave expression that had been set on his features, replaced with a tinkle of mischief. “I did head over to the hospital to check on my surgical patient, that’s all, then I thought I’d just bring the reports over…”

Sakura contemplated telling him the truth, that she had wanted to see him too, but it went without saying. Or so she hoped. She was doing her utmost to match the downright sultry look he was giving her with one of her own. Maybe it wouldn’t need to be said.

“Well that’s a relief.” His hand twitched imperceptibly toward her, even holding his gaze Sakura noticed that he’d nearly reached out to touch her, though he may not have registered the movement himself. “Looks like I’m going to be running a little later than usual tonight, I know I promised to make it up to you, and I intend to, but…”

“Don’t worry about that one bit Kakashi sensei. You know where to find me later, if you’re still up for it after dealing with...all this.”

Sakura flicked her eyes to the hallway behind Kakashi where there was an actual line of people forming to speak to him. She thought that breaking the eye contact for a moment might also break some of the spell he’d cast over her, but it was short lived, her legs returning to a jelly like substance before too long.

The ruckus in the waiting queue grew too loud to ignore for much longer. He nodded, the mask creasing in a familiar way while his eyes were still trained on her face. Sakura was sure she hadn’t seen him so tired since the end of the last war.

With a wink, when she was sure no one else would see, she turned on her heels to leave again.

“Have fun Kakashi sensei, see you later.”

“Ha ha, very funny Sakura. See you tonight.”

As soon as she’d moved away the queue descended upon Kakashi and surrounded him. She fought the urge to giggle like a schoolgirl, deciding to wait until she was within the safety of her apartment to fully let loose the weird tittering emotions that were bubbling to the surface.

The good mood from before resettled within Sakura as soon as she got home. Tinged with a hint of
disappointment that she would probably not see Kakashi until much later that evening, even then she
didn’t mind so much, as least she had seen him once today. It was better than nothing.

Whatever was happening between them had ascended to another level. In Sakura’s mind anyway.
While at first it felt like a gradual shift in her feelings and thoughts towards him, now it was a steady
and strong flow that she couldn’t deny.

And she was starting to see that reflected in Kakashi. Maybe she knew him a little better, perhaps it
was because any change of his behaviour was a stark contrast to the deliberate and careful man she
had known half her life. But there was something there now in the way he looked at her, the way he
smiled, the gentle and soft gestures he returned.

A fraction of Sakura’s mind was distracted while she dabbled in some of the hospital research. Going
over her case studies in an almost obsessive repetition to make sure it was all perfect. If Kakashi did
turn up that night she wanted to be prepared. More so that when he arrived she wouldn’t have to
concentrate so much and could just spend time talking to him.

The hours passed slowly.

Sakura wouldn’t admit to watching the clock but she was certainly more aware of it. It became
easier, just like it had during the day, as she busied herself with a few other things. Part of her
vehemently refusing to even look in the direction of that stupid book. Though it was beginning to
call to her when all the other distractions began to wane. The last thing she wanted was for Kakashi
to catch her red handed reading it. Not only would she never live it down, but the chapter had taken
a steamy turn.

The characters had holed themselves up in that abandoned house, saturated from the rain, sexual
tension prickling as they peeled the clothes slowly from each others bodies.

Sakura began to feel a tight throbbing between her legs, breathing shallow as her thoughts took a
decidedly provocative turn…

“Am I interrupting something?”

His very tired voice caught her by complete surprise.

“Kakashi sensei! Hi. You know you can use the door right?”

She had been standing at the dining table, staring resolutely at the pile of papers, not even registering
when Kakashi had actually climbed through her window. He stood there scratching his head,
holding out a shopping bag for her to take, eyes smiling in the usual way. She couldn’t suppress the
grin as she uneasily approached him.

“What’s this?” Sakura asked, peering into the bag cautiously before taking it.

“This is a somewhat pitiful attempt at making it up to you… I know it’s not much but I figured it
would appeal to you on some level.”

It was desserts. An assortment of them. Sakura’s eyes lifted to Kakashi’s face, her unbridled joy not
able to be contained.

“You brought me dessert?”

“I take it you still have a sweet tooth then? It's a bit late for dinner obviously, so I thought this would
suffice. Someone once told me dessert was the best part, if I recall correctly.”
Sakura had lost track of time, glancing to the clock for a second to find it was almost 10pm. She regarded his face closely, noting the now very prominent dark rings under his eyes, and how his shoulders seemed to be sagging under the weight of tiredness. Yet he’d kept his promise to her.

Still smiling, still clutching that bag, Sakura leant up and placed a lingering kiss to his cheek. It had been an automatic reaction on her part. While her lips were basking in the warmth radiating from his masked skin, she felt the way he ever so slightly leaned into her. That sharp intake before he held his breath completely at the contact.

It was like the weariness was draining from him at her touch.

When she pulled back Kakashi was regarding her, his eyelids drooping even more than usual, an uneasy upturn of his lips. Sakura tucked a messy tuft of hair behind his ear, any excuse to prolong touching him just a little bit.

“Thank you Kakashi sensei.”

He nodded his head slightly. She shifted away to deposit the bag in the kitchen. Holding his gaze for as long as she could, satisfied that he looked less jaded than when she first saw him.

“So, how was your day?”

He asked loudly while she stood in the kitchen.

“Boring.” She called back, wondering if he could hear the smile in her voice. She heard the huff of his reply and shuffle of white robes being removed.

Sakura still couldn't quite believe that Kakashi had brought her dessert. Sasuke would never have indulged her like that, never surprised her with something only she desired. And Kakashi disliked sweet things just as much as Sasuke to her knowledge. That was the difference. Not only could she count on Kakashi to turn up, even if it was late, he made it feel like he had at least been thinking of her.

“You hungry?”

Sakura stepped around the door to catch him shaking his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. Gods he looked so tired.

“No, thanks Sakura.”

Quickly reaching to flick the jug on to boil she returned to Kakashi’s side. Pushing him to sit at the dining table with a gentle shove, he didn't seem to notice as much, rubbing the tiredness from his eyes with an unsettling fervor. Sakura brewed tea listening to the rustling of papers as Kakashi picked through the research.

“You've been busy.” He said in an almost reproachful tone as she placed the cup near him.

“Not as busy as you might think.”

“You had that look about you when I came in.”

Sakura sighed as she sat in the chair next to him.

“I've really only made headway on the case studies and treatment proposals. Just got lost in my own head again…”
She watched his eyes narrow before darting from the papers to her face. A sparkle of his usual mischief returned.

“I take it you haven’t finished chapter seven then….”

Sakura was in half a mind to jab him for teasing. Heat on her cheeks alerting her to the blush that would be spreading like wildfire. She suddenly felt the need to tease back.

“Wouldn’t you like to know…”

********

It took four days for the chaos to finally settle.

Kakashi spent each day following the Tsuchikage’s announcement in an ever growing state of frustration. The tension mounting as he circled through the same arguments with the same middle aged advisors.

As if her gender wasn’t enough of an issue, they were also picking fault with her age, and anything else they could find. Temperament, experience, it didn't seem to matter. Kakashi was tired of it. For the most part he was able to deflect the criticism, referencing the good relations they maintained with the Land of Earth in recent years. But the conversation was repeated so often the words had lost all meaning to him.

And then impatience, as well as frustration, began to simmer away.

Restless because these idle politics were cutting into the precious little time he had set aside for more important things. And while he’d tried to maintain order to his thoughts, just as he had in the Sand Village, it became almost an impossibility within a few short hours. Kakashi’s only solace being that he would spend at least an hour in the evenings with Sakura.

It wasn't much but it was better than nothing.

Each night Kakashi would be worn out considerably by the days madness. Weighed down physically by sheer frustration alone, it hurt across his shoulders and up his neck. The ache only adding to his tiredness and terrible mood. But then each night, when he was finally freed, he would return to Sakura’s. And each night she found some excuse to kiss him gently just as she had that Friday night. On the cheek as a thank you, or good night, or on the top of his head when he complimented her hard work. She’d even massaged his shoulders one time.

These subtle touches ebbed the harshness of the day away. It fascinated him. By Monday evening she had managed to completely recharge him with one quick peck to his cheek. It was addicting as well. By the Tuesday things had settled enough that he didn't especially need the instant gratifying release that her touch provided, but he'd wanted it all the same, looked forward to it even.

They hadn't gotten much planning work done for the hospital since his return, but Sakura was continuing to make leaps and bounds in the treatment side of things. And he'd had an extra hour with her Tuesday night, finishing at a more reasonable time, to go over her presentation plan.

Kakashi didn't think it was coincidence that the bedlam died down as soon as the new Tsuchikage announced her advisors. Including her father, as well as a few of the other more preferred candidates. While their own elderly advisors of the Leaf were still suitably pricked by the whole situation, they now at least didn't consider it a dooming omen to the peace they had achieved. Not that they had anything to do with the actual fight to attain that peace. Kakashi did his best not to hold resentment about the way things had always been, he hadn't been set on changing the world when he became
Hokage. It was simply a means to an end.

By Wednesday morning Kakashi woke early, a little after seven, and went about his usual morning ritual. All the while thinking that tonight he might just be lucky enough to actually make it to Sakura’s for dinner. Perhaps he could surprise her with something so she wouldn’t need to cook after her shift. Though he guessed she’d tell him off and insist on a healthy home cooked alternative anyway. He chuckled into his coffee at the thought of her pout as she lectured him…

And that was his last good thought for the day.

An urgent message arrived at his window on the back of an eagle. At the same time three Anbu agents popped into being around him. He waved them silent while reading the message, wanting a few facts before they began beseeching him on whatever trivial thing had happened.

But it wasn’t trivial. At least, not in the grand scheme of things. Kakashi felt an unvetted surge of anger as his eyes scanned the paper, but it had nothing to do with its contents and everything to do with the repercussions of it, and what that would mean for him.

The Raikage had resigned. Announcing his very young successor as Darui.

Finally he permitted the Anbu to speak. They offered him a little more information. That the succession had been in place for months and Onôke had simply wanted to beat him to the punch. Kakashi was certain there was no shred of malice in the gesture, but people would talk.

And talk they did.

It was incessant. At barely 7:30 in the morning it started and it did not stop. There was no time to even think for himself. There was nothing so wrong with Darui as a strong and capable Kage, at least not in Kakashi’s opinion, but it circled back to the damnable age and experience thing again. It was a loop of the same arguments from last week.

With the added conversation now that there were three very young Kage leading the most powerful Hidden Villages. And while Gaara had proven his mettle, these younger ones were questionable at best, at least to the more senior advisors. Kakashi had to remind them all, repeatedly, that he had actually fought with them and could attest to their strengths.

As ever, that had not been solid enough reasoning. That unnerving impatience began to tug at him again, combined with anger and frustration. Kakashi was the first to admit that it took a lot for him to lose his temper but he was just worn down enough to become agitated. And it was ridiculous. They weren’t even at war for goodness sake. There was no tangible opponent for Kakashi to take his frustrations out on either, and so it was aimed inwardly.

By lunch he had the beginnings of a migraine, the noise adding to it, pressure building behind his eyes.

If he’d had just one moment to himself he might have registered why he was so angry about the situation, but there was no time for reflection. Just phone call after phone call, the planning of an emergency Kage summit, more arguing.

Shikamaru had most of Kakashi’s regular busy work shifted to his own office, it still needed to be done at some point, but it was not so urgent. Each of the advisors were needing to be met with individually that afternoon. Then there were those reporting back from missions who had to be made to wait until he was free.

Kakashi had been hearing near constant complaining without break all day. There had been no
reprieve from the noise. When he finally looked out his own office windows for the first time all afternoon there was the beginnings of pink hues to the sunset. And instantly his mind went to her. The ten seconds of peace he felt at this was short lived, the angry squad of genin in his office no longer content to just wait. Still he addressed them as he should, dismissed them without lingering conversation. His eye hovering to the clock.

It was about the usual time for Sakura to turn up with the medical reports. Though there was no hope to talk to her in all of this upheaval. Just at the very second he decided he would have to be content in just seeing her for the moment, there was another team standing at his desk, demanding debriefing.

There was no time to think.

Someone of average, or below average, intelligence may argue that this made the day go faster. And that was true to a point. But for Kakashi the idea that something so unworthy was taking up all his precious time became more than a nuisance.

There was another phone call. This one coming directly from the Daimyo’s palace. Kakashi swallowed his own ire, doing everything that was required of him before the long winded conversation came to an end.

Another team of shinobi.

Kakashi was certain that it would only take one more small nudge for all his tolerance to be pushed aside and his temper to unleash itself. Dismissing the next team in line, as well as Shikamaru who had been diligently handling as much of today’s shit storm as he possibly could, Kakashi sat back in his now quiet office.

And it was dark now. He had missed Sakura’s usual visit.

His office phone began to ring, the noise stirring the migraine he had been pushing aside all day long. The ticking of his wall clock adding to it. The hum of the damned computer on his desk. The pounding of the blood in his ears. It was a symphony of chaos that forced him to close his eyes from the pain and discomfort.

And he was going to be stuck here for years to come in this noise. There was no escape now. He would have to wait another seven years before it would be acceptable to hang up his hat.

Something in his brain erupted. The buildup of tension, anger and frustration that had all been brewing beneath the surface. Worn down and this, today, it was all too much to bare.

Suddenly those white robes felt more constricting than ever. Like the fabric was trying to literally smother him as he sat. With force he stood abruptly, ignoring the phone, ripping the mantle from his body and throwing it to the floor. Such a disrespectful action might have once perturbed him but today it had all gone out the window. With one last look to the likeness of his sensei on the wall, and briefly to Tsunade also, he slid the pane open and escaped.

The fresh night air did nothing to curb his mood as it once might have.

There was only one thing, one person, he could think of to stop this despicable feeling. He needed her. Needed to feed off that calmness she exuded once again. Sakura was calling him home like a beacon and just for tonight he didn’t give a damned about the consequences. Kakashi felt guilt almost every single day, and so far had managed to survive, what was one more thing thrown onto that pile going to do?
He would worry about that tomorrow.

It was selfish. He was aware of that. But the pain drove him forward, his head radiating agony down his neck and back, behind his eyes. He needed her. And as if the universe was punishing him further for simply entertaining the thought, it then started to rain. Summer downpours were not uncommon in Konoha but this one he felt was personally targeted at him, and were it not for the throbbing in his head, he would probably have laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

But there was no time for laughing.

He still felt cheated this week not being able to spend as much time with her, for the project, and to see through whatever was developing between them. And then the week previous had been robbed of her company as well. It only added to his frustration, added to his resolve for his next course of action.

Kakashi wasn’t sure why he chose to use her door this evening instead of the window but by this point his body was moving of its own accord. Heading for a place where he knew he could find some semblance of peace.

The rain disguised the sound of his entrance. Later on he would debate with himself whether it was unlocked or he’d forced the door open. But the sight he was met with upon its opening would forever be burned into his small stockpile of happier memories.

For what seemed like a long few minutes Kakashi stood there simply drinking it in, a wave of calmness eroding the harsher points of his anger. The pain momentarily forgotten.

Sakura was lying on the couch, legs dangling over the end, why she was in such a position he didn’t know. The thing was certainly big enough for her to lie across it. She was reading the book he’d picked out for her that night a few weeks ago, humming quietly to herself as she skimmed the page.

It was probably only the dripping of rainwater on her apartment floor that alerted her to his presence. She eyed him for a second in mild disbelief before jumping up and throwing the book to the coffee table.

“Kakashi sensei! I wasn’t expecting you until late... I guess it is late now…”

“Stop.”

Sakura had been walking toward him, smiling with a light dust of blush on her cheek. At his command she paused. Her features morphing into an impassive air which he knew to be disguised concern. Either she didn’t notice or she didn’t recognize the expression he was giving her.

Heads she looked so good. In a tank top and shorts, probably pajamas, with her hair out like that. Just the sight of her was helping to ease the coiled tension within him. But he needed more. And when his nose picked up on a pleasant scent wafting from her that was the final straw.

It was the same smell that had lingered on her the morning they went for coffee and a stroll round the village. The morning he had interrupted her. Which meant one thing in his mind.

Slowly Kakashi stepped in to close the small gap between them.

“Don’t move.”

It didn’t sound like his own voice, even though his lips were moving. It was a timid demand, a plea, and he watched in fascination as Sakura’s eyes shone with a comprehension of what he was asking.
He needed this. But he needed not to lose any more of the fragile hold he had over his self control. Just barely Sakura tilted her head up to meet his eye as he stood directly in front of her, she didn’t make any more movements, it even appeared as if she were holding her breath.

Kakashi brought his hand up to her chin before cupping the side of her face and tilting it towards his own. Wishing he’d removed his gloves to feel the softness of her skin a little better.

“Close your eyes.”

She did so immediately. The lack of hesitation at such an odd request showing just how much she trusted him, it was a compelling invitation to act on his urges. It would probably only fuel his guilt later, but for now he needed this more, every fibre of his being calling out for it.

Without removing his mask, inhaling a deep breath to summon what was left of his courage, Kakashi touched his lips to hers.

Sakura did not move, but she didn’t tense up either, she was just still. Everything except her lips, melding to his.

It started tenuously, in an instant Kakashi felt the worst of his feelings from the day drain away. Finally the pain in his head began to dull as all noise faded. The soft pitter of the rain hitting the windows the only sound. Blissful peace.

His lips grew greedy. What began as tentative slow touching gained momentum. Sakura remained as still as she could be while following his lead, not attempting to overtake him, kissing him back with just as much ardor.

The part of Kakashi’s brain that was still functioning begged him not to crowd her or bring their bodies together too closely. It was only his selfish frustrations that had caused this collision in the first place. But rational thought ceased altogether when Sakura was the first to bridge that gap. He grunted softly into the kiss.

If it weren't for the mask he'd be plundering her mouth, exploring her, tasting her. The scent alone this close was enough to break his self control. That subtle hint of musk overpowering her usual minty aroma. Kakashi’s hands drifted down her soft outer edges from her cheeks, fingers tracing her shoulders and arms before coming to rest on her hips. He registered their trembling on their slow journey down her body but he was unable to stop it.

Eventually the need for air, and the chaffing from the mask on his face, forced them to stop. It could have been seconds or minutes, he couldn’t really say. His forehead tilted down slightly to rest on hers. At some point his eyes had also drifted shut, he kept them closed, unsure if he wanted to look at the world just yet. Kakashi wanted to savour this feeling before reality hit him. Peace.

Breathing a little harder than usual, still pressed together, it was now that Kakashi realized they had shifted while kissing. Had he done that? Pushed her until the backs of her legs were against the armrest of the sofa. It was now that he also realized that he was actually quite saturated from the rain. And now so was Sakura.

Her voice was what caused him to crack his eyes open. A breathy kind of whisper he’d not heard from her lips before.

“Bad day huh?”

He nodded in reply with a subtle jerk of his head. Unable to produce words. Unable to move much more than that.
“Better now?”

Another imperceptible nod. He did feel better. All the stress of the day had evaporated, as he predicted it would at her touch. But it didn't lessen the guilt of the selfish gesture he'd just committed. His eyes lingered on her kiss swollen lips that were smiling softly before drifting to meet her gaze.

“Good.” She whispered again, reaching up to brush a sodden strand of hair from his brow.

Kakashi’s eyes widened at her answer. Searching her for any trace of doubt or regret, but he found none. Which was some small consolation because there had been no innocent excuse for this kiss, not a thank you kiss or good night kiss. No pretence for the way he'd wanted her in that moment. No going back. It had not been a perfunctory peck to the cheek either. And for all appearances she seemed fine with that.

Overloaded by the days events and this sudden shock to his system, which had been entirely of his own doing, Kakashi squeezed his eyes shut. He could attribute this sudden numbness to the chill of being sodden, but it was still summer. It all stemmed from a terrifying sense that his own actions had been so very wrong. But there she stood, smiling and touching him lightly, keeping him planted to earth.

She needed to stop touching him before he did something he’d really feel guilty for.

“Right. Let's get you cleaned up.”

Sakura seemed to be reading his very thoughts, moving away suddenly, Kakashi sincerely hoped she wasn't actually able to read minds. Images of her damp tank top clinging to her like a second skin were forming a mental picture at this moment.

He kept his eyes closed until he felt her warmth return. She began to tousle his hair with a towel, wrapping another one around his body.

Kakashi still could not form words. Not shape any rational train of thought after what had just happened. While Sakura was the picture of serenity, completely calm, and knowing exactly what he needed. A singular thought broke through the tranquility.

*I don’t deserve her.*

“How you only managed to get the top half wet again is beyond me.” Sakura was roughly drying him before grabbing his hand and pulling. “Stay right here, I'll get some dry clothes.”

Kakashi sat on the armrest of the couch, not having much choice as she practically shoved him onto it. Towels around him, one hanging off his head, one underneath him. As they absorbed the rainwater, Kakashi absorbed an all encompassing feeling that a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. It felt almost like freedom.

He sighed in contentment. For now at least he was comfortable, it was anyone’s guess how long it would last before the guilt invariably set in, but he wasn’t about to hurry it along.

Sakura came back into view from her bedroom, wearing a fresh black tank top and holding a small bundle of clothing. She was smiling at him, blushing just a little. Kakashi could right that off to the warmth and humidity of summer but he could still see the fullness of her pink lips. Next time he would taste them properly.

*Next time.*
On her approach Sakura reached out to tug at his hand again. Pulling him to stand and very slowly leading him down the corridor of her apartment. There was no need to stand so closely to her, but his body was still acting of its own accord, feeding off that peaceful calm that embodied Sakura. They stopped outside a door where she pushed the clothing into his hands, removing some of the towels and opening it to reveal the bathroom.

“Get dressed, then you can tell me all about your day.”

Kakashi’s eyes darted from her eyes to her lips briefly again. The way she was leaning up into him, her back against the wall of the hallway, it almost felt like she was about to kiss him. He smirked at the thought and suddenly his voice, and some of his charm thankfully, came back to him

“I’d much rather hear about your day, Sakura.”

Her smile widened with a little huff in amusement. He found that his body was still reluctant to move away from hers. Leaning toward her as she placed a short but heated kiss to his lips.

“If you behave yourself I might just tell you what chapter I’m up to…”

The vixen had the nerve to wink before she pushed him, with some considerable force, into the bathroom.

Kakashi stared at himself in the mirror for a full minute before being able to move again. Unsure if he even recognized his reflection. But unfortunately it was still the same man staring back. Same mess of white hair. Same scar. His eyes had a little more life to them tonight. Apart from that he was still the same Kakashi, who was not only her former sensei, but her current Hokage. It should be all kinds of wrong but it just wasn’t. At least not right now, in this moment he was feeling good.

There was just one emerging problem that Kakashi had not foreseen entirely. Which was so utterly out of character for him it put stock to the saying that love is blind.

The problem being that now he had opened the floodgates by kissing her, if it happened again tonight he might not be able to stop himself. It was fast becoming a force of nature.

Standing in that bathroom Kakashi put a hand to his masked lips, still feeling the pressure of her kiss, his olfactory senses bombarded with that minty scent. Being surrounded by so many things that smelt of Sakura, which included his own mask now, offered him that same calmness he had coveted.

He just hoped that calmness would overpower his urge to kiss her into oblivion, press her to the wall, feast on her lips until she begged him for something else. Or got so impatient and needy she took it for herself. The thought alone almost made him growl, his grip tightening on the shirt in his hand.

First he had only wanted her company, but now… now he wanted all of her.

And that was when the first signs of guilt began to fester.

* * * *

Sakura had been grinning like an idiot to her kitchen for a full five minutes. She would shift between going about making tea normally to putting her fingers to her lips and blushing so heatedly she could boil the water with her body temperature alone.

The second she had laid eyes on him that evening she’d known that something was off. His whole being was fractured in some way. Not at all the collected shinobi she had known for so long.
Sakura wasn’t sure if Kakashi would ever completely open up about what had rattled him so terribly, but she was fine with that. Not that she was happy about him feeling horrible, but it was reassuring that he had chosen to come to her, to hold her and kiss her like just the act would solve all his problems.

It was the complete opposite to how Sasuke had once been.

When she had tried to offer him tenderness to help soothe his mind, she had been shut down. He just couldn’t see at all how those soft actions built trust, made the world easier by being able to lean on another for a little while. Even if there was no talking involved.

All week she had been indulging herself with small kisses and touches here and there. Such a thing might have made her uncomfortable before, but she found that she was missing Kakashi so much by dinner time it was hard not to touch him when she had the opportunity. It became an ever conscious desire, and the fact that he was now returning those gestures only caused her grin to spread.

When she heard the bathroom door creak open Sakura tried to damper down the broad smile on her face. Appearing in the living room with the teapot just as Kakashi came into view. He still did not look his normal self. But half heartedly he returned her happy smile, it didn't shine through his eyes as they searched her.

She placed the teapot on the coffee table, took the wet clothing from Kakashi before pushing him to sit on the sofa.

“Before you say anything, no, you're not doing any work tonight. Just sit. Here.”

He did so without argument. She handed him the steaming cup before taking his clothing to the dryer. Perhaps he was just too exhausted to make his usual cheeky comments or reply with any retort. But she returned to find him still staring at the mug in his hands like it was some sort of foreign object. It fostered a feeling of concern, something was indeed up with him, she didn't try to hide it as she sat. A furrowed brow betraying her thoughts.

While she thought his eyes were trained on the cup, when she looked closely his gaze was slightly off. Resting on the book she'd carelessly tossed on the table. Her concern suddenly vanished and her face heated up again. She'd forgotten to hide it. Now he was probably trying to guess exactly where she was up to…

“I feel…” He paused, weighing his words carefully, Sakura tried to be impassive. “Guilty. For not being there for you this week. I know we're on a timer with this planning…”

“That sounds awfully like an apology Kakashi sensei, hmm? I thought I told you not to do that.” Sakura then tried to soften her tone, realizing his guilt most likely stemmed from something else entirely. “Please don't feel guilty. It's not like I've been doing nothing and you're so busy lately.”

“All these politics are ridiculous, it's so cumbersome I feel like I'm losing my mind.”

Kakashi raked a hand through his drying hair. Staring at some fixed point on the coffee table. But he was talking, talking was a good thing.

“Kakashi sensei, you don't have to answer this, but why are you still doing this to yourself?” She placed a tentative hand to his knee, breaking his staring contest, his head jerking toward her. “You've done enough, why don't you just....”

“It's not enough.” He interrupted, causing her to pause. “Not just yet anyway.” His hand came to rest on top of hers as it sat on his knee adding a tenderness to his dark timbre.
Now he seemed to be watching their mingling hands, wrapping his fingers around hers. She squeezed a little for comfort.

“You don't have to do this alone you know.”

Their eyes met. That same droopy expressionless gaze as always, though now Sakura could see it was a front to hide his actual feelings. And he likely did so for his own protection as well as hers. She tried to communicate the rest without words, remembering the little mission she'd assigned herself. *If he needed it, she would be the one to help him.*

For a while he was silent. Breaking the eye contact to look back at their hands again. When he did speak it was with a quiet suredness.

“That's why I'm here, Sakura.”

It was then that he squeezed her hand. She found the small smile on her lips reflected on his face, seeing the shift of his mask. Kakashi seemed to relax a little more, that stiff uncomfortable way he'd been holding himself all but gone. Sakura wanted him to keep talking like this but didn't want to risk the way things were unfolding between them. She didn't want him to retreat again.

“Good.” Was all she managed.

They were quiet again until he began to softly chuckle. The laughter growing with each second.

“What?” Sakura asked while fighting to keep from laughing herself.

“Nothing really, I think I've just finally gone insane. I was just imagining the chaos that would descend if I announced my retirement this week as well. It would probably cause another war.”

He was still chuckling.

“That bad?”

“Yup.”

Sakura sighed.

“Men are such babies. Egos threatened when someone just a little younger than them gets any kind of power.”

“That’s true. It’s just how the bureaucrats work unfortunately, I’m sure Naruto will change their minds when it’s his turn. I’ll just have to wait mine out a little longer…” His eyes were a little warmer when he regarded her this time, “there’s still a few things I want to get done anyway.”

The look in his eye as he said it caused a fluttering in her stomach. Automatically she reached up with her other hand to nervously tuck a strand of hair behind her ears. It was that stupid books fault, all she could think about was very inappropriate things, she wondered if he could tell. Sakura tried to change the subject.

“Well, there’s not anything that needs to be done tonight, so you just relax while you can. We’ll have more to do later once the location is settled but everything else can wait.”

Kakashi sighed and sat back into the sofa, keeping their hands locked, Sakura leant back as well.

“That’s right. We really need to sort that out quickly. We also need to scout that hide out sometime soon. You’ve got this Sunday off right?”
Sakura, in a knee jerk response almost said yes, but her brain made the connection to something she had nearly completely forgotten.

“Actually, yes but I have plans.” She watched his brow quirk for her to continue, “This Sunday is the second to last Summer Festival and the only one I usually go to. I don’t want to miss it.”

“Why the second to last one?”

“Well. It’s not too hot…” She didn’t register that she was scooting closer to him on the couch, “so even if I wear something bulky I won’t overheat. Also there’s not as many people as the first ones or last one, so it’s not crowded and I can enjoy myself.”

Kakashi was tracing circles with his thumb on her hand. The tingling sensation making her warmer than it should.

“That surprisingly doesn’t sound so terrible. I can’t remember the last one of those I went to…”

“You should come with me.”

The idea sparked and wouldn’t stay silent. Kakashi’s thumb paused in its movement. He went a little rigid and Sakura could feel it sitting so close to him.

“That’s probably not a good idea.” He finally spoke with a tone of incredulousness.

“Why not? I think it’s a great idea. Surely you can escape for an hour or two…”

Kakashi was so stiff now it was palpable tension.

“You shouldn’t go with an old man like me…”

He was probably going to add more to the spiel, but Sakura’s patience for what other people thought was appropriate for her was not something she wanted to hear from Kakashi.

“Who cares Kakashi sensei? You’re the only person I want to go with. I’ve only ever gone on my own but it would be so much better if you were with me…”

The words came out unabashed and even shocked her a little bit. Kakashi remained still, watching her face very closely like he was waiting for something. Suddenly Sakura realized what that was.

“I’m asking you to come with me. Will you please?”

His body softened, but his eyes remained dark and fixed to hers in such a way Sakura knew she was blushing a deeper shade of pink than her hair. She probably held her breath waiting for his answer.

“Drop the sensei, and I’ll think about it.”

It wasn’t a yes. But it was something. She gave a small twinkle of a smile, he still seemed a little tense.

“Promise?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“Wait, what do I call you then?”

He finally simpered back and resumed his thumb movements.
“Just Kakashi is fine.”
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

This chapter. Is what I wrote this whole fic for, because Kakashi (and all ninja) desperately need therapy and we ALL need a better attitude towards mental health.

I commend any of you for seeking help, I am proud of you, it is a hard thing to do. I applaud all of you still struggling through on your own, fighting off the demons with sticks, just keep fighting.

Staying alive is really hard sometimes, and sometimes it's for no good reason at all. But guess what, it will be sunny one day. Things always change.

I love you all for your support for this story. It means more to me than I can put into words.

The midday sun bore down on his shoulders. The summer heat might have been unpleasant to the throngs of villagers around, going about their business, but to Kakashi it was just enough warmth to keep the numbness at bay. Feeling that fierce heat was far better than feeling the nothingness that had swallowed him that morning.

Ten years ago he would have simply taken a mission, or been too busy with one already. Avoidant coping. It had served him well his entire life, until recently anyway.

It was perhaps remiss of him to leave the office as early as he had, in light of yesterday's events, but he'd wanted to take the longer route downtown. Just to be certain there were no followers. This week especially the danger of being shadowed had increased. But Kakashi also selfishly wanted to enjoy that sunshine for a bit more, it was pitiable that he had to escape his own office in order to just breathe some fresh air. If someone had told him this ten years ago he would have laughed.

Thirty years of being a shinobi. And he was now only using these skills to escape his own office, to go to a scheduled therapy session.

The whole situation was laughable.

Three decades of missions, assassinations, undercover infiltrations, training genin, you name it. The stress of these missions had been intense, but then his mind and body had been sharpened to best of his ability. A weapon to be utilized. Which he now felt anything but. He was a relic.

In recent years Kakashi would have buried himself in the ever abundant Hokage busy work to avoid stress. But currently his stress was born from that menial labor. Failing that he would have adopted a new project to keep himself occupied enough not to think. But he'd already taken his frustrations out on Sakura in the worst way, their work pushed aside because of it.

How could he have stooped so low? What was even happening to him? It was deplorable to think that he couldn't even rein in his own terrible urges.

The only outlet he had found to calm himself, was Sakura. And now she wanted to spend time with him, not working, when she deserved someone infinitely better than an older man who couldn't
control himself.

The guilt had been brewing overnight. As well as the confusion, just how a little pressure had caused him to overreact like that. While Sakura seemed to be alright about it, too alright actually, the last thing he wanted was to make her uncomfortable or shatter the gradual progress they had made.

She deserves better.

That had been the whole point of his self imposed mission, the whole reason this project had gained so much more value in Kakashi’s mind. And it was already of great value to begin with.

Kakashi reached the building in record time.

Which to anyone who knew him, was an ominous sign in itself.

His thoughts were so scattered that he barely registered nodding to the guard at the entrance, going through the patients door to the inconspicuous office building. The green leather couch making that familiar squeaking noise as he sat, waiting.

Early to his own appointment, maybe he really had gone insane.

Kakashi managed at least to pull the little turquoise book from his pocket. Rather than reading, he stared blankly at the cover, seeking the usual familiar comfort from it’s never changing facade. Lost in his thoughts so wholly he did not notice when Dr. Crane made his entrance. Only registering another presence when he took his seat across from him. Not a good habit for a ninja.

He was supposed to be the best.

The thought dashed across his mind as he met the doctor’s probing eyes, Kakashi found himself wondering again if the man could actually read minds. The look reflected back at him was an odd mixture that Kakashi could not fathom.

“Well, this is unexpected. You’re not due for another two weeks.”

It was the first time in a few years that the man didn’t immediately take out his patient note book, an odd detail that Kakashi couldn’t help but notice. The undivided attention suddenly unsettling.

“Well…Well.”

It might have been the tone of his voice from those short words, or it could have been the dejected way he was now staring at his hands, the tells were all there. Kakashi knew this, he wasn’t stupid, but it still struck him off guard when Dr. Crane spoke.

“Something’s happened I take it?”

A sharp nod. Words forming and disappearing before he could say them aloud.

The doctor sat patiently, watching quietly, not moving an inch. In a typical session he would begin with questions, but it was not typical for Kakashi to have something to actually discuss, to seek him out for extra help. His mind cycled through what needed to be said, mouth falling open to speak but it was lost somewhere between his brain and his lips.

Time was a variable that had been lost on him for the last few days, unsure at what pace it was passing, to him everything seemed slowed. He looked up apologetically to the doctor, hoping that look said more than he could with words. Kakashi knew he’d have to answer eventually.
“Take your time. I’m in no hurry.”

No hurry. The words struck a chord with Kakashi. He had been in such a hurry to get here, wanting reprieve from the utter bedlam that was Hokage tower that morning. It was all he had been thinking about since leaving Sakura’s, occupying a large part of his thoughts as he spent the rest of the night working at his desk, trying desperately to distract himself.

“Sorry…” the word slipped from his lips finally, “I’m, for once, not actually trying to waste time here. It’s just…”

Kakashi trailed off, unable to complete the sentence.

“Kakashi, this is the first time in five years that I’ve seen you outside of the regular appointment. Usually you tell me everything you think I want to hear just to get out of the room. Whatever’s happened, if it was stressful enough for you to seek refuge here, then I can wait until you’re ready to talk…”

“Stressful.” A surging bitterness in his tone surprised him, giving an edge to the interruption he hadn’t intended. “This is nothing. I’ve been in two wars. Lost people… nothing compares to that. This should be nothing.”

Kakashi had spoken quietly, unsure on what he was actually saying. It seemed to be coming out of its own accord. It was all true though.

“I’m aware of your past. But clearly, this isn’t nothing.” There was no false pretense in the way the doctor spoke, watching Kakashi with a deliberate and concerned gaze. “Stress builds in time and without a proper outlet, it manifests in other ways. Like you said, you’ve been in two wars, lost people, been in countless terrifying situations. And now you’re running a village. Just because it’s a different kind of stress doesn’t make it any less real and damning. Exhausting even after thirty years of it chipping away at you.”

A more comfortable silence ensued. Kakashi finally able to calm the brewing anxiousness which had rendered him useless all morning. The doctor beat him to the punch before his own voice returned to him.

“You have excelled in all aspects of your career, not that you’ll agree to that statement, no matter how I put it. You are allowed to take a moment to be selfish after giving so much of yourself, you’re entitled to your own feelings…”

“That’s just it though.”

Kakashi wasn’t sure where exactly to begin. For the first time he allowed himself to admit out loud to the listlessness that had plagued him in the weeks prior to his last session. How all that had almost vanished with just the prospect of Sakura’s hospital project. How Sakura had not just peppered him with kisses, but pep talks, dinners, kindness he was sure he didn't deserve.

He admitted to missing her while he’d been away, how he hated that his thoughts went to her without his express permission. The guilt prevailing even though she’d never once rebuked his gestures.

And with the explanation of yesterday’s event, right down to his kissing her in frustration, Kakashi also admitted to the veritable mourning he was wallowing in. Doomed to be trapped in the white robe and hat for the foreseeable future. The realization consuming him to numbness, which in hindsight he was grateful for as it took away some of the terrible guilt he felt for acting on his
feelings. For crossing a line with her. For not being able to control himself.

He left out no detail of the events of the last few weeks. All his feelings, everything said between himself and Sakura, nothing had been missed. Not once had Crane interrupted him. He’d asked no questions, simply maintained his fixed look on Kakashi, not taking a single note.

For a while after Kakashi had stopped talking, breathing hard as if he’d been running full tilt through enemy territory, he wondered if the doctor had been stunned into silence. Kakashi himself unsure if he’d ever spoken as many words altogether to one person like that.

Until the silence was broken.

“Why don’t you just quit, if it’s causing you this much distress?”

Kakashi scoffed a little at the words.

“Impossible. The foundation for this peace we’re all enjoying is fragile at best. And while no one would certainly miss me, as the worst Hokage in history, it’s not worth the risk. I wouldn’t want to subject the other Kage to the uproar either. Though, pissing them all off would certainly be a fitting departure.”

“That sounds a lot like an excuse. You said it yourself, if no one will miss you, just do it.”

Crane had never spoken to Kakashi with such brazenness. While it was refreshing to hear from the subdued man, it sparked a little anger as well.

“It’s not that simple.”

“What’s so complicated? Your doctor friend certainly agrees that you’ve done more than enough for the village. There’s over thirty years of service under your belt.”

“It’s just…” Kakashi faltered and Crane took the opportunity to keep talking over him.

“It’s just not enough? Is that what you were about to say? What counts as enough Kakashi? When does it stop?”

Each question bore down on him like a weight, pushing him down further into the sofa until the usually calm exterior cracked.

“I don’t know!” It came out as an almost shout, his fists clenching. “I just don’t know. When it’s enough. When I feel…”

He faltered again. This time Crane paused before speaking.

“When you feel what? Content that you’ve fulfilled your friends last request? Satisfied that you’ve exhausted yourself enough to die in the field?”

“No, maybe…”

“If you need to feel something in order for it all to be enough, to finally be able to step back and stop, you need to be able to recognize what that feeling is.”

Kakashi found himself struggling to follow a rational train of thought. So he allowed the first words that popped into his mind to be freed.

“When I’m happy, I’ll stop.”
Crane sat back in his chair. Raising an eyebrow imperceptibly. If Kakashi didn't know the man better, he'd chalk it up as a smug victory to the doctor. But it wasn't that at all. Rather the man was simply relieved that Kakashi had finally proffered an acceptable answer to lead them on the right track.

“Interesting. Although, will you allow yourself to be happy, Kakashi?”

In reply Kakashi raised his brow as if to say, *what do you mean by that?* The doctor knew him well enough to continue without a verbal answer.

“You just told me, in great detail, about the feelings of joy you found in spending time with your former student. And the guilt you suffered for seeking solace in that joy. After all she's told you, you still feel unworthy of her affection, and that outweighs your happiness.”

Kakashi was beginning to grow impatient.

“What's your point?”

“My point, is that you don't allow yourself to be happy. You run from it, like you’re running from your feelings for your former student. In short, you're afraid.”

The words were so heavy to Kakashi it was as if they had physically dropped the atmosphere of that little room. Plunging him into a hole. He wanted to deny it but couldn't. His weary mind tried to fight back just a little, clawing to hold on to his logical thoughts.

Hadin't he earnt the right to be afraid? After thirty years of fighting, heartbreak and death. Just because the wars had stopped for now didn’t mean it all couldn’t happen again.

“What I want to know Kakashi, is what you’re so afraid of?”

The answer appeared in a moment of sudden clarity.

“Loosing her.”

He wasn't exactly sure what that entailed. Death or pushing her to hating him because of his uncontrollable urges. Finishing this project and not having her close to him any more...

“Things aren’t exactly the same between the two of you now. How would you like to change your relationship with her? What would you like to be different?”

Kakashi had to think. More than anything he wanted only to be the person that she deserved, but it seemed an impossibility. He wanted her with him, always. But above that...

“I just want her to be happy.”

“Just her, not for the both of you to be happy?”

Crane posed the question with a quirk of his brow. The doctor already knew the answer.

“Maybe I just think happiness is overrated.”

“But not for her.”

“No.”

There was a slight upturn of the doctors lips into an almost smile at Kakashi’s lack of hesitation in his
answer. Above all things, Sakura deserved the absolute best of everything on offer. For all the love she poured into everything she did, for everyone she cared for, for all the horrible things people had put her through. She deserves someone who makes her happy, always.

What if he was the only one able to make her happy... If not him, then who?

She’d basically said as much when she’d asked him to that damned festival.

You’re the only person I want to go with.

And he’d basically turned her down and avoided the subject entirely. What had he been thinking? He hadn’t been thinking, he’d been stressing over that terrible day...over kissing her… Kakashi’s eyes widened. His thoughts ordering themselves. Crane watched on, aware that a realization had taken place but he must have felt the urge to help it along.

Was he denying her happiness by feeling guilty for his own?

“Kakashi, in two or three short weeks, you’ve opened up more to this former student of yours than you have in all our sessions over five whole years. That is not an insignificant thing.”

“I’ve known her a long time.”

“Yes. Exactly.” Crane appeared to almost be excited as he sat forward on his chair, “She is a constant for you. One of the few you’ve allowed close enough. She knows you well, and you know her. But the difference here, is that she can offer you the kind of physical and emotional comfort you’ve not allowed yourself to experience in a very long time. Something I certainly can’t offer you. And you are looking for other outlets because you are afraid.”

“What are you saying?” Kakashi could not fathom the smile on the mans face.

“What I’m saying, is two things. Firstly, as your healthcare professional. You specifically have always sought projects, missions, work as a form of comfort. A way to silence the demons. Now you have finally discovered that this is also possible with a partner. Someone you trust implicitly. And this, is okay. It is a very normal way to cope with stress and by continuing to strengthen that connection you’ll find that even just the other person's presence can be calming. Again, this is okay. Having another person who makes you feel something isn’t codependence, it isn't shameful. There is no reason to feel ashamed over a basic human need for closeness. You’re still human, Lord Hokage.”

Kakashi raised his eyebrow at the man for the title and the implication of closeness. But the words were hitting home in other ways.

“And the second thing?”

“Secondly, and I say this as someone who has tried to get to know you over the last five years, a friend persay.” Kakashi smirked for the first time all day. “You’ve got to stop being so hard on yourself. Your wounds, mental and physical, are not your fault. But your healing is your responsibility. Listen to her, listen to Sakura. She’s right. Let someone do something for you for a change and for god's sakes let it be her. Because you both deserve to be happy and you’ve found that in each other.”

Responsibility. Even just the notion caused an involuntary shiver to rattle his spine.

Crane stood and stretched a little, he was very out of character today and Kakashi had enjoyed it thoroughly, though arguably he was also behaving oddly himself. But it added another layer of
mystery to the man and Kakashi had always liked puzzles.

“As for the quitting thing, you’ll know when the time is right. But you’ve no obligation to anyone to hold on to the job. Tsunade didn’t even make it as long as you. And that woman had issues.”

Kakashi snickered at the comment, finding himself on his feet with only one place he wanted to be at that moment.

“Thanks Doctor.”

“Don’t mention it. Oh, as an afterthought, you do realize she was asking you on a date last night, right? And you completely avoided answering her.”

“Uh, yeah. I figured as much.”

“Good, good. Flowers are always a good start, I find.”

The man chuckled and opened the door for Kakashi. He paused briefly to shake his hand, it felt like the right thing to do.

“Don’t hang around here any longer. She’s probably waiting for your answer.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and Kakashi… My door’s always open.”

A sharp nod. He smiled before he left.

The afternoon sun sat on his shoulders, warming his skin, but there was an even more comfortable warmth growing within him. And he could only attribute it to Sakura. It was almost time for her to drop the reports off after all, and suddenly his office didn’t seem like such a bad place to be.

There was a little guilt still lingering amidst the strange cathartic feeling now washing over Kakashi, but he figured it would probably all but disappear as soon as he made it up to her. And he was going to make it up to her somehow, make her smile, for as long as she’d let him.

He’d just have to ask her to be patient with him a little while longer.

* * * *

It never got any easier.

She was no stranger to death by now, but telling an entire family that their loved one was not coming home to them, that grief was something she would never get used to. And she didn't want to.

Sakura sat on a bench outside the hospital. Allowing herself five minutes to wallow in the sadness, willing the sunshine to dry the last of her tears as they tracked down her cheeks.

When she’d arrived at the hospital that morning Sakura had been in some mood in between happiness and nervousness. As well as being still slightly baffled from the night before. She'd had a fitful sleep, heated from the imprint of Kakashi’s warm masked lips on hers. Part of her worried that she’d been too forward after that and scared him off entirely.

But right now it didn’t matter.

A patient had died, it had always been a probable outcome, but it didn't make it any easier. When
Shizune had told Sakura to take some time out, she'd jumped at the opportunity. Relishing a moment to organize her thoughts before she would busy herself for the rest of the day just so she wouldn't have to think. It usually worked.

It was just unfortunate that the only thing she had waiting for her was paperwork. The piles on her desk eventually dwindled to nothing, it was probably the only time she'd ever felt bad about not having any to do.

By early afternoon Sakura was fed up. There was plenty of work waiting for her at home for the children's hospital, and if she left now she may even be able to catch some of the psychiatrists she had wanted to poach while they were on their lunch breaks. No one questioned her leaving, Shizune however forcing two days worth of medical reports onto her to go to Hokage tower. She'd forgotten how it had been impossible to get into the building yesterday.

Initially she felt an immediate apprehension in heading over there. That perhaps Kakashi had only been polite with her last night until his departure, and now he wouldn't want to see her at all. She tried to shake the insecurity but that had always been a difficult thing for her to do. Even with Sasuke. She had never felt so unwanted as she had with him, even after the proposal. Sakura had to shake the thought from her head.

Kakashi had never made her feel unwanted. He'd only ever made her feel the opposite of that. She felt needed and cared for. Last night had proven that enough with his desperate kiss, even if he felt guilty for it. There was no reason she should be apprehensive about seeing him. Actually it might just be what she needed right now. The man certainly had a knack for making her feel better after a rough day, even when his own had been hard going as well.

A smile danced over her face as she neared the building. She would make him realize, somehow, that it was okay to touch her like that. She wasn't going to break in his arms.

Sakura braced herself before passing through the gates, expecting the mayhem she'd stumbled upon yesterday. She hadn't even been able to get to the doors, but today all was eerily quiet. So quiet in fact that Sakura's kunoichi skills went into high alert. This was somehow even more ominous than when the place was thrown into chaos.

While she liked to think that perhaps it had all just died down faster than expected, Sakura knew Kage politics well enough to discern that it was an impossibility. Especially after the state she'd seen Kakashi in last night. As her thoughts lingered on him, and that horrible despondent expression before he'd left, she wished the man would just take it easier on himself. It wouldn't surprise her in the slightest if he continued to be Hokage for another decade in order to keep the peace. And he would do the job perfectly while hating every second of it, it was just his way.

The corridors were conspicuously empty.

As was the Hokage’s chair.

The only signs of commotion were coming down the hall from Shikamaru’s office. For a while Sakura just stood at the door, staring at Kakashi’s desk and willing him to appear behind it, smiling at her. Stranger still, now she noticed that the place was even tidy.

Curiosity got the better of her.

After depositing the files in the usual place, noting the haphazard way Kakashi’s white robe was thrown over his chair before he left, Sakura found herself standing at the open door to Shikamaru’s office. Three chunins hanging to his every word before they were dispersed. She waited patiently
before knocking on the open door. Whatever instructions he'd been giving must have been important enough for them all to leave immediately.

Shikamaru looked up at her briefly when she walked in. The other ninja rushing past her and out into the corridor.

“Hay Sakura.”

“Hey Shikamaru, do you know where Kakashi is?” She had to cut the question off by biting her cheek, almost forgetting to drop the sensei part. It would take some getting used to still.

Shikamaru sat back in his chair and crossed his arms in defeat.

“You tell me.”

Sakura raised a brow, then followed the pointed glare he shot the schedule on the wall. When she approached it for a closer look Shikamaru stood up from his desk. Her eyes quickly scanned to today's date before casting a confused look back at him.

“But it’s not the last Thursday of the month...why has he…”

“Seriously Sakura, you’d need to tell me, because I have no idea. First thing he did the morning after we got back from the Sand Village, walked up to that board and blanked out every second Thursday afternoon.”

For the rest of the year there was a blacked out scribble over the squares indicating the hours between two and five in the afternoon. Sakura cast her eye up to the clock above the door.

“I must have just missed him then, it’s not even two.”

“That’s right, he left about twenty minutes ago. Surprising, considering the troublesome mess we’ve been dealing with all week. I didn’t have the heart to stop him, he’d been here all night by the looks of it, answering messages and signing off on stuff. Powering through all the mess and sending people on their way. Probably just so he could disappear for whatever this is…”

Shikamaru flippantly raised a finger to the board, now standing next to Sakura and eyeing it with the same wonder. As if Kakashi didn’t hold enough of an air of mystery about him, this only intensified that enigma. One that Sakura was starting to really feel concerned about.

Perhaps she’d been too clouded by her own feelings of joy when he’d sought her out last night and kissed her so tenderly. Too blinded by happiness to see just how broken and worn down the man actually was. And then he’d returned to his office for the rest of the night…

Her eyes darted to another glaring mark on that scheduling board that worried her. An entire day of inky blackness over every hour.

“What’s this?”

“Hmm, oh that’s Kakashi’s one day off. I didn’t realize it was coming up so soon, what a drag…”

It was soon, less than two weeks away in fact. Shikamaru returned to his desk with a huff as the phone rang. Sakura waved herself out, he nodded as she went. By the sounds of the conversation he was having it would be a while before Shikamaru would be free to speak to her again.

It didn’t matter, she had places to be.
With one eye on the time Sakura promptly made her way back onto the streets with all the speed and grace of a kunoichi. While her conversation with Shikamaru had irked her slightly, to the point that she now did not know what to think at all, she decided to resort back to the original plan.


If she was occupied enough then she wouldn’t have to worry, or at least she could save it for later when she saw him, *if* she saw him. And that was the sudden thought that made her falter in her step, the concern beginning to quietly settle over top of her other thoughts.

She continued quickly, taking the shinobi route, so she called it, overtop of some of the smaller buildings. Chakra adding to her speed, the wind in her hair, eyes stinging a little after the earlier crying session. It was good she was avoiding the masses of people by going this way. The beginnings of a headache started to irritate her before she reached down town.

This would have to be a quick visit anyway.

Sakura had been in this building before, while she had shadowed Lady Tsunade, but years later the place still struck her as odd. It was an entirely below average, boring looking even, office building to the naked eye. But the place offered more secret entrances and exits than some of the more substantial fortresses Sakura had seen in her time as jounin. She chose the back entrance which was for staff purposes. She was technically staff after all.

The first obstacle had been one of the paid guards at the inner door by the intercom. Thankfully her reputation had preceded her. The pink hair and byakugou mark were a bit of a dead giveaway.

Through a labyrinth of corridors she was lead, until she found herself in the office of the man she’d hoped to meet. Laden bookcases surrounded an almost glaringly tidy desk, it practically shone under the lamps. The one window in the room looked out at street level, Sakura knew those windows were tinted to see outwardly only. This place held more secrets than Anbu headquarters.

Footsteps alerted her to a presence.

“Doctor Haruno I presume?”

She turned to take in the stout man, barely taller than her, slightly balding. His hand stretched out to shake. Sakura took it with a smile.

“Yes, apologies for the interruption, I really had just hoped to schedule a quick meeting with you.” She wasn’t lying, but she had also secretly wanted to plant the seed in the doctor’s head about her project.

“No need for apologies. It’s my pleasure to meet you, actually. I’ve heard great things about your current research.”

“Oh, well thank you. But I really don’t want to disrupt your day, I can come back another time to discuss it.”

The man pulled his sleeve down to check the ornate watch on his wrist.

“I’ve one appointment due to start shortly. But this one’s usually late so I have a few minutes at least. I take it this is about the children’s hospital?”

Sakura nodded. Word had been getting out slowly as she approached many other doctors. He rounded his desk to sit, beckoning her to take a seat across from him.
“Yes, actually. Construction is due to start soon, but there are many other things to organize.”

“Let me guess, you’re looking for anyone able bodied or interested in supervising treatment programmes?”

Sakura liked cutting down to business, it made things so much easier. She could see why Tsunade had recommended this one so highly.

“That’s correct. I really believe this will be an asset to the village, something that has been lacking for some time..”

“Sakura, let me stop you right there. Do you mind if I call you Sakura?” The man interrupted her so politely she could not refuse. “I think this is a wonderful idea, and you are one hundred percent right. It has been sorely lacking for a long while.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Believe me, I see enough shinobi veterans that would have benefitted from simple mental health care at an earlier age. I would be delighted to help in anyway that I can.”

Sakura felt a tinge of warmth on her cheeks as she smiled with pride.

“Thank you, thank you so much Doctor Crane. I have a few others to ask, but Lady Tsunade praised you so highly.”

“Did she now?” He raised an eyebrow. “Pity I was never allowed to properly tackle her drinking problem though. Anyway, I digress, you just feel free to pop back in once plans are finalized and I’ll lend you whatever help I can offer.”

“That would be great. There are actually a couple of case studies I’ve been…”

There was a tap at the door. Six knocks at a speed Sakura guessed was code. The door never opened, then silence.

“Ah, my appointment has arrived.” Dr. Crane’s brow furrowed as he checked his watch and stood.

“Two minutes early even, how strange. We will have to discuss this another time, but as I said, come back whenever you like and we can go over the details.”

Sakura stood, shook the man’s hand again, thanked him profusely then left.

It had gone better than expected. Mentally she ticked the list off in her mind.

Unfortunately, now she realized that the guard had also left. Obviously to accompany whichever patient had just entered. Utterly alone in the veritable maze of corridors Sakura felt her headache intensify as she tried to remember her way out.

At least once she was out of here she could down a coffee and a sweet treat. Maybe that would bolster her up. Even if she knew sugar was a temporary fix at best, it was something to look forward to, albeit a tiny something. Her spirits were much higher having the approval from such a renowned psychiatrist as Doctor Crane.

She wondered what Kakashi might think of it all. Then right as she was considering what to have for dinner, whether he would be joining her or not, the entire world paused.

At the very end of the corridor, illuminated by the light filtering in through the opened door, was the
man in question.

White hair attractively askew, Kakashi did not look down the darkened and shadowy part of the hallway that she stood frozen in. He barely looked up from his feet as the guard ushered him immediately through another door.

The whole sighting lasted approximately five seconds.

But the world had stopped for Sakura. Her breathing stilled. The mental connections not forming quickly enough for her to actually move. So she stood there, alone, aghast.

*What was he doing here?*

The secrecy, the disappearing act, and yet here he was. She had seen him with her very own eyes, unless she had truly gone insane.

Sakura hurried herself out the hallway and into the sunshine, finally kickstarting her body into movement, the building had felt stifling all of a sudden. She needed to be as far away from it as possible. Needed the air to be able to process what she had just seen.

The further away she got, the more her mind began to comprehend what had just happened. The more her lungs filled with fresh air the better she was able to see the truth.

Kakashi was in therapy.

*The way he’d talked about coping mechanisms.*

That day they’d been walking together round the village. She had thought that odd at the time. He was self aware because he’d been talking to a doctor about it. Not just any doctor, a specialist in post traumatic stress.

*Of course. That was why he’d jumped at this project. That was why he was helping.*

The pieces of the puzzle all slotted into place before she reached her apartment. When she walked through her own door she took another deep breath. Leaning back against the frame, Sakura’s first sight was the mountains of scrolls and books adorning her dining table. This project really was just as meaningful for him as it was for her.

It now struck her that Kakashi had been talking of himself that day, when he’d said *if something like this had been around in my time.*

The psychiatric form in that Anbu folder. The way he completely shied away from human contact unless forced.

*But he’d managed to open up to her.* Even if it was just a little. For a brief moment she was glad that they had grown close over the last few weeks so that she was able to be there for him in that way. Her own selfish wants and needs aside, she had wanted him to get help, just never expected that he was already seeking it.

Something terrible must have happened five years ago for him to willingly engage in therapy with a trained professional. Five years Shikamaru had said… Sakura’s mind began to flick through what possibly could have pushed their Hokage to that point but she came up blank as another thought dashed across her mind

*He must never know.*
Kakashi could never find out that she knew about it. She could not risk whatever treatment he was getting. Wouldn’t risk scaring him into reclusiveness.

While seeing him in that building on any other day, at any other time, could be written off as nothing it was too late now. Sakura had all the facts about his regularly scheduled disappearances, as well as knowing a little about his difficult past.

_It’s so cumbersome I feel like I’m losing my mind._

He’d said that too. Right after admitting how guilty he felt. Thirty years of constant stress was eating him alive, coming at him in new forms as Hokage… and now with her.

Sakura gulped. Solidifying her thinking now that this would remain completely secret. She would not mention it to anyone, or to Kakashi herself. Mentally she also removed Doctor Crane from her list of able staff members for the new venture. While he was an excellent doctor she did not want to risk any kind of unethical crossover that would make Kakashi uncomfortable. At least for now.

Maybe it had been a bad idea to ask him out to the festival like that.

With a mitigating sigh Sakura forced herself into the kitchen to brew tea.

She made a silent vow to act as normally as possible with Kakashi, even if it hurt her.

The more she tried not to think of it at all, the more _proud_ she felt of the man. For being strong enough to go and get that kind of mental health treatment that men seem so oblivious to needing. For keeping up with it, assuming it was where he was every single month. For doing it on his own. Sakura was allowed to be proud of him for that. She guessed that was the kind of thing one had to do when they’d been on their own for so long. Something she may need to very well do for herself one day.

_A lone He’d been on his own this whole time..._

Absentmindedly she stirred her tea. Shaking herself out of the stupor she’d fallen into.

There was still work to be done. More than ever she could use the distraction. It was with a snicker that she realized that four weeks ago she was doing this very thing to distract herself from loneliness. Now she was doing it to keep her mind off Kakashi.

Try as she might, the tunnel vision that usually captured and forced her focus would not humour her.

Sakura’s thoughts were now distracting her from her distraction. It would have been laughable if she wasn’t so annoyed about it all. She sighed again. Putting the cup of now cold tea to her lips. She didn’t need to look at the time to know it had been one of the longest days of her year. Long, draining, confusing.

It was with a pang of guilt that she remembered the reason why she’d left the hospital so early in the first place. The loss of that patient. A lone tear tracked down her cheek and she was suddenly too tired to brush it aside. Overwhelmed.

It was hard to see positivity at a time like this. For some reason whenever she tried to give herself a statement of affirmation, in her own thoughts, it came out in Naruto’s voice.

_There’s always tomorrow._

It was a start anyway.
A soft knocking sound distracted her. It was like someone had pressed play on a paused tape and she was suddenly aware of her surroundings for the first time all afternoon. Except it wasn’t afternoon, it was evening. The orange light in her apartment made the dark shadows of overly large furniture grow up the walls, towering over her.

The knock returned a little louder.

How long had she been spacing out for?

Flicking the lights on as she made her way across the room, Sakura’s hand grasped the knob at the same time it was pushed open. She almost startled back into her apartment, but the sudden closeness of the other person was not uncomfortable.

Kakashi stood just inches in front of her. White robes gone, headband gone. Just him in the usual gear.

Her mouth opened to speak but she was still so shocked at seeing him. Perhaps not as shocked as she’d been earlier today, but now as he held her gaze, it felt very different. Even his eyes looked wider, internally an immature impulse of hers was very satisfied at seeing him startled, even if it was just a little bit.

“Hi.”

He said, not stepping into the threshold any closer. Like he was waiting for her approval. His eyes never leaving hers in a trance inducing way.

“Kakashi, hi.”

She said it meekly, in a voice she did not recognize as her own. Watching as his eyes softened into something so utterly tender and shining it was all she could do not to wrap her arms around him.

“So. What time am I picking you up?”

Sakura felt her heart skip an actual beat. He was saying yes to the festival. *He was saying yes to the festival.*

“Five, does that work for you?”

“Five sounds great.”

Now he was smiling as well and Sakura felt like she was about to melt. She stepped back and went straight to the kitchen to throw water on her overheated cheeks, but she never made it. The door made a clicking sound as he shut it, when she turned he was standing very close to her, but not moving. Like he was waiting for something again.

Without thinking she bridged the gap, leaning up to place a slow kiss very close to his lips. His thumb immediately came to her cheek, wiping the trail that tear had left. For a silent and heated few moments they simply leaned into the others touch. Sakura letting out a breathy kind of sigh.

This day was too full of surprises, it left her head feeling light.

Kakashi pulled back ever so slightly. The concern in his eyes tugging at her heart even more. She watched it fade as she smiled widely, letting him know that she was alright.

That was when his eyes creased shut in a more familiar way. His hand reaching up to scratch his head.
“I do have one condition…”

The surprises weren’t done with Sakura for the day.
Pacing had never been one of Sakura’s better habits.

At this moment she was sure that if her apartment were carpeted, she’d have worn it to the hardwood anyway with the circles she was marching around her bedroom. She had been on tenterhooks the entire afternoon, the nervous anticipation pushing her into getting ready a lot earlier than she needed to be.

The reflection that stared back at her in the mirror had been fastidiously crafted, and she would switch between picking at her already perfect appearance, to pacing. Invariably this pacing would cause a single hair to fall out of place from the neat bun on top of her head, and she would need to pick at it some more.

At least it gave her something to do. She was too excited to properly focus on anything else. That excitement had been building for the last few days actually. Simmering on low, until she was alone, before kicking up a notch and rendering her completely useless. Sakura reasoned that it was normal to feel this way, to have something to look forward to. But the butterflies that raged inside her stomach could be classed as anything but normal.

It was all his fault.

Sakura shot a glare to the book lying face down on her night stand, something she’d taken to doing whenever her mind wandered to Kakashi.

Their time together, since Thursday, had been brief and frustrating. The night that he’d turned up on her doorstep being the eye of the storm. A fleeting reprieve from the chaos that had continued in the following days. Sakura had gleaned precious little information about what to expect from tonight’s activity during the small time that they had spent together.

Date. It was a date. There was no need to beat around the bush about it.

She was going on a date with Kakashi. The same man who was not only her former teacher, but current Hokage. The man who had made almost every day this week impossible.

The minutes they had stolen Friday evening in his office had been fraught with a palpable kind of tension. Things that were left unsaid, touches that had to be withheld while people flitted in and out of the room. It almost crackled in the air between them. When he had been inundated again before she even left the office, Kakashi had watched her leave with a dark gaze until she was completely out of sight. That look had warmed her considerably. She’d remained hot and bothered that whole night, although the broken air conditioning unit in her apartment probably didn't help the situation. Sakura had worked until she’d collapsed on her bed, too tired to think.

Saturday had been almost the same, though marginally a little better. Through some miracle Sakura’s
hospital shift had been switched, she had ended up staying much later that night. This was not an
unusual occurrence, it was however unusual for her to be so pleased about it. By the time she'd
found herself in Hokage tower it was devoid of most of the usual suspects. Only Shikamaru and a
few office staff remaining, and of course, Kakashi. When she'd wandered into his office he was
alone, immediately standing on her entry. By the time she put the dark blue reports in the tray he'd
clicked the door softly shut.

He was right behind her before she’d even turned around. That comfortable and familiar warmth
washing over her for just a moment. Sakura slowly faced him, that molten look in his eye making her
hold her breath. She almost expected him to lean down and kiss her, they were standing so close, it
wouldn’t take much to close the gap. But even in her daze she registered that the Hokage shouldn’t
be kissing people in his office, no matter what the time. Kakashi watched her lips but made no
movements for the second.

Sakura now couldn’t remember if it had been her hand to first reach out or his, but their fingers
mingled together at some point. Pressing into each other ever so slightly. This fleeting and peaceful
moment alone was the last that she would share with him for the day. Both heated and frozen by his
stare, Sakura stopped breathing momentarily, feeling an urge to wrap his kage robes around herself.
The phone on his desk began to ring and broke that quiet moment, Sakura slipped out the door with
a sympathetic and tired smile which Kakashi returned. She had only made it so far as the couch in
her living room that evening.

There had been no time to really talk. So Sakura now found herself in a peculiar position of
unknowing. Five o’clock had been the agreed upon time, that was fine. She expected that he would
be at least thirty minutes late in the usual fashion. But that was about all she could predict at this
point.

That morning she had dusted off the yukata in the back of her closet for it’s yearly outing. She’d
waited until at least four before putting it on, not wanting to be sitting around wearing it for too long
in her sweltering apartment.

Only the sage of the six paths knew what Kakashi would be wearing tonight.

That thought morphed the glare on her face into a kind of scowl and Sakura didn’t even care if it
ruined the small layer of makeup she had on. It would give her something to do for a few minutes,
again. The frustration she felt stemming from one thing, and one thing only.

Kakashi’s one condition.

Regretfully she’d been so overwhelmed by everything on Thursday, she’d not pestered him as much
about it as she should have. So now she was left guessing. The only information to go on was vague
at best. The man certainly still knew how to press her buttons.

He’d been adamant in the condition, unwavering and determined that it was the only way. In her
giddiness, and perhaps confusion, Sakura had blindly accepted. That night she’d just been so happy
to see him, to cook dinner with him and have him close, in light of her inadvertent discovery of
where he’d been disappearing to once a month. Sakura made the decision that she would not
mention it, unless he told her about it himself. He had been so secretive about the therapy to all others
that it was only fair, and in no way would she jeopardize the help that Kakashi obviously needed.

The initial shock eventually passed. The idea that someone who had been such a strong fixture her
entire life was, in fact, vulnerable and in need of help had shocked her to say the least. It was that
damned Anbu report all over again. Once the feeling passed only pride in the man remained. Pride in
the way he strived to keep at the very top of his game at all times for the sake of the village.
Despite her apprehensive wondering she found herself in a better mood than anticipated, smiling back at her reflection. The veritable mood swings she suffered through lately at just the thought of Kakashi was maddening. If it wasn’t him, it was that stupid book occupying her mind and flushing her cheeks.

For a brief moment she recalled her preparation for last years festival, or rather, lack of preparation. Just throwing on the yukata and tying her hair as she rushed out the door hardly counted. Why she’d hurried back then was a mystery, no one had been waiting for her.

It was gratifying having someone to look nice for again. Someone who would appreciate her no matter what she looked like, even when she was dog tired after a hospital shift, Kakashi still looked at her in a way that made her melt.

But for once, Sakura really just wanted to look nice for herself more than anything. It almost felt like she had something to prove, that she was still desirable, that Sasuke hadn’t tainted her for other men. Most importantly that she could be with anyone if she chose to be. She still had it, whatever it was.

With a sigh Sakura dabbed her face with another sponge, attempting to smooth the faint lines she could see. It wasn’t from any cracks in her makeup, she quickly realized that these lines were etched on her face, the tiniest of creases that only she would notice. The passage of time was beginning to mark her worries on her face. While any signs of aging would have been unthinkable to Tsunade, Sakura took it in her stride, thankful at least that she still had precious people to be worried for.

Now that she knew the truth about Kakashi, made peace with the help he was getting, she worried about him perhaps just a fraction less than before. However, after hearing his one condition, Sakura had to admit she was more than a little concerned about his mental faculties.

It wasn’t an inherently bad condition. It was just...odd. Though Sakura had to argue with herself that she really shouldn’t have expected anything less from Kakashi Hatake. The man was oddness personified.

Deciding that she needed to move again, she resumed her pacing, aiming a kick at the broken air conditioning unit as she passed. She had half hoped that it would spring to life at the touch, and finally cool her apartment down, cool her racing mind. It had been hard not to jump to conclusions the second Kakashi had told her what his stipulation was, though he’d explained his reasonings. It felt oddly like an excuse no matter how Sakura tried to ignore it.

That one condition being that Kakashi would only be able to go with her freely if he was in disguise.

It had been laughable at first, and she’d done just that, giggling for a second before she realized how serious he was about it. His explanation had been simple enough, there was work he needed to be doing, and in light of everything that had happened this week it wouldn’t do to see the Hokage out partying. Those had been his words. So Kakashi planned to keep a clone at the office for an hour while he was in disguise and out with Sakura.

It was odd, and had it been anyone else she’d have promptly knocked any silliness out of them with her fists, using clones like that being a personal pet peeve. But this was Kakashi. His agreeing to go with her at all was already more than she could have hoped for, more than Sasuke had ever been willing to give.

At that abysmal train of thought Sakura’s eyes drifted to the clock, and at only a quarter past five, the doorbell sounded. Immediately her heart was in her throat. It couldn’t be Kakashi, it was far too early to be him.
The intense butterflies in her stomach had returned. Any other night with Kakashi was nothing to be nervous about, and this was something she really wanted to do together with him as well. But what *in god’s name* would he be disguised as? What kind of embarrassment was he going to make her suffer through? She couldn’t help but wonder if this was all an elaborate prank after the teasing and inappropriate comments a few weeks ago.

But things were different now, the voice of reason in her head chimed in. It sounded an awful lot like Sai’s tone to her at times. Kakashi wouldn’t play with her heart like that. Not after that kiss, they had both felt it, they had both acknowledged it in some way...

The doorbell rang again.

“Be there in a second!”

Sakura smoothed the yukata, took a fleeting last look at herself in the mirror, and made her way to the door. It was alright, she steadied herself, she was looking good. With a deep breath she grasped the handle, it *had* to be Kakashi on the other side, she wasn’t expecting anyone else.

Just as she was thanking some unknown deity for his using the door and not the window for a change, Sakura tentatively opened it. The sight that greeted her was both familiar and unexpected, the dark headed figure turned to meet her with a smile.

“Hello…”

“Hey Sakura, long time no see.”

Her eyes narrowed, that voice was familiar also, and the handsome face right down to the purple markings across his eyes and little beauty mark. In a sudden wave of nostalgia Sakura suffered a mass recall of memories of Team Seven misadventures.

“Oh, my gosh, it’s Sukea right?” He nodded in reply with a wider smile. “It really has been a long time. How are you?”

Sakura smiled back, opening the door a bit more to look anxiously around for Kakashi. What exactly was this photographer doing here after all these years? And how had he found her…

“I’m doing much better now, thanks. Sorry I think I may be a little late, there was this frail old lady crossing the street you see…”

*Late?*

“Did you say late? Late for what?”

In a moment of self consciousness, and perhaps Kunoichi instinct, Sakura guarded herself just a little. Feeling suddenly exposed standing out there in a yukata and without her usual garb. Her fists were the only weapons she’d ever need, but the last thing she wanted was to rip the only yukata she owned and mess up the look she had carefully crafted.

Sakura scrutinized the strange man from her past. Taking in every detail, the scarf, the green jacket. But her eyes were eventually drawn to his smirk and her mind froze, there was something so unsettling and familiar about it.

“Five o’clock, right?”

He spoke through the widening smirk.
Sakura felt her brow furrow with confusion, felt the dust settle at his words. It was when her gaze drifted from the smile now tugging on his lips, to his eyes that something finally registered within her mind. It was *that* look, without a doubt. When he softly chuckled, his eyes creasing shut in such a familiar way, she felt her jaw drop in confirmation.

“*Kakashi*?”

* * * *

Standing there at the doorway, in front of her apartment, Kakashi watched with fascination as Sakura put the pieces together. The perverse kind of pleasure he would usually savour at her confusion was numbed just a fraction. She just looked so exceptionally beautiful, it was hard to concentrate on anything else for the moment.

He had expected her to look amazing, as she always did, he had just miscalculated how strong the effect would be on himself. Trying to gain back some modicum of normalcy, Kakashi relented and smiled in the usual fashion.

“*Kakashi*?”

Sakura put a hand to her open mouth, eyes wide. He was excessively pleased that it was a clone at the office right now so that his real self could witness this hilarity.

“Were you expecting someone else, Sakura?”

“Oh my god…”

He watched as she retreated back into the apartment, with a shrug he followed slowly. Sakura sat at the edge of the couch with her head in her hands. As he walked closer to her, she peered up at him before making a muffled kind of squeaking noise and burying her face in her hands again.

*This* had been only one of the ways he had predicted she would react. The others had been decidedly more violent. Kakashi sat himself on the armchair, folding his arms behind his head, making a show of fully relaxing into it. This comfortable display seemed to jostle some of Sakura’s usual fiery spark.

“So that whole time, all those years ago, it was *you*?”

“Yup.” Kakashi dropped back to his normal timbre, enjoying the frustrated groan this elicited from Sakura. “It was a good way to observe your team working abilities anyway.”

“That whole time. That was your face…”

Kakashi closed his eyes briefly in a quiet chuckle, this was as good a disguise as any in his arsenal, it had served him well over the years. When he opened his eyes to regard Sakura again she was staring at him fixedly.

“It’s just a face.”

She made that squeaking sound again before forcibly looking toward the floor.

“Sorry…” Sakura said the word quietly before exhaling and standing, a sudden assured look on her face. “What the hell am I sorry for, screw it, I’ve waited twelve years for this.”

Standing directly in front of the armchair he was seated in, with her hands on her hips in a matter-of-fact way, Sakura scrutinized every inch of his uncovered face. The look of concentration about her
might have been fierce, if it weren’t for the creeping blush that just made her look even more adorable. Kakashi found it difficult to keep from smiling, enjoying the way the action caused her blush to deepen.

“Sakura, why is it so warm in here?”

His question momentarily brought her attention back from the blatant scrutiny of his features.

“Hmm? Oh, the air conditioning unit is broken… How do you make your voice sound like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like Sukea’s voice?”

Kakashi coughed and put a hand to his throat.

“Call it an old Anbu trick. It’s all about testing the range of your vocal chords, but I’ll admit it puts a strain on them. So just for you I’ll use my normal voice…”

While he had been speaking, Sakura had been leaning forward with that same scrupulous gaze directed straight at his face. When she closed one eye in concentration and lifted a hand up, shielding the view of his nose and mouth, Kakashi couldn’t hold back the laughter.

“It’s that bad you want to cover it up again?”

Sakura dropped her hand with a playfully mischievous grin.

“I am just having a hard time believing that it’s really you, Kakashi.”

He noted the lack of sensei attached to his name, this was the second time she’d omitted it for the evening. Kakashi did not predict the surge of satisfaction that it caused to wash over him, or the way his smile was now reflecting hers. The laughter petered out, Sakura still leaning toward him as he sat, her eyes searching his own. It would be so easy to bridge that gap, and it was already too tempting an offer. All of a sudden he felt a strange panicking urge to remind Sakura just who she had agreed to go out with.

“It’s still me, Sakura.”

Her features softened.

“I know, still the same ridiculously difficult and aloof Kakashi.” She chuckled at herself, he resisted the urge to roll his eyes briefly. “But you still look pretty handsome even in this disguise.”

Kakashi couldn’t help the smile that tugged one side of his lips, an action he almost forgot was on full display for Sakura without his mask. At least forgotten until she spoke with a kind of girlish squeal he hadn’t heard from her in quite some time.

“Oh my goodness. Are you blushing right now?! You are! And I can see it!”

The coquettish glee might have lessened the effect she was having on him, but only by a fraction. He didn’t even bother attempting to hide his face. Instead he sat there smirking, watching the happiness spread on Sakura, marvelling at how such a simple thing had delighted her so much.

“Are you quite done there?”

Sakura nodded yes while still grinning wildly.
“Good, we should probably get going.” Kakashi stood, trying to ignore the smugness practically oozing off Sakura. Despite this there was a smirk unfading on him still, he was enjoying himself, purely because she was happy. Everything was going according to plan.

Sakura had bounded off to retrieve a small purse she had lying on the table amidst the hospital research. Kakashi unabashedly watching her movements. This, this was the Sakura he had missed, the one that had been bogged down and hidden for too long, the one so filled with love that you could practically feel it warming the entire room. Although, it was warm in here to start with thanks to that broken air conditioning unit. Kakashi’s eyes briefly roamed the table, in a moment of sudden clarity he would be grateful for later.

“It’s too warm in here. When are they fixing that unit?”

“Hmm, oh, I’m not sure. They said next week, so god knows when they’ll actually turn up.”

“Well, we won’t be able to work in this heat. And something tells me the library won’t be available to us now either…” Kakashi paused when he heard the derisive snort from Sakura which she unsuccessfully tried to hide. He continued. “We could move this all to my place later, if you wanted to. I know it’s a ways away, but the air conditioning at least works…”

“Yeah, sure. That sounds fine.” She all but interrupted him, as if trying to put a cap on the current conversation. The theory confirmed as she strided to the door and swung it open.

Kakashi had the distinct feeling that a line had almost been dangerously crossed, and he wasn’t an idiot, he knew why. Tonight was not about hospital research or work. Tonight was….well something completely different, this was new territory. He followed behind, knowing full well that it would take more than the usual charm assault for this evening to go well. And the plan he was sticking to would keep it all going smoothly, it only called for one added thing to the charm. And that was honesty. Something he found easier to do with Sakura than anyone else, something she held in the highest regard as well, so he’d found. He had been right that this particular disguise would allow him to open up to her without the actual use of words. It was all going according to plan, he just needed to remind her...

She was paused at the open door as he reached it, a hand fussing over a strand of hair in her face.

“Hold on one second, I just wanna check that I still look okay…”

“Sakura.” Kakashi blocked her way to the bedroom. “You look exquisite.”

He added a genuine smile, and he hoped a gentleness to his tone that she would notice. Sakura’s mouth opened in mild surprise with the faintest of pink dusting her cheeks.

“Thank you…” she mumbled before chewing her lip in a way that Kakashi found both endearing and tortuous. Wanting to taste those lips for himself… but not yet. That wasn't part of the plan.

There were many things that Kakashi Hatake was exceptional at. Many of them without actual effort on his part, the byproduct of being the byproduct of a genius Shinobi. One thing he would never fail at, was planning, strategy. It happened in an instant and sometimes without a great deal of thought. It was also continuous in all aspects of his life. So as he walked out of Sakura's apartment building, with her at his side, he mentally walked himself through the plan in his mind. Not only did this comfort him, but just seeing the smile and blush on her face also grounded him.

This is all part of the plan.

It was all coming together, and the next phase presented itself just as he knew it would. As they
approached the lights and forced merriment, Kakashi would have sighed at even the thought of entertaining himself here tonight. But it was worth it as he offered a smile to Sakura. She had taken to staring fixedly at his face while they were walking, almost yelping and turning away when he caught her each time. Until they reached the Festival itself and Kakashi decided to turn the tables. Watching her features closely, the increasing blush an indication that it was a noticed action.

“Kaka… I mean…. Sukea, can I ask you something, honestly?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, don't get me wrong, I'm just happy you came along with me at all. But...why the disguise? I know you said some stuff before but...”

The noise of excitable children and music was the perfect camouflage for his normal voice. And he wanted Sakura to hear this as him, not as Sukea. Just for the moment.

“Well, honestly, there’s a few reasons. Where to start…” Kakashi took in the way their walking had slowed, how she watched him closely, almost reverently. “The first was everything you told me to begin with, everything you liked about this festival in particular.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really. All the things you said, about how this one isn’t so hot and crowded, the reason that this is the only one you make the effort to go to in the year. So, I figured, if you were walking around with even just a less than average Hokage, people would be bothering you left, right and center.” Kakashi took a deep breath, rallied his nerve for the next part of the plan, bolstered by her smile and easy laugh. “The bothering would have been tenfold after the last few weeks as well. Hence the clone in place.”

“That’s actually, pretty thoughtful. In an odd sort of way, thank you.” As Sakura added the last two words Kakashi couldn’t resist the slow spreading smile on his own face.

“There’s another, more intimate reason…” At his words her mouth opened a fraction in surprise. “It means I can do this…”

Deliberately, with a careful touch so as not to startle her, Kakashi gently brushed his fingers against the back of her hand. Her eyes drifted to the point where they connected, Kakashi finally taking her hand into his. An innocent action perhaps, considering how they had wandered through Konoha some weeks ago in the same position, hand in hand without a disguise.

But that hadn’t been a date. This was definitely a date. And Kakashi had wanted, more than anything, to be able to touch her innocently like this with entire impunity. Without the jeering or incessant questioning that would have occurred if he had accompanied her as just Kakashi, the Hokage and ex Copy Ninja. The very idea of holding something so wonderful and life giving in his own hands was utterly perplexing, the fact that she wanted to go to this with him, of all people.

“Oh.” The blush on her cheeks deepened before she chuckled, the sound stirring him more than it should. “You know, I was worried, that you wouldn’t want to be seen with me or something...but this. I like this. It means I have all the things I love about Konoha in one place.”

“You approve of the disguise then?”

“Yes, Kaka….I mean…. Sukea.” She blinked at him owlishly, he chortled himself.

“I’m guessing you still won’t forgive me for using this particular disguise in the past though…..”
“Not a chance in hell.”

* * * *

As the night went on, Sakura would momentarily lose herself in her surroundings. As she always did during this particular festival and it was always in a way that she never quite felt at any other time of the year. Peaceful, enjoying the moment, things a hardened Kunoichi needed to appreciate when they had the rare chance to. It was during these moments of her mind wandering that she forgot exactly who was with her tonight.

The shock of brown hair would startle her for a second, but always without fail, he would not so subtly remind her that he was Kakashi. Sometimes it was with a more familiar smile, or a not so quiet grumbling about the amount of people milling about, but it was his touch that seemed to ground her more than anything. The light occasional dance of his hand across her back while they were watching the performances or playing some game, the way he would allow her to tug on his arm, or recapture her hand every so often when she strayed too far from his side.

Weeks ago, these slight touches would have made her uncomfortable to the point of physical pain (for others as well as herself). But tonight she just couldn’t get enough of it. Sakura started to wonder if this is what was supposed to happen on a date. If these side glances and laughter were normal or if it was just that girlish side of her coming out, that side that had basically disgusted Sasuke. But she really couldn’t help it, even if she’d wanted to. She was just, well, happy.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world, to be holding on to his arm, gazing at the hanging lights as the last of the sunset vanished to black sky. More natural still, to be spread out on the bank of the river, having a picnic dinner while other couples did the same a few meters away. Waiting for the best part, the fireworks. Lanterns lining the path close by.

“This will be a good spot.” Sakura sighed, relaxed, leaning back on her hands as she sat. Staring at the sky, unfazed for the moment that her outfit may be crumpled in this position. She didn’t care about that anymore.

“Definitely.” Kakashi was also sitting relaxed in the same manner next to her, a drink halfway to his lips.

His lips. And she could see them. The novelty had never quite worn off this evening, and even now as the night went on she caught herself staring at him still. Judging by his reaction, Kakashi’s ego didn’t mind the flattery in the slightest. His eyes would just briefly roam over her before he smiled and diverted her attention elsewhere.

Occasionally Sakura would also think on how they ended up in this position in the first place and it wasn’t without some small measure of guilt. They were supposed to be working on this hospital, they still hadn’t scouted that hideout, or made plans to even do it at all. Time was running out before they would have to present the project to the council, self doubt began to claw its way into her mind.

“Sakura.” Kakashi had mingled his fingers with hers, the touch and the gentle way he said her name pulled her focus back. “You alright there? You looked a little….far off.”

“Hmm. Oh, I’m fine.” Sakura marvelled at being able to see the concern, on his entire face, it changed the look of him so completely it was beguiling. “Just thinking about the hospital, feeling a little guilty.”

“You’re allowed to take time for yourself, and you only get to do this once a year.”
“I know that, just. The timeline, and we still haven’t decided on a location…”

Sakura felt added remorse for being so flippant earlier when Kakashi had offered to move the research to his place. Maybe they should have done that first… There was a tender grip on her hand, somehow they had shifted closer to each other.

“Sakura, there's time.” Just his voice was reassurance enough.

“You’re right. And I think, we both needed this break, just for tonight.”

“Exactly. We’ll have plenty of time for this,” he gestured to their intertwined hands, “after the hospital is finished.”

Their eyes met in the low light, his shining with an unspoken promise, hers hopefully showing the contentment he seemed to foster within her. Although a thought began to niggle at the back of her mind. That once this hospital was finally built, the project she had been nurturing and hoping for her entire career, she would be tenfold busier running the place.

Would there be time to sit and have picnics with Kakashi like this? To have dinner with him each night, like she had grown to love. To have him there to ask about her day, and to hear about his in return. Would she get to know what his face really looked like, without the disguise?

As she regarded his soft expression, the way his eyes darted to her lips every so often, she sincerely hoped that there would be time. And if not, she would have to make it so. For now she could only hope, there was no alternative. It wasn’t as if she needed him, she was independent enough, but she wanted him there so desperately.

“We’ll make time.” She finally answered, rewarded with his side smile, she still couldn’t get over just how handsome it was in plain sight. For now she would keep her quiet worry to herself and enjoy this time with Kakashi.

It took a moment for Sakura to realize that they were slowly leaning toward each other, the lantern lights reflected on the water made it seem almost ethereal. It took every ounce of restraint she had not to close that gap in an instant and taste him properly. Instead she marvelled at the feel of his warm breath on her face as they inched together, the tingle of the bridge of his nose brushing against hers. That look in his eyes, dark and molten, all the things that made her heart beat faster. Kakashi could probably hear it himself the way it was thundering, there was no way he wouldn’t even with the noise around them…..

Just when she thought she would finally taste sweet relief…..BANG.

The first firework sounded above them. Sakura pulled back, startled and flustered, looking up at the suddenly brightened sky. The peppering sound of the fireworks seemed to mirror her own erratic heartbeat for the second. When she dared to look back to Kakashi, his eyes were still fixed on her face, which did little to relieve her. Instead it sent a bolt of something, an ache, to other parts of her body. A fervent wish and desire that there wasn’t so much space or clothing between them. His gaze seemed to express that same wish, and that only added to the heat.

When a gaggle of children ran closely by them Sakura was momentarily glad that they had been interrupted. Not because she didn’t want to kiss him in public, but because she wasn’t sure if she’d have been able to stop herself from roaming his body. And she desperately didn’t want to make him uncomfortable, though for the moment he seemed to be content, his gaze shifted to the children with a warm fondness and then to the sky bursting with light. She was still fascinated by the sight of him, taking it all in while she had the chance.
When the fireworks stopped there were even more people around them. More than she had noticed before anyway. Kakashi gave her a knowing smile, a sympathetic one, one that promised he would make up for it later. She confirmed this theory as he even indulged her with dessert. They wandered around the dwindling activities for a while after, it shocked Sakura to see that it had already reached ten o’clock by the time they started to leisurely walk back towards her apartment.

The conversation had flowed easily between them. Words not exactly necessary in most places, just that quiet companionship and relaxation that accompanied it. In between they were discussing food, books even the village. What surprised her each time, was that Kakashi remembered what she had said, taken it to heart, and made reference to it later in some way. It was thoughtful. An act which in itself should not be so shocking, but the fact that it was coming from Kakashi, even in disguise, was still perplexing. Though, more sadly, she guessed she just wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of it. In reality, Kakashi had always been thoughtful towards her, in other ways, not in the romantic sense. It followed that he would be like that in all aspects of his behaviour.

*All aspects.* The thought made her smirk darkly.

“Sakura?”

“Hmm?”

“You drifted off again…” he chuckled and she blinked, not realizing they had reached the footpath to her apartment. “And you had a look on your face like you were plotting a village takeover.”

“Trust me, I definitely do not want your job. I’ll stick to what I know thank you very much.”

“Good, I wasn’t kidding when I told you that you were the best medic in Fire Country, what you know is too valuable…”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant.” She enjoyed the confusion that passed on his face as they stopped at the door to her apartment building. It was a rare thing, and to see it almost completely without that mask was a real treat. “I mean that what I know is flirting with Hokages, not actually being one…”

Seeing his face, that smile, while hearing that deep chuckle. It did things to her body that made her want to act on all the urges she had been trying to keep buried down so as not to scare him away. But she was heated, tingling, breathing shallow in anticipation. Just when she thought she could bear it no longer his voice broke her daze.

“This is where we should probably say good night.”

“Yeah, you better relieve that clone before you exhaust your chakra.”

She couldn’t help the giggle at his expense, it petered out when her eyes met his again. A dark smile, even darker with the only light shining from the apartments inside, crossed that handsome face. And she was rendered speechless, which Kakashi then took to his full advantage.

“Would take a little more to exhaust me, Sakura.” He winked, the very action alone stopping her breathing altogether. The innuendo dripping through his voice.

Before she could even get her mind working again to think of a witty retort, he had tugged her closer to him. Her mouth opened in a gasp, but her arms wrapped around him unthinking, as if they knew what to do before her brain even registered what was happening. In an instant their noses were brushing together, her heart pounding in her ears, the warmth of him radiating her own. Kakashi leaning down to rest his forehead against her own. She closed her eyes in anticipation.
“Good night, Sakura.”

Her eyes flicked open at his words, but all she could see was his face, all she could feel was his bare lips on her cheek. Sakura’s hands gripped at his bulky cloak, and it was with satisfaction that she leant into the kiss, willing him to shift his lips to capture hers. Still he lingered, Sakura felt his hands drifting to dance along her arms, tingling until he finally let them rest on her own against his chest.

Kakashi inhaled deeply, stepping closer til they were flush against each other. Sakura’s eyes drifted shut again, revelling in the way she was lined up against his muscular frame. If this was what his lips could do to her with just a kiss on the cheek, she felt a coiling excitement at what his lips could do to her elsewhere. The temperature shot up again, a whimper almost escaping her at the thought. Kakashi didn’t miss this, relinquishing her hands and bringing his own around her back, where they dropped to her rear and cupped it.

She would have gasped, but his mouth was moving, she bit her bottom lip in anticipation but that soft warmth travelled in another direction. Instead he was burying his face in her neck, inhaling, peppering kisses on the supple flesh. She didn’t hold back the quiet groan, feeling his smirk into the kissing, she fisted his shirt. Allowing her hands to dig beneath that coat he had on.

Kakashi let out a contented sigh, bringing his forehead back to rest on hers, Sakura lamenting the lack of his lips on her skin. It felt like she was burning at the touch. So sensitive to just the slightest of kisses along her neck. Her head felt fuzzy. She vaguely registered him letting go of her and pulling back.

“Thanks for asking me out.”

He added. Sakura was still too stunned to speak, standing there, her mind blank. Trying to permanently copy the look of his uncovered face into her mind before he left. She watched the unwavering smirk about him as he stepped back further. She mumbled something intelligible.

“G’night…”

That chuckle, that one which was so very Kakashi, was the last thing she heard before he disappeared into the darkness. It might have been a full minute before she could actually feel her body return to some normalcy, moving up the stairs at a glacial pace. The smile on her face spreading to a wide grin with each step she took.

It was perfect. Every part, right down to the disguise even. What had she been so nervous about? This was Kakashi, the man who always did everything in his power to make her comfortable, safe, happy. Her key in the lock, the grin still on her face, she could still feel the warmth and tenderness from those soft kisses. They heated her, right down from her neck to her chest and further. Gods, how she wanted him to keep going.

When she opened the door to darkness she was so wrapped up in thoughts she didn’t notice anything amiss. Even when she clicked the lights on she didn’t immediately notice. Not until she heard the low and deep drawl of a voice that was so familiar and so unexpected that it terrified her in an instant. Chilling what had just been warm and melting.

“Sakura.”

“Sa….Sasuke?”

The Uchiha sat at the end of the table, looking fixedly at her, sitting in the chair that she only knew now as Kakashi’s.
Chapter Eleven

Thanks for the support lovelies, you have no idea what it means to me <3

CHAPTER ELEVEN:

The light of the morning sun rested on his shoulders, spreading it’s comfortable warmth over him as he meandered slowly to the office. It was earlier than usual, but Kakashi had come to an unexpected decision of absolute clarity. One he was surprised, and disappointed in himself, for not realizing sooner. It was simple really, if he got to the office earlier, he could leave earlier, provided there were no disasters and the work was actually finished.

He could do this, would do this, sacrifice that extra few hours of his morning. Because it meant one thing. Getting to spend a little more time at the end of his day with Sakura. It was a novel feeling, a burbled mixture of excitement and hopefulness, and it seemed to be a permanent fixture now whenever Sakura was involved.

It was with a smile that he approached the main street to Hokage tower, glancing out of habit to the monument behind and the likeness of his former sensei. Kakashi anticipated a pang of guilt to accompany the action, penance for his behaviour, for indulging in his feelings for a former student. But it was absent for the moment, or at least outweighed by the sheer relief he felt.

That date yesterday had gone well, so much better than he imagined it would. Though he suspected that this, with her, was something he would not allow himself to fail in. And it was always so easy to just be with her.

The clerk was lazing at the desk as he entered, jumping to attention at the unexpected sight of an early Rokudaime. Such a thing was as rare and fleeting as a lunar eclipse, and just like the planetary event, not to be stared at directly. In an instant the clerk spluttered back to life, busying himself, Kakashi simply quirked an eyebrow as he walked by. In such a good mood he barely registered said clerk then try to get his attention as he continued up the stairs to his office.

It was 8:00am already, which gave him an extra two hours before anyone actually expected him to be here...

Kakashi swung the door open and all train of thought abandoned him at a sight so unexpected and strange, it made everything else freeze. It was even more of an absurdity than witnessing an early Rokudaime, and just as foreboding.

It was Sasuke Uchiha. So casually looking out over the village through the window behind his desk. Turning his head to aim a dark eye at Kakashi as he entered.

“Sasuke, welcome back. It’s been a while.” Thankfully his brain finally kicked into control, allowing him to form the words and voice them through the shock.

“Yeah... it has, Kakashi.”

At the sound of Sasuke’s voice, saying his name, the guilt resurfaced tenfold, propelling him into a
state of anxiety that turned his blood to ice water. Kakashi physically shook his head, as if to shake
the feeling altogether, something a veteran shinobi should be able to do in an instant. He must be
going soft.

“Last time I heard from you, you were around Kusa, looking into that...other matter.”

“Yeah. I’ve delivered my findings to Shikamaru.”

Kakashi rounded the desk, sitting with feigned laziness into his chair. Hoping like hell that his
actions all remained somewhat normal in the Uchiha’s eyes. But who would suspect that his old
teacher was now attempting to reign in guilt for courting his student’s former fiancee. An action that
crossed so many lines, no matter how good it felt to be with her…

“You didn’t have to come all the way back to the village just to deliver a scroll though, Sasuke.”
Kakashi hovered over the question he wasn’t sure he wanted to ask, but damn he needed the answer.
“So, what has brought you back? Something happen?”

A pregnant pause. Sasuke said nothing, merely continued his perusal over the village from where he
stood. If Kakashi deemed to know the man that his former student had become, and he very much
looked the part of a man now, he would guess that the Uchiha wasn’t simply silent for dramatic
effect. Whatever had been worthy enough to call him back to Konoha, without an express order,
must have been of some importance.

And to Kakashi there was only one thing of importance, currently, that was addling his own senses.
Only one thing that was as significant as the village he was currently Hokage of, and that was
Sakura.

“Let’s just say, I had some loose ends to take care of. Nothing more.” Sasuke’s voice held no trace of
that menacing drawl as he spoke. Instead his last two words were tinged with a melancholic tone that
pulled Kakashi’s thoughts in an ever turbulent spiral.

“I’m assuming by your use of the past tense that things have already been taken care of.”

Sasuke nodded in reply. He had never exactly been forthcoming when it came to conversation,
though he may have gotten a little better since his early years in Team 7, Kakashi knew that he
would have to directly ask if he wanted more information. But the words would not form for
Kakashi now, at least not in a way that he found acceptable. They felt thick and hard to form. Like
he was about to hear in reply something that would destroy his shaky foundation of happiness.
Something that would likely shatter his world.

So the silence stretched on, Kakashi barely registering the Uchiha slowly walking to the opposite
side of the desk, until he was staring straight at him.

“Why are you here, Sasuke?”

His right hand snaked beneath the cloak he was wearing, and withdrew a scroll which was held out
to Kakashi. The two words emblazoned below the seal fell out of his mouth in a voice that did not
sound entirely like his own. The two words that seemed to be so physically heavy that they weighed
down the atmosphere of that room with their release. Crushing all thoughts of happiness and hope
with it.

“For Sakura.”

Still Sasuke said nothing, he watched on as Kakashi handled that scroll like the contents may burn
him or explode in his face.
“A gift?”

“An apology…”

With a kind of nodding indication from Sasuke, Kakashi tentatively opened the scroll. It was brief, succinct, with no actual apology written on it. Instead it was something much, much more…

“You’re…giving her…”

“What’s left of the Uchiha land, yeah.”

“That’s a….pretty big gesture there, Sasuke. Are you sure about this?”

A soft kind of exasperated sigh escaped the raven haired man, a thoughtful but sure expression on his usually stoic face. Kakashi was reminded of the day Sasuke had left the village before, playfully poked Sakura in the forehead, it was that same kind of softness that was a rarity. And while it would normally have warmed Kakashi, to see such an emotion from Sasuke again, right now all it did was terrify and solidify his own unhappiness.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Kakashi couldn’t help the automatic and somewhat bitter response.

“And why don’t you give this to her yourself?”

Another rarity, a side smile and amused grunt. Obviously the disdain in Kakashi’s tone was only recognizable to himself. The look on Sasuke’s face now was one that ebbed the anger away, it was a look of sincerity. Something Kakashi knew would be hard for Sasuke as it was for himself to achieve.

“There is nothing left to discuss between her and I. Everything that needed to be said has been… “

“Then why are you giving it to me? Clearly this is for Sakura…”

There was an edge to his words now, the situation getting to him completely in a moment of vulnerability. He hadn’t meant to let his emotions get the better of him but it was uncontrollable.

“You’re the one helping her, with her children’s hospital project, right?”

Suddenly a wave of something else was washing over him, and Kakashi could only nod in reply, too stunned to form any words at all.

“I can’t admit to knowing many things about….people, emotions, women in particular… “ Sasuke trailed off and Kakashi fought back a derisive snort at the unexpected confession. "But Sakura....Sakura is one of the few things I claim to have known, a little at least. I need her to understand, this is my amends for all of it, everything. There is no way she will accept anything from me directly. Gift or otherwise. Last night’s interaction was proof enough of that...."

Sasuke trailed off, looking wistfully out the window for a moment behind Kakashi. There was too much noise in Kakashi's mind to completely comprehend what was happening, too many feelings coming to the surface and clouding his usually precise judgement. So he had been to see Sakura last night....

"This project of hers, it needs to happen. And if she's too stubborn to take this...” he indicated to the scroll, "then I know that you will make her see reason."
Now there was a silence which stretched on long enough for Kakashi to collect his thoughts into coherency.

"I still don't understand... why this? The last of the Uchiha land? Isn't it still your dream to rebuild your clan, or have you completely abandoned that now?"

Kakashi fell silent, not wanting to add the words that had formed in his mind, *now that Sakura is mine.*

"Not at all. But it is imperative that I redeem myself, in my own eyes as well as the village, my name must be clean. And this is the only way for it to happen, for all I've put her through and everyone else.... With this, she will understand, and she won't be waiting for me to come home any longer... She can be free to follow her own dreams, make the village a better place."

Kakashi caught the hidden meaning to these words. That now, finally, Sasuke was washing his hands of Konoha. Never to return. This was the only way he could clean his name, by starting afresh somewhere new. And while Kakashi understood this in an instant, some niggling and uninvited thoughts of self doubt began to gnaw at him.

That Sakura's refusal of this land offer meant one thing, she wanted Sasuke to come back. That she wasn't over him at all.

It was irrational, completely and utterly after all they had been through together, after all they had shared... It shouldn't have stung him so badly in just having these thoughts... But it was out of his control. With a solemn nod to Sasuke, conveying what he could not utter at this second, he stared at that scroll before releasing the breath he'd been holding for a while now.

"I will give it to her."

"Thank you, Kakashi. I wouldn't ask this of you if I didn't think you could make her see reason."

"As usual you don't give Sakura enough credit. She may not be as stubborn as you make her out to be...." Even before he finished the sentence Kakashi was trying to stifle a small grin. Sakura was Sakura, stubborn to a fault. In the amiable silence that followed Kakashi's thoughts continued to spiral in all directions. Sasuke finally broke the quiet.

"Keeping away from the village is the final act, Kakashi. The last thing I need to do before I can move on. But that doesn't mean my loyalty lies anywhere else, I will protect the village from the outside, as I have always done..."

"I understand, Sasuke. I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

Kakashi stood. He wanted to add here, that the village would always welcome him back home, that he didn't need to redeem himself in such a way. It wasn't necessary to clean his name with such an act. But Kakashi also could not make those words fall from his lips, because it would shatter the fragile hold on his happiness. It would threaten the foundations of the relationship he had built with Sakura, and more than anything, he wanted to keep exploring that. It was selfish.

It was also negligible of him to assume she would want Sasuke at all, given how things had been between them over the last few weeks. But that thought was there, festering. And it was only because *he still felt wrong.* That guilt, ever present, had taken hold again in a vice grip. And there was only one thing, one person, that could admonish him of that guilt. And that was Sakura herself.

* * * *
Sakura sat at the table, wading through the documents before her with an unsettling fervor. There wasn't enough time to be dawdling when such a thing was so urgent, so needed in the village. And she would make sure that it happened.

Sasuke be damned.

His visit had been short and sweet, thankfully, minus the actual sweet part to it. Not that he had ever been capable of that particular kindness, so she shouldn't be expecting it now.

She was sure, more than ever, one hundred percent. There was nothing left of a relationship with Sasuke to salvage. They were merely indifferent acquaintances now, nothing more. Sakura had grown more sure with each and every terse word that passed between them the night before. There was no longer a familiarity or frame of reference. No longer that heart melting feeling whenever he bid her any attention.

It was... closure. Completely and utterly. It had just been unexpected to see him just appear like that in her apartment, and that shock had subsided quickly before morphing into annoyance. Because all she'd wanted to do that night, was flop down on her bed and gush over that stupid book, to poorly hide her excitement at how the date with Kakashi had gone that night.

Sasuke had just been in the way, and she resented him for tarnishing such a good evening with Kakashi. So she'd gotten him out of her sight as soon as the opportunity had arisen. Not without a small parting jab from the Uchiha himself about her obviously not working so hard lately.

"Sakura... you look..." Sasuke regarded her briefly, and for a stupid moment she thought he might say something sweet, but it was reassuring that his character was more in keeping with the Sasuke she had known so long ago. "Different..."

"Well it's festival night, I assure you I don't look like this on the daily..."

"You look...happy."

Sakura shook her head again in a vein attempt to focus on what she was looking at. This project that deserved her attention, deserved the space in her head. Not Sasuke. But she couldn't help recalling the conversation that had pissed her off so much the night previous.

"You've done a bit more work on this since the last time I saw it."

The word *bit* stuck out in her mind now more than ever. At the time she'd had to bite back a volley of insults targeted at the cape wearing fiasco that was her former fiance.

"Well, you know me, head down working away..."

"You haven't been working at this alone either."

"No, Kakashi has been helping, when he can. It has to go through council approval, so we need to make a proposal to the council before any actual building work can happen..."

"Just..." Sasuke interrupted her in the condescending way he always did, like he hadn't heard a single word she had said. "Don't let Kakashi turn you into another one of his projects...."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you know exactly what I mean Sakura. Just look at him."
That had been the end of that conversation. Sasuke had not needed to elaborate, and Sakura wouldn't have allowed him to in any case. She had caught his train of thought, and it had vexed her instantly. How dare he? How could he presume to know the man that was their current Hokage, the idiot had never even seen his face, didn't know about all the sacrifices he had made... still made for the sake of the village.

"Sakura?"

It was insanity, it was bothering. Sasuke had never even told her the reason he had come back to the village so nonchalantly without a single warning. And without even knocking before letting himself into her apartment. How dare he? Insinuating that she had made no progress on this project... that she couldn’t possibly on her own... It had all been there, in his tone of voice...

"Sakura... You're scaring me."

So intensely was she trying to hone her focus on the work in front of her, and trying to coach her thoughts and feelings away from anger, she hadn't noticed Kakashi’s arrival.

"Oh, Kakashi, what time is it? You're early..."

Just seeing him and hearing his voice had an instant feeling of relief attached to it that she was grateful for. Just having him here with her, it felt like home. He watched her with a tired expression of fondness, though there was something a little more disheveled about him than usual, the robes had already been discarded. Seeing him early was an oddity in and of itself...

"It's maybe a little earlier than usual. But there's... something I need to discuss with you..."

In a reaction to his presence that Sakura wasn't even going to try and understand right now with her mind so jumbled, her body seemed to be instantly drawn to his. Kakashi's voice trailed off with her sudden closeness. She found herself pressed up against his chest, burying herself in that safe and comfortable warmth, inhaling deeply. She could feel the deep sigh that escaped Kakashi, felt that tenseness in his body ebb away the longer she stayed there in his arms. And suddenly he was inhaling deeply as well, as if trying to breathe her in, they both relaxed into the hold. She wasn't even sure how much time had passed before she stepped back just a fraction, a beaming smile on her face.

"Sure, what did you want to discuss, Kakashi?"

His eyes morphed from that tired fondness to a look of exasperation.

"Actually, it's about Sasuke."

Ah. There was the rub. And she had almost completely forgotten that the emotionally stunted Uchiha had waltzed back into the village on a whim. It took everything she had not to instantly roll her eyes at the mention of his name. Instead she sighed deeply and shifted back around to the table she had been working at.

"I take it he's been to see you as well."

Kakashi merely nodded in reply, remaining in the spot he was standing like a statue. Almost like he was afraid to move in case it scared her.

Damn this. Damn Sasuke. Just when things were moving along at a comfortable pace with Kakashi, just when she was finally allowing herself to be, and be happy about that. He just turns up and throws all that hard, tentative work out the window. Just when she had felt good for the first time all day...
"I understand he came to see you first."

Sakura nodded in reply here. Pretending to be busy with the sudden need to organize paperwork, really she was just shuffling the paper around out of nervousness. Why was this making her nervous? How dare he turn up and cause her to feel this nervous, this anxiety, when she should only be happy with Kakashi.

Breathing a sigh, she realized that Kakashi didn't deserve this, didn't deserve her anger and frustrations to be taken out on him.

Sasuke was still Sasuke, An ignorant and emotionally unavailable person who misunderstood the feelings of others. That was not Kakashi's fault. And he had always been so good to her. She needed to be an adult about this. Needed Kakashi to see that she was unaffected by Sasuke. Even if the real truth was the opposite, she was just pissed off he'd shaken the fragile foundations she had been building with Kakashi.

"He did." She sighed again, just talking about Sasuke put a damper on everything. "He was lying in wait for me when I got home from our date last night." For a brief moment Sakura enjoyed the dusting of blush that crept up and over Kakashi's mask at the words our date. She might have given a little self satisfied smirk at seeing the reaction. "He didn't stick around for long..." She added as an afterthought.

"Ah, I see." Kakashi looked uncharacteristically odd, like he was nervous about his words. Sakura smiled a little. It really was adorable. "Do you think he... saw?"

"Saw what? Me almost making out with a dark haired stranger on my own doorstep? Probably. Consider yourself lucky I didn't rip the wig off there and then like I wanted to..."

"Sakura..." Kakashi's tone was a mixture of amusement and warning her not to shift the conversation.

"Well, there were other things I wanted to rip off of you as well, but I was going to start with the wig..."

"Sakura..." This time the tone was just fractionally louder, enough to stop Sakura from plunging the conversation further down the rabbit hole, it was that same tone he had adopted when she was a young genin. A no nonsense kind of thing. But there was still a tenderness in there. Affection she could feel practically washing over her with warmth.

"I know, I know..." She added in a softer voice. She needed to talk about this properly. Needed to reassure herself and Kakashi of what her feelings were now. "But, if he did see, he didn't say anything. And it's really not any of his business anymore anyway who I choose to be with..." She stopped what she was doing, looking Kakashi directly in the eyes as she spoke. Hoping more than anything he could understand her thoughts. When he nodded back a fraction, closing his eyes for just a brief moment, she knew that he agreed.

But there was still something... off about him. Something that just didn't sit right.

"Good." For a second she thought she had imagined Kakashi saying it, the word sounding so foreign in that tone. She decided to keep the momentum going, the sooner this was over with, the sooner they could get back to the project. The sooner she could spend just a little bit more time relaxing and holding onto him.

"So, Sasuke came to see you too?" A nod in reply, Sakura knew more words must be necessary to
get him to open up, get this out in the open and dealt with. "What about?"

Kakashi stepped closer to her, and at first she thought he was going to kiss her again, maybe pin her to the table. There was a dark shadow of something that crossed his features and she was not so familiar at being on the receiving end of it. It was something she imagined his opponents had the misfortune to see, or whichever woman was lucky enough to bed him. Instead he held out a hand, a small scroll sitting inside it.

"You, actually. He wanted me to give you this."

"Lazy shit, why didn't he just give it to me himself..."

When she went to take it, Kakashi took his hand away and made her meet his eye.

"Because he wanted me to make sure you accepted it..."

"Magnanimous asshole..."

"Sakura. His belief was that if he handed you this... gift...himself, then you would refuse. I'm not Sasuke. I'm not going to force you, or pressure you in any way, on what to do here. But I had to give you this as an option. The decision is entirely up to you..."

Sakura's mind raced to catch up. Staring into the darkness of Kakashi's eyes just as he was imploring hers. She couldn't get over the feeling that there was something more here, something deeper that he was omitting from the conversation entirely. But just as she had always done with Kakashi, she would remain patient. He would tell her when he was good and ready to, they hadn't come this far for nothing, right?

"The last time you handed me a scroll the contents nearly drove me insane... I don't know if I like it becoming a habit..."

Kakashi softly chuckled, just ever so slightly, his eyes creasing in a familiar way.

"It's okay, I'll be here. We'll do it together."

Finally he relinquished the scroll, and Sakura caught the scribble of her name across the seal before she opened it. Kakashi's words had taken the edge off, but honestly, whatever Sasuke had to give her she wouldn't want. Her eyebrows raised as she read, absconded past her hairline at the anticlimax of what she was reading.

She wasn't sure exactly what she had expected to be inside that scroll, a confession of love, a jutsu that forced her back into his arms.... something. And something utterly terrible by all counts. But this....

"Is this.... it?"

Kakashi made a small noise of surprise.

"Well....yeah, that's it."

"This is all he wanted to give me?"

"What do you mean is that all...? He's gifting you the entirety of the Uchiha land for this hospital Sakura. It's big."

Sakura stared at the few words that were written on the page before rolling it back up and placing it
It was a nice gesture on Sasuke's part... if that was really his intention, but there was no way to know for sure what he really wanted or what his game plan was.

"You... don't want it then?"

Sakura tried to hide the disdain that she was feeling. Not wanting to put those feelings onto Kakashi, when he had his own feelings to deal with.

"No, not really."

"Just think about it Sakura, this is a lot of land, and with it comes a lot of opportunity to build even more than we had planned."

"You want me to take this, without question?" Kakashi didn't answer her, just watched with a pained expression. "This is our project Kakashi, remember? I don't want to be indebted to him, of all people. I don't want him to use this as an excuse to worm himself back into my life and control it. I want us to make the decision together where this hospital goes..."

Sakura watched his brow furrow in concentration or caring, she couldn't quite be sure without seeing the rest of his face, and suddenly she found herself picturing Sukea. Remembering the way he had looked without the mask, the smile on his face. Kakashi stayed silent, unmoving as he regarded her.

"We are building this together Kakashi. And we both agreed that the site would be something we both decided on... It's something we have to explore all the options for, not just take the first too good to be true offer. There's still the hideout to scout, and we haven't even made any plans to do it..."

"What about now?"

"Huh?"

Kakashi's sudden question completely throwing her off track and the impressive speech she had been making.

"Yes, it's still light out, and a little earlier than usual. Why don't we take a quick look now? The sooner we get it scouted, the sooner we'll have all the options on the table for the both of us."

Kakashi placed the scroll back down on top of the other paperwork. Sakura staring at him skeptically for his impatience. There was something more going on here, she was sure of it. But he was also right.

"Alright. Let me get ready."

He was already signalling his Anbu detail before she left the room. Whatever else was happening, she at least trusted that Kakashi would tell her when he was good and ready to. And he was someone she had always been able to count on.

* * * * *

Kakashi wasn't sure exactly which part of the conversation had caused this surging bitterness to take hold of his mind. But he was well and truly in the throes of it. Even if he realized it wasn't rational, even though he knew that what Sakura was saying didn't mean she was fervently in love with Sasuke at all. It still festered. The more he tried to push it to the back of his mind the more intent it
was on climbing it's way to the surface.

The entire walk over to the abandoned hideout was terse and uncomfortable, though he tried with effort to seem as aloof as possible. This wasn't how it should be, how it had been with Sakura over the last few weeks. It had all been easy, comfortable, exciting even. And Kakashi understood that this change, this negative feeling, it was all of his own doing. Projecting onto the situation the horrible feelings he could no longer reconcile with.

So, more in keeping with his usual self, Kakashi tried to shift his focus. Onto the village, the nice weather despite summer's end, the way Sakura smelt so delicious even after she'd been working all day... the way the soft skin of her neck had felt last night under his lips.

"Kakashi...."

Gods how he wanted to devour her in that instant, press her into the wall and steal her breath, taste her moans...

"Kakashi!"

"Hmm?"

While he congratulated himself on a successful distraction of his turbulent thoughts, it had not produced the desired effect. Instead, he’d completely not heard a single word that Sakura had said the entire time they had been walking. And they were here already....

"I lost you there..." She sounded concerned, though it was only a thin veil for the irritation that was lying beneath the surface. "As I was saying, are you sure that this is a good idea? I mean... going into this hideout, without a plan, at night..."

"Sakura, give me a little credit. Besides, the Anbu guard detail will be right behind us, and I'll be going in with the best medic in the Fire Country. Nothing to be worried about."

Kakashi tried to be self deprecating in order to shift her discomfort at the situation. But it came out in the usual arrogant tone he never intended it to sound, it just happened. Sakura eyed him skeptically in a way that was reminiscent of their Team 7 days, complete and utter exasperation, before she relented.

"Well. If you say so."

It was rash of him perhaps, and very un-Hokage-like, to suggest doing such a thing right then and there without a plan. Certainly this was something that Kakashi the Copy Ninja would never dream of doing, or any of his predecessors. But it was a potent mixture of everyday boredom and frustration. As well as eagerness, a desperate desire to have this whole business decided on finally, so that he and Sakura could move on with whatever was happening between them.

Basically, he wanted Sasuke removed from the picture entirely. Maybe that would alleviate some of the guilt he was currently stewing in. It had to... Something had to....

"We're here. Alright, we'll enter in two man teams. Starting with basic formation until we meet in the centre. We have an advantage knowing the preexisting layout of the building, but this place is still big enough to be a pain. So it'll be faster in cells and we have limited time and limited light." The two Anbu guards had already appeared behind Sakura. "I'll go in first..."

"No, don't you..."
"Hokage-sama, no..."

"Oh have some faith in me now. If anything else, the likelihood of me being knocked out twice at the same entrance to the same hideout is very low. The odds are in our favor here."

As usual, they at least could not fault his logical thinking. Sakura reluctantly nodding before she conceded defeat.

"Alright then, you follow behind in formation, then we'll split up and fan out."

Kakashi dropped his hand down, signalling to start moving. This felt good. Too good. It was like the old days, where he had some actual use in the field. It helped that the Anbu captain nearby was Tenzo himself, it just added to the nostalgia.

Kakashi shut down his train of thought in a way he thought might have abandoned him after years not in the field. This required his full concentration. It required all of his former experience, his training. And as usual he needed to be able to call upon that in an instant. Kakashi caught Sakura’s eye before making contact with the Anbu agents, a stern nod from the kunoichi, his confidence bolstered by the lack of fear and hesitation as she stood by his side.

In one minute all the seals had been placed, and the hideout opened. The latch led down into an inky darkness which prompted a feeling of deja vu. But this would not be like the last time. And those few memories of that incident were something he would not bare to repeat.

Sakura had been so concerned, finding the truth in that file, it had shaken her badly and he could tell. His explanation to her about it had been honest. But the more he remembered about that day, and the lengthy hospital stay afterward, the more he realized that it was only part truths. He hadn't intentionally tried to end his life, he had been shielding Tenzo from the worst of the explosion, and he would do it again. But, as an afterthought, he remembered the rest of it. The hidden things that had surfaced while he recovered. The admonition that Kakashi himself would not have done a single thing to save his own life that day, it had all been Tenzo rushing him to safety. And he wouldn't have minded dying right there, on the floor of that hideout.

"Formation one, go."

The command came as second nature. He watched with a mingled sense of pride and concern as Sakura moved with ease, it was now he reminded himself that she too had not been in the field a lot recently. Maybe it had been a subconscious desire on his part to keep her close, but he liked to think that it was only because she was irreplaceable as a medic in the village. Even more so once this hospital project was complete. And he would know where she was all of the time.

The grand entrance to the hideout was......anticlimactic at best.

From the details in that Anbu folder, and from his knowledge of other hideouts, what Kakashi had expected to see was....more. But the myriad of passageways that usually greeted them was absent, or rather, buried under collapsed mountains of earth and rubble. Sakura shared a side glance with him briefly, so much for structural integrity.

When the dust and his eyes settled to the surroundings, Kakashi could see two of the passages were intact. Which was probably the best they could have hoped for in this situation.

"Alright. No explosions that's a good start. It was right about here that we encountered that, uh.... surprise trap. Anyway, you know the plan, we don't have a lot of daylight hours. Split up and move out."
What he had expected was for the Anbu to assign themselves one each to himself and Sakura. Then he would be able to better concentrate on his surroundings, work better without the threat of endless guilt and nagging thoughts consuming his entire being. He was doing remarkably to push them down as far as they were now.

But what happened was entirely different, and off plan. Suddenly he was left, standing there alone with Sakura, two Anbu agents lighting some tags and disappearing without a word down one of the long passageways. Sakura seemed unperturbed by the turn of events, readying herself in kunoichi fashion, awaiting his next order. Kakashi stifled a sigh.

Of course this was going to be a bad idea. It had been a reckless, stupid move on his part to begin with. Kakashi had to remind himself that once it was done then things could move on. The direction those things would be moving in however, was entirely unknown, and equally out of his control. And above all things Kakashi liked being in control, of himself, his mind and his body.

But it seemed now that Sakura had a firm grip on whatever direction his happiness may lie in the future. And this realization both astounded and terrified him.

"Ready?"

He didn't need to ask the question really but she nodded all the same. The pair took tentative steps down the passageway. Kakashi keeping an eye on the surroundings as much as possible in the darkness. The light creeping through some of the collapsed parts of the ceiling. With one eye on what was around him, it was unfortunate that his other eye, was firmly fixed on Sakura. Watching her every move, reveling in the way she looked while she concentrated. It was a kind of beauty that was so fleeting, because as soon as she noticed him looking, it would turn into something else.

He enjoyed being able to watch her more than he should. And the guilt he felt for this true statement was more than enough to cause him to turn away. They were only here in the first place because he had so rashly insisted. Because he wanted so desperately for Sakura to want Sasuke gone from the village. He was just starting to wonder if she really understood the Uchiha's meaning in gifting her that land...

It was his farewell gift, as well as an apology to Sakura.

"The structure is holding up in this part at least."

Her blind optimism that this hole was still a prospect did little to boost his spirits.

"Yes. For now. I imagine it would take a lot of work to bring it up to code for a working basement of a hospital..."

"But we could still fill in the entire thing, depending on how far down these paths go anyway..."

There it was again, too much optimism. Kakashi huffed a small sigh as they reached a closed door. With a nod to Sakura she made an attempt to open it, when it wouldn't budge she gently removed the entire thing from its hinges. Kakashi was ready, prepared just in case something was lying in wait for them. But all they could see was rubble. The brief excitement had felt so good. Just at the prospect that there might be danger lurking behind these doors.

It did not last long. By the fifth door, Kakashi was starting to see, that if anything was left over from this hideouts working days, it had been destroyed or reduced to dust. Even any booby traps left would have lost their chakra signature by this time. He couldn't help but release another sigh.

"If you keep making noises like that Kakashi I'm going to have to ask you what the matter is...."
Sakura gave him a pointed look, tinged with mischief, which he was only just able to make out in the low light. Gods how she was able to look so good, even in this dismal place, was a true mystery. The use of his own words against him wasn't even bothering him in this instance, he had fallen back into stride just enjoying her company, reminded of how close they had grown over the last few weeks.

When she paused in her movements he realized that she was waiting for him to reply. And while he was momentarily sated from the guilt he'd been feeling, he wasn't quite sure how to voice it to her. So instead, he allowed himself a moment of vulnerability, allowed those worthy feelings to spur his honest words on.

"I just... have a few misgivings. Perhaps this was a hasty decision..."

He wasn't sure if that only pertained to scouting this hideout. Perhaps it had all been too hasty.

"Kakashi, we've been talking about doing this for weeks. We just got a little..." and here she gave him a look that made his temperature rise too high at once, "sidetracked." She was standing too close to him, he was reacting in a way he could not control or predict, that smile on her face. It was the best thing he'd seen all day.

"I've been enjoying the distraction..."

The words were out of his mouth before he could check them. Kakashi watched as a little blush dusted her cheeks and her smile widen before clearing his throat and moving away. If they didn't get out of here soon the close proximity to her.... well. It wasn't something he wanted to give into, not just yet, not until he was sure...

"So have I..." Her words were sure as she caught up to him, her voice causing a new reaction, goosebumps to form on his skin despite the warmth. "You know, I am a little worried myself..."

"Oh?"

"Mmm. That I've been enjoying myself a little too much lately... Not working hard enough."

"That's not true Sakura, we both know that. Why would you think such a thing?"

"Just..." she looked down to her feet, stepping over an errant root that was growing in from somewhere, "something Sasuke said."

"Ah." Kakashi fought back an unexpected surging of protective rage, it subsided thankfully, under his control for the moment. It wasn't Sakura's fault, and there was no Sasuke here to rebuke for his behaviour. Kakashi also fought back an impulse to apologize, for leading her off track, forgetting that she had been the one to ask him out.... kiss him... more than once. That this had been a gradual and mutual bonding by all accounts.

Dr. Crane's voice was echoing in his mind. The voice of reason in this case.

"Listen to Sakura..."

* * * *

Despite the gloomy surroundings, despite the impending sense of dread about having to make a decision, Sakura was content. It was the feeling she'd felt before, that day her and Kakashi had walked around the village hand in hand. Maybe content wasn't the right word... safe was more accurate. And it was unexpected considering they were both currently traipsing around Oorchimaru's old hideout.
Sakura had expected a mass recall of terrible memories, those gruesome and tense moments when she and Naruto had been desperately searching for Sasuke. But they were surprisingly absent.

Kakashi was right there beside her as they checked the few rooms they could actually get into. There were parts where the path narrowed and the light couldn't reach them at all. In the darkness they managed to climb over collapsed rubble, errant roots breaking through the walls. It seemed the further they went along this path the more dilapidated it became, the more absurd the possibility of actually using any of this hideout for a children's hospital also.

Sakura had no idea of how much time had actually passed, she wasn't paying much attention to that particular variable. Instead her attention had completely shifted to one thing and one thing only. Kakashi. Whenever she needed to climb over something he would offer a hand, or gently nudge her in the darkness to tell her that he was right there beside her. It was all things he would have done before, back when they were both in the field, and it was only now that she saw this truth.

Kakashi was Kakashi, he was always there for her, physically as well as every other sense.

The whole idea of turning down Sasuke's offer, it had been out of selfish pride really. She just didn't want to owe the Uchiha anything, didn't want him to be able to hold anything over her. But it was ridiculous. There was nothing there between them anymore and she knew that now, seeing him and having that terse conversation, it was all the proof she needed.

And what she needed to do now, was be the bigger person. Accept this land offer for the good of everyone else. Stop being selfish and stubborn. Move on. And move on with Kakashi beside her.

Sakura stopped in her tracks suddenly. The conversation with Kakashi as they walked had been few and far between, but it had been an amicable silence, and she'd needed that silence to be able to think and sort her own thoughts.

"Sakura, what's wrong?"

He approached her with concern dripping in his voice. Sakura took him in as much as she could in this light, there was only a small glow from the seals and slivers through the cracks in the ceiling. But she could see his hair, that shine, see his eyes as they studied and heated her at the same time.

"This is ridiculous..." she finally admitted out loud.

"What do you mean..."

Sakura cut Kakashi off before he could finish the sentence. Taking slow and deliberate steps toward him as she spoke.

"This hideout, it's ridiculous. It's completely unsuitable for what we need. There is practically a maze down here that goes on forever, and even if we built over top of it the structure would never hold... I'm...", standing directly in front of him now she averted her gaze in a hope it would bolster her courage for what she had to say. "I'm sorry for being so stubborn."

"I've told you before, you never need to apologize to me... you have your reasons." His words were tender, and the way the back of his hand brushed against her cheek for just a second added more softness to it. "I'll support any decision you make."

Those were the words that sweetened the deal for Sakura, and after everything with Sasuke, she wanted all the sweetness she could get. She couldn't help the burbling giggle that began to escape her, in relief as well as contentment. Kakashi smiled, or at least she thought so, it was impossible to really tell. He still looked concerned.
"Well that settles it then." She added an extra sentiment to her tone. "While I don't want to be indebted to Sasuke in any way, accepting that land offer is the best option, for our project. Cost wise, size wise, it's stubborn and selfish to me to turn it down..."

"But you still..." Kakashi faltered here, as if he wasn't so sure if he trusted his own voice. "You still want Sasuke to keep that land to rebuild the Uchiha clan, right?"

Sakura stared at him stunned, her jaw might have actually dropped open at his words. Is this why he was so weird about all this? She needed to set the record straight, fast.

"I don't care what he does with it, or how he rebuilds his clan. I just, didn't want him to take credit for all my... our hard work. It was selfish of me. And I didn't want him to waltz back any old time and think he can control my life again..."

"Sakura." It was Kakashi's turn to interrupt her now. "You do realize what this... 'gift' means to Sasuke? What it will mean for his future..."

Sakura had always been quicker than the average ninja. But this was where she felt decidedly dense for the first time since her genin years. She searched Kakashi's eyes, hoping to understand without the need for words. The thought occurred to her so suddenly and was so odd, she wondered if she had actually read his mind.

"I think... I'm starting to.It means he won't be coming back to the village, right? Surrendering the last of his claim to home..." Sakura said it without any sadness, without any emotion at all, Kakashi nodded in reply and it was solemn before he hung his head glumly. All the clues had been there for her, Sasuke had left them himself.

Sakura smiled, any emotion coming from Kakashi was a rare and beautiful thing to behold. Tentatively she placed her thumb and finger to his chin, nudging his head upwards as she stood almost flush against him. There was a small sparkle of surprise that flashed across his eyes. This, this, is what he had been worried about all along. It had nothing to do with the hospital at all...

"Good..." Sakura said more assuredly. "There were a couple reasons I didn't want to take the land at first. Stubbornness was one of them. The other, was a silly worry, that if I had to go to the former Uchiha compound everyday to work at the hospital, all I'd be thinking about is Sasuke...." Sakura watched as Kakashi didn't move, blink or breathe as she spoke on. "But it was silly. Because we've been in this hideout, the darkest, snakiest, Uchiha-ist place I can think of..." Kakashi exhaled in amusement, "and all I can think of... is you..."

She cemented her last two words by dancing her fingers up from his chin to his cheek. Smiling at the way his whole face changed, even with that mask on, even in the darkness, she could see it. There was a grin underneath that fabric and for the first time ever she was certain of it. Seeing ‘Sukea’ that day made it all the more real for her. And it was true, all she'd been thinking of, was what lay beneath this mask beneath her fingertips. The lips that had so tenderly caressed her neck, heating her to her core.

There was a moment, where she saw it sink in, saw Kakashi register her words. And in a second she felt like all her blood had turned to electricity, felt a fluttering in her stomach so strong she might just fly away. And then there wasn't any room between them for her to think anymore,

"Finally..."

She heard the word escape him as a sigh. Then his large hands were cupping her cheeks, with a fervent rush and need her face was drawn into his. Lips meeting with a force that Sakura did not
know Kakashi capable of, but she wasn't about to be outdone by him, matching him with equal passion.

With a gasp turned sigh, she threw her arms around his neck, feeling him step in and closer to her. Their bodies lining up in all the right places, breathing labored as their lips refused to part, despite the mask still on his face. Sakura's eyes were closed, but this part of the cave was dismally lit at best, it only took two steps back into the shadows... Two steps and Kakashi had pushed forward and backed her against the wall.

She couldn't taste much of him through this damn fabric, couldn't feel much of his body through these damned layers, her hands roaming to reach inside his vest. Feel that heat. All she wanted was to rip the mask down. Sakura couldn't help noticing the shakiness of his hands had subsided as they made their own tentative roaming of her body. Skimming down her neck, down her sides, resting with a grabbing force on her hips. She could feel him pressing against her, feel that delicious hardness that had her wanting nothing more than to grind against him wantonly to ease her own ache.

With an impatient growl that caused her panties to become damp in an instant, Kakashi wrenched his hands from her body, but he didn't keep them away for long. Only briefly tugging the mask down on his face, their kissing paused for only a second, and he was back to her lips.

Sakura didn't dare open her eyes in case this all turned out to be another dream. It started slowly, as if he were acquainting her with the feel of his bare lips to hers, a tenuous and loving kiss. But the fire spread quickly, burning through them both, and suddenly he was devouring her. Firm hands pushing her legs apart, then lifting her against the wall slightly, gripping her buttocks. Their cores were meeting and rubbing earnestly through too many layers of clothing between them.

He tasted so good, smelt so good, felt so good. They paused for air. Kakashi resting his forehead against hers, panting into each others mouths. Hands still roaming where they could. Pinned to the wall like this it was all Sakura could do to hold on and grind against that tempting hardness between his legs. Still she would not open her eyes. This was a dream she didn't want to wake up from.

"Kakashi-sama!"

At the sound of the yelling the pair of them froze in the darkness.

"We're finished down this path, do you need assistance?"

The frustrated yet primal groan that Kakashi released had her aching to touch that tempting bulge again, rub herself against it. With a sigh, she realized that this was where they had to stop, at least for now. Kakashi softly and slowly pecked her lips before steadying her. By the time she opened her eyes he was already adjusting the mask to his face. But not seeing him didn't bother her really. Not now, she was too happy to be bothered by anything.

"C'mon, let's get out of here..." His voice had dropped a few octaves, laced with a dark promise of things to come.

"Took you long enough."
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness you guys are making me cry.

From the bottom of my heart I want to thank all of you for every review and kudos. I admit I had given up on posting in AO3 but you have all changed my mind with the warm support that has me in tears ngl.

This is a story about redemption partly, and this means for Sasuke as well. But most importantly it is about healing, mentally, physically, all of it. Because we all deserve to be happy, and SO DOES KAKASHI GODDAMIT.

Kakashi found himself in a strange kind of limbo, where he wasn't exactly sure of his own feelings, with no idea how he would even behave. Giving in to his inhibitions was not something he was accustomed to, ever. And that one moment of letting those feelings take over had caused his brain to actively short circuit.

While this foreign feeling would usually have frustrated or irked him, disrupting the balance of the well oiled machine he'd fashioned himself into, something that had taken years of self control... For the moment he only found himself enjoying the novelty of it. Which was also completely and utterly new to him. It was with a kind of gusto he'd never experienced in his life long career as a Shinobi that he walked the main street to Hokage tower, early again.

A smile unabashed on his features as he returned the gestures of a few startled villagers. It wasn't like the Hokage to actually return the greeting after all, and seeing him so early was surely one of the harbingers of the apocalypse.

Kakashi had, again, expected to feel some mixture of remorse or shame after behaving so... brashly with Sakura the night before. He had expected to go home that evening and sit in a puddle of guilt. So shocked were his overloaded senses, the taste, the smell, the touch of her that had lingered, it had been all he could do to simply tell her he would see her tomorrow before they parted ways. A knowing, and tantalizing look that they shared, a mutual understanding.

They both wanted this. And while this was something they had established before, it was still such a rush of endorphins every time he thought of it now. She didn't want Sasuke.... she wasn't waiting for Sasuke to come back anymore, wasn't hoping to rekindle whatever they'd had.... She wanted him. She had chosen him.

Kakashi had slept better than he had in months, possibly years. Though there hadn't been a lot of sleep actually involved, he'd been reading and sighing to his ceiling for a fews hours there, it was still more restful than anything he'd felt in a while. He woke refreshed and early, ready to face whatever the day had waiting for him.

The clerk hadn't even arrived at Hokage tower yet when he entered, or at least they weren't in sight, possibly fleeing at another sighting of an early Rokudaime. The second in two days. A sure sign you were trapped in a tsukuyomi dream to be sure. Kakashi chuckled to himself. Yesterday he'd been in a good mood, today he was obnoxiously so.
Sakura accepting that land truly meant one thing in his mind, that she was moving on, with him. The pessimistic part of his brain kicked into gear, telling him that his good day yesterday had been ruined by the brooding Uchiha in his office, he shouldn't get too cocky now. But that voice was silenced by a novel feeling of butterflies at the thought of what he had planned for later when he left that office.

He had a plan alright. As soon as Sakura dropped off those reports, he was going to take her somewhere. Okay, it wasn't exactly a plan, he hadn't worked out where the somewhere was going to be yet. But he had an entire day to think about that detail. Deciding on the land for the hospital meant they had a bit of extra time for each other, and there was still so much left unsaid that Kakashi wanted to voice now. He was eager to whisk her away even for just a few hours.

Continuing with the eerie smile on his face, Kakashi opened his office door, not even phased by the veritable stack of paperwork that lay waiting. Things he had been putting off since yesterday's surprise visitor, it was surely an omen that he'd beaten even Shikamaru in to sort them into the appropriate piles.

After half an hour Kakashi had completed what might have once taken him an entire afternoon. Though it was a little bothering having to find things without the Naara present, that eidetic knowledge of his was something he perhaps took advantage of too often. Like he had once done with Obito's sharingan. Used too much, and without it he felt a little lost.

Kakashi smirked. Nonsense. Today anyway, it was all nonsense. He would do all of this and more if he could get out at least a few hours early and not be interrupted afterwards. Without even one sigh he trapsed into Shikamaru's empty office to find what he was looking for. Some mission report review scroll that should have probably been done weeks ago. No time like the present.

Happily it took only a minute to find, sitting in plain sight on top of the desk, like Shikamaru had known it would be the first thing that Kakashi would need that morning. He made a mental note to ask him whether he was part Yamanaka later with an amused snort to himself.

It was when he turned around to leave that he found himself staring at something glaring and unwelcome. It jarred the smile that had been unwavering on his face all morning. What he found himself looking at, was the familiar sight of his weekly schedules, planned down to the hour each day by Shikamaru himself. Pristine in it's planning, and usually this was something that would comfort Kakashi. To know he was in control of his day, to know what was going to happen down to the half hour. It was something that was usually calming. Usually.

What Kakashi had completely forgotten was fast approaching. So near that he could see the foreboding black mark of it in front of his face. It was a Thursday this year then. His 'day off'. And suddenly all that earlier happiness that had been bubbling to the surface was set back to simmer, because there was now one thing consuming his thoughts.

How would he explain it to Sakura? How could he explain it to her?

And an answer formed at once that was unfavorable to him. He didn't want to. He didn't want anyone to know what he did with that one horrible day on the calendar each year. Least of all Sakura. What would she think of him?

Kakashi shook his head. Tried to shake all thoughts of it from his mind. Tried to focus on that happiness he'd woken up to. It was just one day. Maybe his good luck would hold out, maybe she wouldn't even ask about it at all, and he could get away with disappearing for the day, just like any other year.

But at the same time he didn't want to. He actually wanted to spend that time with her, didn’t want to
waste a single minute that could be spared with her before this hospital was built, and she was too busy for him. But there was no way....

"Kakashi? You're early, again."

A startled and skeptical voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Oh, Shikamaru, didn't see you there. You're early too...right?"

Kakashi suddenly found it remiss that he had no idea what time his own assistant started work in the morning. Shikamaru continued to watch him with a concerned brow.

"Who, me? I'm always here at 9..."

"Right, of course..."

Kakashi walked past him with a nod and back to his own office. Closing the door behind him and releasing a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. A glance at the clock told him, it was definitely 9. He'd been spacing out staring at that board for at least half an hour. Losing time was not a good thing, though it was something he was accustomed to in the worst possible way. Staring at that cenotaph for hours on end, they just drifted by, and this had felt exactly the same way. Somber and fleeting. As if his time was inconsequential to those that had passed all too soon, and they were taking the hours he offered as compensation.

And that was what this whole 'day off' was about. It was reticent of Kakashi to not notice how fast it had crept up, and that was how it really felt. It had snuck up this year more than the others. The blanketing numbness now engulfing his happiness was penance, in his mind, for not being vigilant enough. For indulging in selfish needs and desires.

"There is no reason to feel ashamed over a basic human need for closeness. You're still human, Lord Hokage...."

With another more vigorous shake of his head Kakashi went back to his desk, went back to the work that was waiting for him. And while he'd made substantial headway only an hour ago, he was considerably slower going forward. The numbness had thankfully not dulled his judgement, and he was able to make the appropriate calls where necessary.

There was nothing specific about his behavior to give away the turmoil in his mind, or the way Crane’s last session was replaying through his head, nothing out of the ordinary other than his arriving early two days in a row. Nonetheless by late afternoon Shikamaru was more of a fixture in his office than ever before. Concerned suitably. But Kakashi was nothing if not a consummate Shinobi, and deception was Shinobi 101. The very basics.

Shikamaru was also accustomed by now to his eccentricities, especially around this time of year, and the 'day off'. And after all the years of working together so closely, he had also given up trying to get any information from Kakashi about it. Or at least, he hadn't yet devised a plan of attack that was worthy to garner any leads on the matter. Instead he had tried to help in his own way, with quiet companionship and understanding. Sometimes things were best kept in the shadows. With the typical Naara sigh of mild irritation, Shikamaru finally relented, clicking the door shut to Kakashi’s office and finally leaving the Hokage alone with his thoughts.

Kakashi swivelled in his comfortable chair, leaning back and looking out the window to the Konoha sky. It was a nice evening, summer still seemed to have its clutches on the village for now. The temperature was mild enough to enjoy without being excessive. Kakashi sighed closing his eyes,
forcibly calming himself. Anxiousness had absorbed and then wasted part of his day. Maybe not so wasted. He’d gotten a lot of work done for a Tuesday...

There was a soft knock at the door. Kakashi didn’t even bother to turn around. His eyes were focussed on some distorted cloud as it wisped quietly by. When it clicked open and shut again he didn’t notice, nor did he register who the quietly shuffling belonged to. What he did notice was an assault on his olfactory senses, the smell of something so sinister and sweet it shouldn’t be allowed in public for driving him crazy with a burning urge.

That scent that was particular to Sakura, he had become more acquainted with after last night’s indiscretion. Just as quickly as he realized that she was definitely in his office, that beacon of pink entered his field of vision. With the light behind her she seemed almost ethereal. But for the smile on her face and the glint in her eye, that was very real, a primitive reflection of where his own thoughts seemed to be wandering.

Kakashi wanted to stand, wanted to hold her tightly and inhale that sweet perfume of hers. Odd considering he’d never been one for sweets before now. One proper taste of Sakura and suddenly he was addicted. For some reason his body didn’t exactly want him to move at all just yet, so he simply enjoyed the view, Sakura leaning against the sill and regarding him with that mischievous smile. There was nothing sweet or innocent about this smile, it was pure devilish mischief. If Kakashi had to guess, he would think that she was currently working through which quip was best to tease him with at this moment. Instead she remained silent, it was all in her eyes, in her smile. Written in the way she stood there.

Kakashi was still tired, exhausted from the circles his mind had been running in all day long. Seeing Sakura was enough to renew his mental vigor for a brief moment. It took a little longer for him to make the connections to the rest of his body to actually move and stand up. She only spoke when he was standing square in front of her.

"All done for the day stud?" There was nothing in her tone of voice to give away the cheek of her words.

"Yeah, looks like it."

"Good." Sakura said with a finality, reaching out to grab his hand and pull him closer. "I was thinking about you today."

"That so?" Kakashi might have purposely dropped an octave or two for effect. It was here that he began to lament not thinking of her more, he had meant to make plans for this evening after all... 'winging it' would have to suffice. It was a practise which had served him well enough so far...

"Yes and I was thinking, it's been a while since I last saw you have a proper meal." She was now standing flush against him. "You're coming with me, I'll cook, don’t argue."

"Is that an order or a request?" Sakura raised her brow at him in such a way he knew the question would be taken rhetorically. "Well, either way, I like the sound of it."

* * * *

For the entirety of Tuesday, Sakura had felt lighthearted and decidedly chirpier than she normally would on her least favorite day of the week. Not even the regular brand of chaos that the hospital provided could put a damper on the smile still clinging to her lips. It hadn't faded since Kakashi had touched them with his own bare lips.
It felt strange to be walking side by side through Konoha with Kakashi. Though the village was still the same busy ridiculousness it always had been, and to onlookers it wasn't such a strange sight to see two former members of Team 7 out and about through the streets. It all looked the same, the same people and buildings, but to Sakura everything had changed. It wasn't that being together made the world any less terrible, it wasn't a cure all for her problems, there were no rose tinted glasses, it just made things... more bearable. Like there was a light at the end of the tunnel on those bad days. There was someone else standing next to her to help shoulder the burden. Someone to help carry the groceries.

While she had anticipated that it would take some getting used to, being with another person this way, let alone that person being Kakashi, it seemed to be following the easy pattern that they had begun with. As they stood side by side in her kitchen, Sakura admitted it would definitely always be strange that he was so helpful in the kitchen. But here she had to remember that Kakashi had always tried to help her in all ways, when he could at least. It was less like she was getting to know him as a person, and more like she was remembering who he was.

The more bothersome parts of her day had faded from her memory the moment she had seen him in his office. The same laid back Kakashi she usually encountered at the end of her day. It had been more of a relief than she had anticipated, perhaps worried ever so slightly that the hurried make out session the night before had changed their relationship entirely. But he was still Kakashi. If just a little quieter than he had been over the last few weeks as they cooked together. But even in these comfortable moments of silence he was keeping an eye on her in such a way her entire body began to heat, and it had nothing to do with the broken air conditioner.

It was a simple meal, one that she knew he wouldn't have any complaints about. She had to suppress a giggle more than once while they were eating at his insistence to hide behind that damned mask. Even though she'd seen his face, and tasted his bare lips... He definitely felt more relaxed around her, in Sakura's view anyway. They talked about all manner of things that were neither important or memorable, it was all just comfortable conversation. And Sakura was the one doing most of the talking, this was something she was used to with any of her boys, except perhaps Naruto. The difference being that with Kakashi she actually felt like he was listening. He was still being awfully quiet... but it wasn't as if he had ever been a chatty Kathy anyway.

With a hum of contentment as she cleared the dishes from the table, the hospital plans shunted to one side, Sakura didn't pay particular attention to what Kakashi was doing as she deposited dishes at the sink. When she turned to head back to the living room she startled, almost smacking directly into Kakashi's chest as he stood flush behind her. Sakura was comforted at least that his shinobi sneaking skills were not rusty in the slightest. Perhaps she'd just been too relaxed to hear him enter... That must have been it, she hadn't even tried to punch him into next week.

Out of reflex she grinned, but it faded as she took in his features, the way he was looking at her. "There's something..." Kakashi's words faltered as she closed the gap with her body, his hands instinctively finding her waist. He cleared his throat and a darker desire flashed over his eyes for just a second. But this faded too. "Something I need to talk to you about..."

She understood that whatever this was, it held some importance to Kakashi. She liked to think she knew him well enough to judge that much at least. Not wanting to impede whatever he had to say, Sakura nodded, smiling softly with all the encouragement she could muster.

"Do you know what the day after tomorrow is?" He spoke in his usual tone, not giving away anything. Sakura thought hard for a moment, it would be September 15th and a Thursday but that was about all she could say about the day in question... Unless he was talking about his therapy
sessions...Words would not form themselves so she simply shook her head in reply. "Well..."

Now it appeared as if words were not forming for Kakashi. His whole body seemed to exude sadness, a sigh escaping him. The hands he had resting on her hips felt tense even. Time passed slowly as she waited for him to continue, when no words seemed to be imminent she danced her own hands up his chest to cup his face. Searching his eyes as they appeared to be concentrating on finding the right thing to say. Sakura brushed her thumb over his masked lip and he exhaled sharply, she fought back the urge to smirk, instead just smiling and gently encouraging him to continue. He cleared his throat as if he'd forgotten how to speak.

"Well, the day after tomorrow, it's the one day I get a year to..."

"Oh, that's right!" Realization hit Sakura, "It's your one day off a year, the day you...disappear." The words came out unchecked. Kakashi raised a brow.

"Yeah... it is. How do you know about it?"

"Shikamaru says that even he can't find you. I only know because I checked your calendar a couple weeks ago."

There was a pause, Kakashi continued to eye her in a way she couldn't quite fathom. Some mixture between amusement and an unidentified emotion she didn't recognize on his face at least.

"You're not curious as to why that is?"

Sakura didn't need any time to carefully pick her words, she went with honesty and the first thoughts that came to mind. Just like that Anbu folder she'd stumbled into, it was better to discuss this truthfully, with both parties willing and understanding.

"Of course I am. It's a closely guarded secret, like why you choose to hide your face, but I know all I need to know."

"Is that so? That would be convenient for me to be honest. I'm just... not sure how to explain it..." Kakashi's timbre changed so dramatically with his last sentence that Sakura knew it wasn't that he didn't know how to explain, but that it would likely hurt him to do so, or he wasn't ready for it.

"It is. I know that this is your only day, and if the details of that day were of extreme importance, then I'm sure you would be telling me. Besides, you've been doing this for years and the village still stands. You're more than deserving of one whole day to yourself Kakashi. Truly, you do so much..." With her last words she caressed his mask covered face ever so slightly.

The only thing bothering her in this moment were the echoing words that Sasuke had spoken rattling around her mind. Just look at him. It had been said with spite condescension. Sakura knowing all too well that Sasuke viewed Kakashi as too weak to hold the mantle of Hokage. But here, right now, she was looking at him. And for her eyes all she could see was the man who protected everyone in any way he could, always, unwavering. The man who continued to work on himself, mind and body, all for the sake of others.

"Thank you, Sakura..." Kakashi dropped his forehead to rest against hers while she continued to stroke his cheek.

She wasn't exactly sure what he was thanking her for specifically, she was only sure that he meant it. There was an edge to his voice that assured her this much.

"You're welcome."
Sakura had no way of knowing just how long they stood there for, doing nothing more than holding on to each other. It was one of those tender moments that she'd only ever read about in books before and never experienced for herself. Before now she believed that such a thing perhaps only existed in books and fiction. But standing in her kitchen now, anchored to Kakashi as she was, all evidence pointed to her being completely wrong.

With a sigh that resonated through his whole body, Kakashi broke the silence, even though it seemed like he didn't particularly want to.

"I should probably get going..."

It was still early, or rather, Sakura thought it could still be early, maybe it was later than she realized. It didn't matter. Whatever was bothering Kakashi, he would come to her with it in more detail when he was ready.

"Mmkay. See you tomorrow then?"

"At some point, I'm sure."

At least, she sorely hoped that he would come to her. Only time would tell.

* * * *

Wednesday passed in a blur of regret for Kakashi. Regret that he hadn't told Sakura why he took this one day a year specifically. Regret that he hadn't stayed with her longer the night before, that he hadn't kissed her goodnight.... In that moment of vulnerability in her arms, he was sure that if their lips had touched right then, he would not have been able to contain his urges to an acceptable degree.

By the time his day was done, Kakashi was only thinking of how he could possibly repay Sakura for her patience and understanding. Especially considering he'd been unable to tell her exactly what tomorrow would be for him, and why it required secrecy.

So he had started his day early, again, working at a reasonable pace while quietly devising a plan for the evening. At one point he even sped up his paperwork peddling, delegating where appropriate, just so that he could leave the office for a while. He'd had an idea that just wouldn't quite leave his thoughts, and those were usually the ones that deserved to be acted on. If it is still in your mind it is worth pursuing after all. So, deciding it was an appropriate apology, Kakashi found himself at his usual book store. Walking through the familiar aisles until he spied the particular section, and it didn't take too much looking to find what he was after.

The spine wasn’t the most recognizable, but he’d read it, so he remembered exactly what it looked like. It’s familiar hardback stiff under his finger before he flitted immediately to the volume next to it. The sequel.

*The Confessions of Alejandro* was, in Kakashi’s opinion, the better edition in the trilogy. And seeing as Sakura was still enamored with the *Passions of Alejandro*, she would begrudgingly take this as an apology at least. Kakashi knowing that she would be secretly thrilled but too irked to admit it to him out loud. It would be interesting to see her reaction to say the least.

With a smile hidden behind his mask, Kakashi almost quietly chuckling to himself, he took pause at the sight of the gap on the bookshelf, now that the desired volume was in his hand. Beside that gap lay the third book. On a different day, in a different time, Kakashi would have simply ignored this and continued on with his day. But now, now that he had been privy to the warmth Sakura provided to him daily, the way she made him feel… it stirred another action that his wallet almost couldn’t
believe.

He bought the third and final of the trilogy as well. It would save another trip back to the store anyway. And he could stash it away for a time when he needed to proffer another apology, which was more than likely to happen. It was a win-win situation.

There was a saying repeating through his mind for the duration of his walk back to the office. And at the same time he was marvelling at the dramatic change from just a few weeks ago. Where he’d begged for just one more minute walking in the sunshine and out of his office, now he was for all intents and purposes, hurrying back to it.

_Time is very slow for those who lament._ That was the saying. And it felt as though each day before now had been an exercise in tedium, Kakashi simply going through what was necessary, and at a glacial pace. But now it was all so different. His day off aside, his time was eaten up, keeping him busy getting all the work out of the way so he could get to the sweet bliss and relief that was the end of the day. His time with Sakura.

His office was sweltering when he arrived back. The midday sun not sparing even Hokage tower from its wrath. In the earlier days of his title, Kakashi had kept the air conditioning set low, enjoying the crisp air during the blistering summer. It had been a welcome relief from missions where he traipsed through deserts and fire. But it hadn't taken long for the novelty to wear off, and the comfort he felt dissipated, he had begun to sorely miss any form of mission. Even the hot and bothersome ones. So now he didn't bother with it so much, and it was almost, _almost_, like being back in the field. Though really not at all, it was a way to trick part of his brain into thinking so at least.

For the first time in a while he made it cooler than the usual, sat back for exactly 20 seconds to enjoy it, and then sped through the rest of his busy work. It was all on track to be completed maybe even before 5pm, despite the messages he was firing to the two new Kage coming into office, which were more lengthy than he intended. His mood must be improving despite his impending day off.

The afternoon blended into early evening, Kakashi surprised that he was the last one left in the offices. When he ran out of things to do, he found himself staring at his empty in-tray, listening to the clock as it ticked past 6pm, and then 7pm.

Where was Sakura? There hadn't been any major incidents in the village today for her to be knee deep in surgeries at this time. When Kakashi made a serious and unsettling dent in any work that may even possibly arise in the next two days, he decided enough was enough. Touching the apology gift that was tucked in his pocket while he clicked off the lights in his office.

His feet at least seemed to know where they were going, Kakashi wasn't so sure that his mind had caught up. He was outside the gates to the hospital before he realized he had no excuses to actually be there. But he was Hokage still, right? He could walk into any establishment in Konoha if he chose to. And it wasn't unheard of for him to visit a former member of Team 7. it was perhaps a little less common than it used to be, with them all being so busy in their respective paths.

Kakashi walked in through the doors and nodded to the nurses at the desk, but he knew roughly where Sakura's office was at least, he didn't need directions. He stopped himself from asking whether she was still in the building or not... He wasn't trying to hide what he was doing there, but he at least believed it was really no one else's business to know. And the last thing he wanted was for Sakura to be facing ridicule in her own workplace for dating the Hokage, it would raise all sorts of questions about how she got to her position in the first place...

Wait... _dating_? Was that the word that had crossed his mind, was that what he was doing with Sakura? He paused in his step but only for a moment. Yeah, they had gone to the festival together,
they had dinner almost every night, he was now buying her gifts... It was dating in some form alright. But it held none of the usual terror for Kakashi that had been previously associated with that word.

On the corridor to the surgical ward administrative offices, all was silent. There was hardly a soul in sight. And for Kakashi, a seasoned veteran in all things to do with hospitals, that either meant a very quiet night or the exact opposite. He hoped sincerely for the latter when he reached the door to her office. Seeing her name in bold on the door. Dr. Sakura Haruno.

He’d given up any thoughts of being able to explain his absence tomorrow and what it meant to him specifically. Because, for the first time in a while, he was thinking beyond tomorrow. He was thinking of the future he held and what that meant for them both. It was a novel feeling, wonderful, though tinged with minor regret about his day off. One day he could explain it to her, he knew that to be certain, and she would support him as always.

With a heavy breath he opened the door, releasing some of the tension he had been holding. Tomorrow would pass, as it always did, and at the end of it Sakura would be there. Just like always. It was only one day to get through, and if the saying was correct, then the day would pass relatively quickly the less he lamented over it.

Kakashi wasn't sure what he expected to see, he wasn't even positive Sakura was going to be in there. The fact that the door wasn't locked assured him that she was at least close by. But what greeted him was a sight that he wasn't usually seeing from this perspective, as in, he was usually on the other side of this view.

Sakura was asleep on her arms at her desk. Slumped over some files, a familiar novel loosely in her grip. Without taking his eyes from her, he entered swiftly and shut the door behind him. He'd lost count how many times he'd woken up stiff and slumped over top of his damned prison of a desk. Usually it was when he'd pulled an all nighter in order to finish something urgent he'd put off. A couple times Tenzou had actually jostled him awake in the middle of the night. Each time he'd woken up so sore and regretful, it made the entire next day torture until he could lay down properly.

Gazing at Sakura closely now, she appeared to be serene as always, looking almost comfortable. And while in another time and place he'd have simply woken her, or left the apology gift and bolted, he could not bare the thought of her spending her entire tomorrow sore, and he wouldn't be there to provide comfort for her on that one day. It was only one day, but for her to be in any kind of pain and alone for even just one second. It bothered him to his core. There were a few actions to take here that could solve the issue or make it worse, and in Kakashi's mind he plotted those strategies out to the letter. It was just lucky he was a ninja with a respectable number of jutsu under his belt. It bothered him to have to touch her without her permission but it was a necessary thing, also he couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried. Gingerly, with as much grace he could muster, Kakashi maneuvered her ever so slightly. Taking his time so as not to wake her. He'd even had the foresight to pocket the volume of *The Passions of Alejandro* that Sakura had obviously been reading before she'd fallen asleep.

She was up to chapter nine, *nice*. It then took more force than he was proud of to dispel the racy imagery going through his brain before he deemed it acceptable to touch her again. Lifting her into his arms, positioning her in such a way as he might a fallen comrade (a thought he could not help in this instance and tried to dismiss just as quickly), he made the necessary hand signs. Her office blurred out of vision and in an instant they were at the door to Sakura's own apartment.

He didn't think it was appropriate to carry her, sleeping, through the place she worked. Or across half the village for that matter. But he also didn't think it appropriate to simply teleport inside of a ladies apartment. She was still strong enough to slap him into dust, and she was also still a kunoichi, so
who knew what traps she had in place for low life trespassers. It was here he took pause to muffle a
curse word that he hadn't managed to procure her keys before deciding to whisk her away like that.
With a dejected sigh that he may have to wake her after all, he shifted her ever so lightly in his arms,
enough to hear a small jingle and discern where it came from.

The keys were attached to the belt of her scrubs. An retractable elastic meaning she could snap them
back to the right place. There were about six keys attached to it, and if he'd had another hand or two
Kakashi would have been able to work it out much quicker. As it stood it took three tries before he
found the right one in the lock and got them inside. He counted it as luck alone that there were no
other apartments on Sakura's floor, that no one could see them in this state and get the wrong idea.

Soundlessly he crossed her apartment, blessing his ninja abilities not to bump into any of the bulky
furniture she had all over the place. From memory he knew where the bathroom was in the darkness,
having been in there before, which left two other rooms that were hers. In her sleep still Sakura
sighed, except it was a lot more breathy than any of the sighs he'd previously heard from her lips. It
sent his mind straight back to the gutter he'd so desperately tried to crawl out of before touching her
in the first place.

He needed to get her off him, and quickly, he was still entirely unsure if she could read minds. And if
she woke right at this moment and read his, then being slapped into dust would be the least of his
worries. They wouldn't be able to find the dust if that were the case. The first door was obviously a
spare room, filled to the brim with so much furniture it was impossible to step inside of it. He found it
peculiar that she was a hoarder at her young age. But time was still of the essence so he didn't stop to
dwell on it.

Sakura's bedroom was spacious, tidy, the furniture in here was more of what he expected from her.
Modern though not overly girlish. It was in complete contrast to the rest of the apartment and he
found it stranger still. As if this was the only room in the place that Sakura herself had decorated
tastefully while the rest had simply had a heap of excess furniture thrown into it.

He shook his head before returning his focus to the woman in his arms. She made that sinful noise
again as he placed her on the bed. Just in time. All at once he was wondering what she could
possibly be dreaming about and hoping that he at least had a starring role in it. With a smirk Kakashi
put the book she had been reading on the pillow beside her. Remembering the page she had been at
and placing it face down. Chapter nine would certainly explain any racy dreams she may be having.

Kakashi then reached into his other pocket and withdrew the apology book. Perhaps he should wait
until she was awake and properly able to receive the gift, then at least he'd get to see her reaction...

"Kakashi...."

Though there was no one else in the room, and it had definitely been recognizable as his own name,
it was in such a tone he would not have ever guessed Sakura to have whispered it in her sleep. But
there was no one else here. And it sent molten heat directly to his groin. It was such a passion filled
whisper, he began to imagine it said in his ear while he ravaged her....

Oh gods he needed to get out of here. Watching a girl while she slept was just as punishable an
offense as having despicable thoughts before breaking into her apartment.

_He hadn't broken in this time_. He'd used the key. No, that still wouldn't do as an excuse if she woke
up right now and found him standing there rock hard and holding a romance novel. Kakashi huffed
in part frustration and part relief that his body was at least willing to cooperate and move. Perhaps not
with as much care as he'd taken before, he threw one of the thinner blankets at the end of the bed
over top of her. It would get cooler later....
The action made her stir a little though she never opened her eyes.

"Kakashi, is that you?"

Still breathy, but more recognizable as Sakura at least, Kakashi knew she was awake enough that he would have to reply. Hastily crouching down to be closer to her, and to hide certain.... parts of his body, he adopted a softer tone.

"Yes, you were asleep at your desk. I took you home, don't worry."

"Mmkay..." she mumbled before burrowing further into the pillow.

He found his stare shifting from her face to the other book in his hand.

"I've left a present here on your nightstand for when you wake up..."

"Present, for me?" She sounded hopeful, like a child, but at the same time half asleep and trying to fight it.

"Who else? Think of it as an apology... about tomorrow..."

"Kashi' don't worry about it... S'fine. Only coz I love you..."

Kakashi felt his eyes grow wide, watching as she fell back into slumber without another word or thought to crinkle that smooth content look on her face. His eyes were in his control, but his mouth was not. It seemed to be reacting on it's own to this situation. He was just glad some part of his body knew what to do. A grin spread on his lips so wide he felt his mask shift down his face just a fraction.

He stood, still smiling, shaking his head ever so slightly at the ridiculousness this girl seemed to bring to his mind. Only Sakura would love a man as broken as him, and say it's fine. And he made a silent vow then and there that he would make it up to her at some point. Somehow.

Kakashi went to place the apology present on her nightstand as promised, what he saw there made his grin crack and his heart leap. Beside her bed, on this small table, lying neatly folded, were some very familiar pieces of paper. Kakashi raised a brow, looking from those to Sakura and back again. It was all the small notes he'd written to her over the past weeks. Every single one. She kept them here of all places.

Something collected in the corner of his former sharingan eye, and he brushed it aside with his arm. Putting the book down next to that pile reverently so as not to disturb it.

Without a second thought Kakashi turned and leaned over Sakura's sleeping form. Pulling his mask down to his chin but never taking his fingers off the fabric. He placed his lips on her forehead for a brief moment before whispering...

"I love you too..."

To the Kakashi of the past it would have been pointless to say that to a sleeping person, or any person. But it needed to be said. With a determined look now he locked the door before exiting via the window as stealthily as he could manage. Content that tonight his Anbu attachment was not so bothered with his whereabouts. Thank goodness too, because the smile on his face would have concerned them quite probably, and he could not hide it any longer.

All he had to do now was get through the next day. Get through tomorrow and then he could start
making it up to her. Giving her every part that she deserved and more. This was his new personal mission. And he would do it, do anything, for her.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

Well lovelies, we are now caught up with what I have already posted on ff.net.

I am halfway through the next chapter to be posted sometime in the next two weeks <3

Also a heads up, this chapter killed me to write....

AND THANK YOU FOR ALL THE LOVE!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sakura woke with a start, at an absolutely ridiculous hour of the morning. Panicking briefly, though she found herself safe and in her own bed, it was having no memory of actually getting there in the first place that worried her the most. Steadyng her breathing, calming the flood of anxiety that momentarily swept through her, Sakura slowed her heart rate to a more acceptable level.

This was her own apartment, her own bed she had been sleeping in, there was no need to fear. It wasn't as if she could be placed under any kind of genjutsu so this had to be reality. Sitting upright with a hand to her sweaty brow, Sakura leant over to switch on the lamp. The alarm clock glared just past 4am. How on earth had she managed to sleep for such a long time. And how had she made it back to her apartment...

All questions were answered as she took a proper look around the room. The book that lay so neatly on the pillow next to her. The brand new book which sat on her nightstand. A smile crept onto her face.

Kakashi.

She shook her head. That impossible man, he'd gotten her the next book in the series. Immediately her face begun to flush heatedly at the thought of Kakashi tucking her into her own bed... And then she was flush for a whole lot of other reasons. The dream she'd been having, the chapter she had been reading just before she'd fallen asleep at her desk... It had been one of those prolonged teasing chapters where Alejandro practically worshiped the Princess's body. The only reason Sakura had fallen asleep in the first place was because her office was so nice and cool, a stark contrast to her balmy apartment with broken air conditioner, she'd had little to no sleep the night before. The good mood she had been in was the only reason she'd managed to get through the day.

Had he carried her back here? Through the hospital, through Konoha? Surely he wouldn't... But this thought only added to her growing blush. She threw the suffocating blanket off her body, though it was the thinnest one she owned, the cloth was suddenly unbearable. She decided to start her day early with a cold shower.

That whole chapter had her hot under the collar. And it only compounded the delicious memories of Kakashi pressing her against the wall of that hideout before he'd kissed her into oblivion. With his bare lips. The pressure was something she still felt in her dreams. It was just a shame there hadn't been a repeat performance since then... Kakashi had been odd even for Kakashi standards this week.
As she shut the shower off Sakura suddenly realized exactly what today was. Kakashi’s black day on the calendar. And she still had no idea what or why he behaved in such a way on this day specifically. Would she get to see him at all this evening? Only time would tell. And for the moment, Sakura was simply going to enjoy feeling rested and cool because it was not likely to last for very long.

Going about her morning, occasionally her mind would drift to Kakashi and what he could possibly be doing with his time. He was a grown man, and he had been Hokage for years, it wasn’t as if she needed to worry about him. It was just a healthy level of concern… After years of dealing with Sasuke’s silent moods and absences this was infinitesimal. So she continued to power through her day like the strong kunoichi she had always strived to be. Even going so far as to draft up the necessary job offers for the new children’s hospital during her break. The list of medics she had ready to go would impress any board member.

While she spent her afternoon helping some of the med students, Sakura’s thoughts again drifted to the teaching aspect of the new hospital and all the good things it would accomplish. By the end of her shift she stayed on later just to type up some of her thoughts on the matter, whether it could be used in the presentation to the council later was another thing, but she would be prepared. She couldn’t over prepare for it.

One thing was for sure, she was no going back to her apartment anytime soon. It was too hot to even think in there with that unit still broken, and Sakura could now see how much her work was suffering for it. When her fingers began to ache from typing, and the word count slowed, she lamented not bringing that damned book with her. Maybe if she was in a cool place when she read it her reaction wouldn’t be so bad… Look how well that worked out last night…idiot. The thought hit her suddenly and she tried to shake it off.

Truth was she had been flustered for a month now reading that thing. So flustered that some nights she only managed to read a paragraph at a time, the tension was just so palpable, so real. How did Kakashi read such things all the time? And in front of others? The oddness of the man seemed to only grow in his absence. Though she could not believe for a second that he was as sexually repressed as she was. Even if it had been five years since he’d last… well, she was still giggling that she had gotten him to admit that detail anyway.

Sakura couldn’t get herself off even if she tried, and she had tried. More so lately than she cared to admit. Ever the medical professional, she knew the likely causes to be psychosomatic, and that she needed to address these things in order to… y’know, finish the deed. Kakashi at least could deal to his own needs, it was probably how he managed this long, reading those filthy books in public. Leaning back in his office chair, reading Icha Icha while avoiding Shikamaru and the possibility of more paperwork. That was an endearing image of Kakashi in her mind, though lately it had been replaced by his darker looks… the ones he gave to her in private. The way he’d looked at her the other night in his office before she dragged him home for dinner, that look like she was the only thing he wanted to look at.

Tonight however, she wasn’t even sure if there was any point in going to Hokage tower with the medical reports. It wasn’t as if the man would be there to go over them anyway. They could wait another day. With a sigh, Sakura felt her empty stomach protest that it had passed the acceptable dinner hour. It had been a while since she had stayed working at her desk after 9pm. A fifteen hour stretch was a good effort at least.

Leaving her coat, grabbing her things and shutting off the lights, Sakura high tailed it out of that hospital. The day was done, and with very little about it to distress or vex her. She attributed that to the miraculous and restful sleep she’d had the night before.
Sakura would claim later that she knew exactly where her feet were taking her, and that she definitely wasn’t dreamily gazing at a certain mountainside likeness of her former sensei. But she found herself on one of the main streets of Konoha she usually avoided on her way home, unless she was grabbing a sneaky and greasy treat for later. Her stomach again reminded her just how neglectful she had been today. This detour had been intentional of course, and if she went just a little further out of her way she could grab something from the specialty dessert place. It was a good plan indeed.

A sizeable bag in hand, Sakura had successfully cleaned out the place of most of their remaining desserts before they had closed for the evening. If there was an air of smugness about her then it wasn’t intentional, she was just overly pleased that she’d made it through the day. And tomorrow was looking brighter for one reason, she would be seeing Kakashi. She closed her eyes and smiled, ducking down a side alley to boost it back to her apartment as quickly as possible, before the precious cargo melted or was compromised by warming cream cheese.

Halfway down the alley a noise startled her from nowhere, her first instinct was to protect the desserts, oddly enough. Her kunoichi senses telling her that she wasn’t in any immediate danger persay, unless the alley cats had become weaponized. But a muffled swear and upended trash revealed that it was probably just a couple of drunks. A door slammed and a familiar voice reached her ears.

“Gods senpai. You really overdid it this time, didn’t you… Don’t try and answer, it’s not like I can understand what you’re saying at this point anyway, come on.”

It happened very quickly, but from the shadows emerged none other than Captain Yamato, carrying a slumped over and probably unconscious form with a familiar head of silver hair.

“Oh, Sakura… Thank the first…”

“Captain Yamato? What in the hell… Oh my god, what the hell happened?” She might have spat the words at her former superior, a very un-Sakura like thing, but she just couldn’t care less in this moment.

“He’s just had… a bit too much to drink.”

“A bit? Yamato, he’s barely conscious… Kakashi, can you hear me?”

“Mmm, Sak...ura…”

It was all the answer she received from the man in question. Desserts forgotten and dropped to the pavement the instant she had recognized him slumped over in the Anbu captain’s hold. Her hands glowing with chakra in an instant she brought her palms to the side of his head, those dark eyes were closed and he was barely mumbling. Nothing was coherent. As soon as she was certain he didn’t actually have any forms of alcohol poisoning, Sakura allowed herself to breathe again.

“We probably shouldn’t do this out in the open, Sakura. Wouldn’t want anyone to see him... like this.” Yamato jostled the man he was supporting, Kakashi looking like a rag doll.

Once upon a time she might have found this comical, but now it was only concern she felt, and Yamato was right. Gods forbid that anyone actually saw him in this state. Especially with all the new Kage in office this month, it wouldn't do well for the Rokudaime to go down in a blaze of drunken glory.

"Yeah, my apartment is just around the corner...."

"I know..." said Yamato flatly, Sakura eyeing him as she took support of the other side of Kakashi's
"Where do you think we just came from?"

Sakura blinked a couple times in confusion.

"What do you..."

"He wanted to find you. Don't ask me why. It took some persuasion, and his actually passing out to get him to move on again."

"Oh. Well, we're usually working on the hospital plans this time of night at my place. He must have had it stuck in his head to come over..." It felt a lot like an excuse, and Sakura wasn't exactly sure why, it was a plausible truth. Yamato was also in Kakashi's Anbu detail, so he was sure to know those details already... Sakura blushed in wondering whether Yamato knew the rest of it also, if he did he said nothing.

"It's probably best to take him straight home, he's not likely to move again once he lies down. Trust me when I say you don't want a hungover Kakashi in your apartment first thing in the morning."

Sakura couldn't remember ever seeing Kakashi hungover or drunk for that matter. There was a first time for everything.

"How are we going to get him back home without being seen? I don't know any jutsu that..."

"It's fine, there's an old tunneling system that was used by the Foundation still underneath Konoha. We can take that and stay out of sight." Yamato paused before he added, "You don't have to come too, Sakura. I can manage one drunken Rokudaime on my own."

"There's no way I'm leaving this without an explanation. Besides, he should probably be checked up on properly by a doctor at this point..."

She left no room for Yamato to wriggle out of telling her why this was happening. A stern tone and a narrowed expression. The captain nodded before making the necessary hand signs, a narrow tunnel with steps opening up mid way down the alley. Sakura heading down into the darkness without a second thought, not even to the desserts she had left on the pavement.

By the time they reached the grounds of the Hokage's quarters, Sakura's stomach was no longer interested in eating anyway. It felt like knots of anxiety were writhing inside of her as a physical mass. Occasionally she would cast an eye to the unconscious Kakashi, he looked...like he was in pain and it bothered her. There were more surprises in store for her this evening apparently.

"Wait, where are all the guards? Why is this place empty?"

"Today's the fifteenth. The black day." Yamato answered her squarely without bothering to look at her as he opened the door to the spacious home of the Rokudaime. Sakura gulped, what the hell was this all about?

Without ceremony, Yamato ungraciously deposited Kakashi on one of the large couches in the living room. Sakura made a tisking noise of disapproval that came as an automatic response. Her former captain had none of the bedside manner required in this instance. She positioned Kakashi properly, kneeling on the floor beside him, sending chakra to her palms once more before placing them on his brow.

"Do you need anything, Sakura?" Yamato was stretching his limbs, looking entirely not concerned enough about the Hokage passed out in his own living room.
"Can you grab a big glass of water please?"

Yamato wandered off down a corridor to what was presumably the kitchen. Sakura had never been in here before, this wasn't the mansion that Tsunade kept house in before. This was built for Kakashi specifically. While it was sparse and spacious, she could see the odd thing that were so very.. well, Kakashi. The rows and rows of bookcases filled to the brim along the walls, the box of dog toys she could spy in the corner. Though this room alone could fit her entire apartment in...

"Anything else?" Yamato returned, handing her the glass which she set down on the floor. Standing and stepping away from her unconscious but otherwise stable patient, she fired her most fearsome look towards Yamato, almost spitting the words out as she stepped.

"Yeah, a god damn explanation for all this... nonsense! What the hell is going on? He disappears for a day then turns up practically catatonic!" Her words were hurried and panicked and she may have been pointing a finger directly at her former captain's chest. She didn't care. She needed the truth. "Tell me, what the hell is going on." It was an order, and she flared her chakra for effect.

As ever, Yamato remained a stoic figure of neutrality. His face not giving away anything as she spoke so belligerently at him. Just like Yamato, he knew when he needed to remain silent. Knew that she needed to get this out before her mind would be uncluttered enough to think clearly. When the room fell silent he spoke, and there was a caring and tenderness to his tone.

"Sakura, please don't concern yourself. This...this happens every year."

He stopped talking and it wasn't enough of an explanation for her, or even a shred of an explanation.

"What do you mean this happens every year? He gets blind drunk once a year, takes a whole day off to do it, and doesn't take any other time off? I find that hard to believe."

"It's the truth... well, it's part of the truth." Yamato sighed, and his eyes flickered to Kakashi in such a way that it pulled on Sakura's own heart. Her eyes widening, she waited for the man to continue. "He doesn't always get blind drunk, as you put it. Just recently. Some years he trains himself so hard that his chakra is depleted entirely, some years he locks himself in a room for the whole day, some years I haven't been able to find him at all..."

There was a sinister thought that crossed Sakura's mind as Yamato's sentence trailed off. This was an anniversary of the worst kind for Kakashi, and one he had kept a closely guarded secret for a long, long time. She was immediately sorry for her treatment of Yamato, who had been there for Kakashi when she and everyone else hadn't known to look.

"But... why?" She spoke softly. Yamato sighed so wholly his whole body seemed to accompany the action.

"As to the why of it, I wish I could tell you Sakura, I really do. I'm afraid he's the only one who can tell you for certain." They both looked sullen and downcast at the hardwood floors. "The only thing I do know... that this is the first year, in all the years that I've known him, he's wanted to find someone. He wanted to find you, Sakura."

Sakura sighed herself now, closing her eyes for a brief moment to process what had happened. In part also because she didn't like that look of Yamato's, the one that bore into her very soul. There was still no information to really go on. All she could do now was wait for...

"Kakashi... You really shouldn't try to move right now, senpai..."

"I wish you would... stop calling me that." Kakashi paused mid sentence as he tried to sit himself up,
it was all wobbly with all the grace of a new born giraffe.

"Kakashi!" Sakura spun around to kneel beside him again. His eyes were still closed, swaying as she helped him to sit back on the sofa. "What am I going to do with you..." She muttered, sending more chakra to her palm and sitting herself next to him. Stroking the wayward spikes of silver hair as she tried to send the necessary electrolytes to his deprived and drunken system. His eyes cracked open, it was one of those eye crinkle smiles, brief but reassuring. She smiled a little back despite herself, only stopping when Yamato made an obnoxious throat clearing noise, Kakashi shut his eyes tight.

"Guess I'll be going then, it seems like you're... in good hands here."

Sakura shot him a filthy gaze, Yamato scratching his head with a sheepish grin. The innuendo was not lost on Kakashi, even in his current state.

"Do you... have to make so many sounds with your mouth Tenzo?"

It was slurred and deep, and not at all like any voice of Kakashi's that she recognized. But it calmed her all the same just to hear it. She rolled her eyes at the ridiculous man, Yamato putting his hands on his hips and shaking his head.

"I'll leave him to you, Sakura. Thanks for your help."

Sakura shook her own head, aiming an apologetic smile toward Yamato, when her eyes snapped back to Kakashi she found him staring at her with an unfocused gaze. It was unsettling for a moment but Yamato's voice once again broke the haze.

"I take my leave Lord Hokage..."

"Shut up Tenzo." Kakashi sounded impetulant now and not at all like the sixth Hokage she knew. All the same Sakura had to suppress a giggle at the way he sounded, his eyes not once leaving her face, unfocused but studying her every reaction.

"One last thing..." Yamato called from the door, putting his hand inside the pouch at his hip and stepping toward the coffee table. Sakura raised a brow at Yamato as he placed a bottle of sake down with a thud.

"I don't think...." she began her rant but was cut short by Kakashi.

"Don't say it..."

"Happy birthday, senpai." Yamato nodded in a kind of deep bow and promptly departed.

Sakura's eyes were darting between the bottle and Kakashi, unsure which she was more confused by.

"Birthday? Did he say.... Is today your..." She was cut short again. This time there was a sharp bitterness to Kakashi's tone.

"Yes, he did. And it is." An exasperated sigh escaped him, that was just a bit over dramatic but she put it down to his current level of drunkenness. "Tenzo and his goddamn big mouth, he should never have said anything."

Sakura sat up more fully, leaning over to pick up the bottle of sake that Yamato had left behind. It was a nice sake, an expensive one, Tsunade would have approved. She studied it for a moment before turning her scrutiny to Kakashi. What the hell was this, some kind of mid life crisis? Did he
just want to get plastered on his birthday without being bothered? What kind of juvenile, idiotic....

"He doesn't always get blind drunk... in all the years I've known him..."

Sakura went over and over every word that Yamato had said to her that evening. Searching for anything that might be useful, but it wouldn't do. She needed to hear it from Kakashi, it was the only way to be certain, the only way she was going to get any explanation. But at the back of her mind she also registered that this was Kakashi... She didn't want to probe him for something he so obviously didn't want anyone to know, didn't want to push the boundaries. At the same time she wanted...needed to know....

A small glimmer of hope, she had wished for him to come to her if he needed, and he had indeed gone looking for her tonight while in this state. Maybe all was not lost on getting the truth out of him. Though he didn't seem so talkative right now, maybe she could change that.

An idea presented itself. Not the smartest or most reliant of strategies by any stretch of the imagination, but something was better than nothing.

"Lissen... Sakura... I don't, I mean I didn't want..."

"You don't have to explain anything you don't want to, Kakashi." It was now her turn to interrupt him, uncorking the bottle of sake for effect. Both his brows raised as he watched her with confusion. "I do have an idea for a game we can play though..."

Sakura took a deep swig of the bottle, praising herself for not coughing and spluttering at the instant burning in her throat.

"That's notta good idea, even after what I've had to drink tonight I can see that's not a good idea..."

She knew 'game' had been the wrong choice of words for the man.

"Fine, not a game, think of it as more of an... experiment." She could tell his curiosity was piqued by the way he not so subtly raised an eyebrow at her.

"Like a bet? Because that's a bad idea as well..."

"No, not a bet, an experiment. I have a hypothesis and a potential method for proving it to be correct." She took another sip. It wasn't going to her head nearly as quickly as she needed it to. But even if Kakashi was under the impression she was also drunk, then he may offer her more information.

"And what exactly is that hypothesis?" Kakashi cocked his head to look at her but it just lolled back onto the couch.

"You have to guess. And if you guess right, I take a drink."

"Why would I want you to do that?"

"Because if I get to your state of drunk, at least I might not remember tonight and then I wouldn't be able to tell Shikamaru what you do on your birthday..."

"You wouldn't...."

"I might, for the right price." She winked at him for good measure and he seemed to be interested enough now to play along. She went in for the kill. "And I could always give Guy sensei a quick
phone call...."

"Fine" He sighed."What's this method of yours?"

"I'm going to say something, and if what I say is correct, then you have to drink."

"Sakkkuraa, that is the worst idea, but if you really want me to black out then..."

"No." She stopped him again. "You won't be drinking sake, you'll be drinking this." Sakura plucked up the large glass of water Yamato had delivered to her, putting it on the table in front of Kakashi. He didn't look stable enough to hold such a full glass without spilling it.

At least with this method she could kill two birds with one stone. There would be no more sake for Kakashi to drink if she downed this bottle, and he desperately needed water in his system. And she would also, hopefully, get a little explanation. Another thought also occurred to her, that it didn't really matter so much, because now at least they were beside each other again. She just wished she knew what was going on inside his head.... so that she could help him, the way he had always helped her.

"Ok.. Who gets to go first?"

"I'll start. Today is your birthday, correct?"

Kakashi shot her the same look he'd been giving the glass. That dark mixture of disapproval and annoyance that had her smug as hell. He didn't answer, but with surprising dexterity leaned forward to take the glass of water. Sitting back with the glass in his lap he took a gulp through his mask, Sakura narrowed her eyes. Not that she'd been trying to see his face for this, she'd just considered it a possible bonus. When Kakashi smirked at her and spoke, she suddenly felt not quite so sure about her little experiment game.

"Right, my turn."

* * * *

Whatever this little game of Sakura’s was, this experiment, Kakashi was intrigued. Even inebriated as he was, games always had a way of coming around in his favor. This would be no different. More importantly, he was still drunk enough to not care either way.

"Yes, your turn. Go ahead."

There was still some fun to be had here.

"The perimeters of this... experiment... still need some explaining. Not like you, Sakura, to leave out such important details."

He was still enjoying the encouraging effects provided by the sake he’d downed earlier. Liquid courage had indeed been the right course of action, and luck had brought them together tonight after all, and she was playing right into his hands with this game. At least that's what he was thinking in his current state of intoxication. The guilt would later strike that he was resorting to the worst of his coping mechanisms just to get through one day. But if it turned out well enough… Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

“And what exactly do you mean by that, Kakashi?” Sakura now sat next to him on the sofa, chin propped up in her hand, eyeing him indignantly.
"Well, am I required to guess the entire hypothesis exactly? That doesn’t seem entirely fair. That doesn’t seem... entirely fair."

"I guess not..." Sakura pouted just a fraction and Kakashi had an involuntary flashback. "What do you propose?"

"Well, this experiment is fact based correct?" He watched Sakura nod slowly. "If I guess partial facts regarding your... hypothesis... you sip. If I guess the entire thing correctly, you skull the bottle. Deal?"

"Kakashi, I don't think there are typically deals within experiments..."

"If you want a willing participant in your little game, you'll need to make exceptions, Sakura."

She looked as if she were mulling it over, she might not have sounded impressed moments ago, but there was still a queer little smile on her lips.

"Sure. I guess that's fair."

"Good. So, back to my turn." Kakashi pretended to be thinking hard about his choice of words. "My first hunch, and I must say, my hunches are usually correct..."

"So modest..." she interrupted, rolling her eyes.

"Just let me finish... Okay, first fact. This hypothesis of yours, there's something you want out of this. Correct?"

Sakura said nothing, leaning back into that sofa, winking before bringing the bottle of sake to her lips. She took a very subtle sip, licking those luscious lips slower than should be considered legal.

When the bottle was firmly set back on the coffee table, Kakashi had to shake his head just a little bit to get his mental faculties back out of the gutter.

"Right... Now it's my turn..." She eyed him in such a way now he felt certain he'd walked into a trap of some kind. But damned he was just too curious about where she was going with this to care too much.

It went back and forth like that for a long while. Facts diluting to regular questions, laughter fits, random reminiscing. At some point, and thanks to the alcohol he'd consumed earlier Kakashi wasn't certain exactly when, they had started moving closer together on that couch. Legs tangled together and turned slightly to face each other. Leaning back into that couch cushion and only moving to take a sip of their drinks, never being apart for very long.

"Okay, but seriously, you had absolutely no idea it was me? The entire time you were on that mission with Sukea?"

"Not an inkling... The fact that you got Lord Third in on it... It's shocking behavior considering you are now the Hokage..." This time when Sakura went to put the bottle back on the table she faltered a little, he had only just sobered up enough to notice that she was now in her own state of intoxication. She was even more giggly when she flopped back into the cushions next to him. "I guess that's one of the perks of having outlandish hair, you're an entirely different person once you change it..."

Sakura was toying with the ends of her own locks as she said it. Those deep green eyes of hers looking sullenly at them, she was sitting so close he could see every lash.

"Don't you even think about changing this..." His hand drifted up to brush the strands she'd been
playing with behind her ear, Kakashi chalked his next words up to liquid courage again, but it was simply his first thought that drifted from his lips. "You're so beautiful. Just as you are."

She leaned into his touch and time seemed to stop for him in that moment altogether, though hours must have passed with them like this.

"Alright, my turn..." She said it so quietly, but their faces were so close now he could almost taste her words.

"You still playing that game?"

"It's not a game, remember, it's an experiment." She pouted and it was all he could do not to capture her lips.

"Beautiful and diligent... sorry, go ahead."

Kakashi couldn't stop his hands from caressing her cheek, touching that gloriously smooth skin, so fragile and untainted. The alcohol didn't numb the shock of Sakura's own hand coming to his face to mirror the action. And she did it subtly. He had an idea of what could happen next, and only because it was her, only because it was Sakura did he allow it. Those delicate fingers curled into his mask, and at a snail's pace, tugged it down below his chin. This time she asked a question rather than stating a fact, speaking in a hushed voice to his bare face.

"Why do you hide away?"

It wasn't hard to tell what she meant, but there were two edges to this question. And instead of withdrawing as he would have before, he wanted, needed to give her the explanation now that she deserved. She who had sat by him tonight with patience, reverence and tenderness. She who always deserved the best, and he would be the one to give it to her now.

"Do you mean the mask, or do you mean today specifically?" Kakashi watched her blush deepen. She brushed the bare skin on his face tenderly but never answered. Kakashi sighed but it wasn't out of exasperation, it was out of nervousness.

It was time to let it out.

"Sakura, I'm going to give you two answers to that question." He spoke deliberately, never severing the physical contact between them. "You can choose to believe whichever one you prefer."

She nodded imperceptibly.

"Imagine a boy, who watches himself in the mirror each passing day, growing older. Then imagine this boy also watching his father despair at the very sight of his own son. For each day, the boy turns more into the likeness of the woman who died in giving birth to him. So the boy uses his quick thinking to come up with a solution, a safety blanket if you will, that allows his father to finally be able to see him. And for a time, it works, it's enough. Until it isn't anymore..."

Kakashi didn't know where these words were precisely coming from. Some deep inner process that had been lined up and waiting to come out for the longest time. Waiting for the opportunity where he would trust another human being with the soul crushing secret that had wracked him for years. But he continued unhindered, even when Sakura's eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

"The boy loses his father, loses the need to hide. But can't bring himself to look in the mirror, because now, now... he looks too much like his father. And can't bare the sight of seeing the man he lost faith in every day in the mirror. The safety blanket becomes the only constant, over the years..."
One day when the boy is grown he realizes that things could have been different... much different. If only he hadn't been born in the first place."

He watched the first tear fall and cascade down her cheek but the words would not stop.

"His mother would not have died, would have been there to support her husband and stop his own demise. All his comrades would still be living, thriving. Not sacrificing themselves to the darkness, or to save anyone... His sensei, his wife, a whole clan might have even been spared. The weight becomes so much when the boy ages that he does just about anything to forget the day he was born into the world."

Kakashi paused watching Sakura's mouth open and close, the tears she tried to hide continued to fall, so he brushed them away. All the same she made no sound. Simply watching him with a quiet reverence and still stroking his bare cheek.

"What's the other answer, Kakashi, please?" She spoke with a sweetness that was tinged with sadness also. But hearing them only seemed to solidify his decision in telling her the truth. She'd needed to hear it, he cleared his throat.

"The other, is that a very intelligent boy decides he will be the perfect ninja, in all shapes and forms. And finds a way to do it. Hides his face away so that he can better serve his village and his missions. Until one day he and the mask are one and the same, it's a cover he can hide behind at all times so he no longer has to feel. Or age. And then one day he looks in the mirror without it, and sees that time is still affecting him just like the ordinary people, and he is in fact not perfect. So he adopts many terrible coping mechanisms to distract himself from his own aging. Reading, drinking, falling in love with a young and attractive doctor..."

"And intelligent..." she added with a sudden smile, the tears still falling unabashedly.

"Did I forget the intelligent? I'm sorry, yes, intelligent, modest, so beautiful it shouldn't be legal..." His thumb caressed her lips at his words and she huffed a smile. Their faces only an inch or two away from each other now. "Sexy as hell..."

"Mmm, keep going..." she said it somewhat sleepily but with a laugh that forced a grin to his face. It faded slowly.

"Sakura?"

"Mmm."

"What was your hypothesis for this experiment?"

Kakashi's eyes were searching hers. Those green orbs that held him captive whenever they met. She might have been affected slightly by the alcohol but she was still the fire cracker that he had fallen in love with.

"I'll tell you a secret... there never really was one." She giggled and he smirked. "I was just pretty sure that you could tell me anything and I would still be in love with you... and I was righ....."

Kakashi cut off her words with his mouth, bridging the small gap between them and finally taking what was his. She tasted sweet, laced with a hint of the sake she had been drinking. As always she was full of surprises, taking a moment to steady herself before meeting him. It was like a battle for the upper hand with their lips. Kakashi plundering her mouth only to back down as she placed a hand on his chest and pushed him back onto the couch.
With a hand on her chin, leading her down with him, Sakura was now on top of his chest. Their lips not parting once, their tongues in a dizzying dance that Kakashi could not keep up with at times. Reacting to instinct alone, Kakashi's knee was between her legs, prying them apart. She wasted no time in planting herself, straddling his hips, her hands fisting his shirt.

Out of urges alone Kakashi took handfuls of her rear end, gripping and guiding her. The soft moan she made into the kiss tore his concentration away from savoring the moment. He couldn't control the automatic groan he made in response. They parted for breath panting, but Kakashi chased his lips down her neck, leaving open mouthed kisses and resisting the sudden and strange urge to bite her.

"How..."

"Mmm?" He murmured into her skin. Not stopping for one second. She continued to grind against the painful hardness that was restrained in his pants.

"How...do...you make me so hot like this...."

He chuckled, and at the sound she audibly moaned in a way that was so sinful he could feel the beads of precum drip from him. With a wonderfully wicked idea Kakashi decided to take the upper hand back, flipping her suddenly so that she was on her side, trapped between his hard body and the soft back of the couch. The yelping noise she made would later become one of his all time favorite noises.

"Well..." he hummed deliberately low, soliciting another moan from Sakura as he whispered kisses up her sensitive neck again. "You make it too easy. Being so... flustered. Is that how you put it?"

"Mnhmm..." she hummed, losing herself in his touch, his voice. The primal surge it sent to his groin was like molten lava in his blood.

"Do you want me to help you... be less flustered... Sakura...?"

She gasped as he nipped lightly on her neck. Her eyes were closed, and he could taste the sake in her skin. She hadn't held her liquor at all well tonight though she hadn't consumed all that much. When he felt her shiver, though he knew it was from lust alone, he stilled his assault with his lips.

"Yes... please..."

Kakashi cut her off, kissing her more tenderly this time, despite her soft noise in protest. Those words almost pushing him to breaking point.

"It's my turn right?" Another quick and heated kiss.

"Still..." A peck. "Playing?"

"When was... the last time... you weren't flustered?"

The gripping on each others bodies became less urgent, less insistent, the kissing forming a more tenuous path. Sakura sighed, pressing her forehead to his before she answered. Their bodies were still lined up on that couch, still entangled as if separating would ruin the closeness they had found in each other.

"I haven't been able to... unfluster myself in two years..."

"Not even...by yourself?"
"No matter how hard I try." She sighed deeply again. "As a doctor I know... it's all in my head... But I don't know..."

"Maybe you just haven't found the right... motivation... Hmm?"

They both descended into laughter again. It felt so right, so easy, being there with her in every way. She knew every piece of him and hadn't run away. She was right here in his arms still. But her eyes were still closed, and her bodies movements were not as willful as before.

She was tired.

They continued to talk in between kisses, long wistful ones, quick and fiery pecks that left him just as breathless. He suspected that he would never grow tired of kissing her. They laughed, they touched each other, but not with urgency. Because for this, Kakashi was sober enough to know that for Sakura's own sake, he needed to take his time. And he wanted to take his time with her body, show her what she deserved.

It wasn't until he saw morning's first light through the open windows that he realized how long they had been like this. Sakura had spent some time in that blissful state between sleeping and awake. Kakashi had been unable to turn his brain off, but for the first time it hadn't gone in any direction that was too terrible.

"Don't you have work soon, Sakura?"

"Five more minutes... please Kashi..."

He was powerless to resist, he wanted to spend all his minutes of the day right here.
**Chapter Fourteen**

Chapter Summary

This one does contain some mild smut <3

Trigger warnings for fingering/mutual masturbation apply

Chapter Notes

Hello my loves <3

Thank you all for the overwhelming support <3 I'm touched and honored.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

That week had been a strange go between for Sakura. One moment it was as easy as if nothing had changed or transpired between them. That same focus and dedication for their shared project continued. But then…then it was as if a switch had been flipped inside of her, and it was all she could do not to touch him everywhere and anywhere she could reach.

If Kakashi had still possessed the sharingan, she’d have accused him of placing a genjutsu on her of some kind. Trapping her in a world where all that existed, were each others bodies, and the desires that they shared. And even Sakura had to admit, she wouldn’t exactly mind being stuck in that reality.

Sakura had woken that Friday morning with a despicable hangover, she hadn’t even drunk that much so it seemed hardly fair. Especially considering Kakashi had no sign of a hangover himself. But drinking anything on an empty stomach was a mistake, and one a medical professional really shouldn’t fall into. She had stumbled to the hospital, misusing her chakra to speed up the process. Kakashi had supplied her with a breakfast to go, and a heated but brief kiss at the door, and normalcy was somewhat returned.

Each night, after her shift, Sakura would take the shinobi medical reports to Hokage tower. Kakashi would be waiting for her, each night, with a smile on his face and an offer to make her dinner. With the air conditioning unit at her apartment still broken she found herself spending more and more time at his place. The hospital research had mostly migrated there as well.

The majority of the time was spent working, and with good reason. On Monday morning, Kakashi had gotten word that the council would be convening that very week to decide the fate on their project. The proposed meeting day to be Friday. Kakashi had said it was unusually short notice, but they weren't to worry. So naturally, Sakura did what she did best. Prepare….and worry herself into a stupor. By Wednesday she had grown so anxious that it was only Kakashi’s soothing temperament that kept her grounded enough to focus.

While she knew in her heart that this project stood up for itself on its own merits, that all the work
they had put into it would surely shine through, she just couldn't help the ominous feelings toward this meeting with the council. Hearing Tsunade complain for years about these kinds of things had festered the idea in Sakura's mind, that her ideas would be automatically discredited just because she was a woman. When she shared this unsettling theory with Kakashi he managed to soothe her with only a few words.

_Different time, different Konoha._

In this Konoha she was a force to be reckoned with, and that was the attitude she needed to maintain during this meeting. When the Thursday night rolled around, she was certain that there was nothing more she could do to prepare, she found herself frenzied. Just going over it all _one more time_, then another, then another…

Kakashi had physically stopped her. Placing his hands firmly on her shoulders and forcing her to meet his eye. It still amazed her at how responsive her body was to his, these touches which would have made her recoil months ago, now only left her wanting more. Without so many words he implored her to rest, it was laughable, that the man who only took one day off a year was telling her to rest. When she argued that nothing was going to distract her from these anxious and restless feelings, he had let go his hold and disappeared into his bedroom for a moment. She felt a surging excitement when she lost sight of him, thinking that perhaps she should follow…. But he returned promptly with two books in his hand. Two _stupid_ books.

She had been reading a lot at night, usually hospital reports, and while that book had offered a kind of solace for her a couple weeks ago…. Now it only magnified the urges within her own body that she failed to satisfy herself. She looked at the thing with disdain until Kakashi shoved it into her hand, then pulled on her other, leading her to the sofa. He kept hold of the second volume and sat back, pulling him with her.

So for the rest of that evening Sakura found herself nestled into Kakashi's side. On the same sofa she had slept on a week ago after a bottle of sake. It disturbed her slightly that the man knew which chapter she was up to without being told, but Kakashi was Kakashi after all. She wasn't exactly sure how, or when, but she grew so comfortable just sitting there reading next to him, Kakashi reading the other volume but making a few choice remarks every so often.

Giggling fits of laughter, long moments of silence, heated moments during particularly steamy passages where whatever parts of her body were touching his suddenly felt ablaze. It was just what she needed. And when Kakashi pointed out the clock had struck midnight she'd headed home to sleep. He had accompanied her under the guise that she shouldn't be walking alone at night, which was silly to her ears when she could pummel any man into next week, and he knew that too. It was just an excuse to spend a little more time together, the tender and lingering kiss at her doorway being just what she'd needed as well.

They’d stood there for a while, holding on to each other, lining up in the darkness. Sakura taking in every inch of his maskless face as she could before his lips took hers. It wouldn’t have taken much, to kiss him senseless and drag him to the bedroom. But it wasn’t the right time, or the right place. The council meeting she'd almost forgotten suddenly looming in her mind once more.

As if sensing the thought Kakashi pulled back, bid her goodnight with instructions to rest up, and then left. She fell into a cautiously optimistic slumber. That feeling continuing into the morning until precisely ten minutes before the allotted meeting time.

Sakura paced nervously around the empty room she had been ushered into, alone to prepare before she would be called before the council. Everything replayed through her mind tirelessly until it almost lost all tangible meaning. Her heart leapt into her throat when she heard the door open in shut,
only to fall back down to her stomach when she saw it was Kakashi who had entered. Clad in white robes, mask up, but the look in his eyes was soft and tender. They regarded each other for a second, Sakura managing an uneasy smile before she continued her pacing.

Then she was stopped again by two firm hands on her shoulders.

“There’s no need to be nervous, you’re going to do just fine. One of the perks of being a crotchety old man is that I know how the other crotchety old men will think. Trust me.”

“Of course I trust you… it’s just…”

“I know. There’s a lot at stake, try to think of it like a mission, alright?”

“Okay.” She took a deep breath, exhaling and closing her eyes. She was unable to stop the thoughts racing through her mind when she reopened them, Kakashi’s gaze was so heated it should be made illegal. The words that fell from her mouth were also unchecked. “Also, you’re not that old, really Kakashi…”

Sakura’s hand came up to rest on his masked cheek and he leant into the touch, but his eyes never left hers. It was heating her very insides just holding this staring contest with him.

“Stop…” he whispered, she thought she had imagined it but the deep timbre returned, her skin burning where he touched her. “You need to stop looking at me like that in public.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’ve seen me without my mask…”

“You’re the one who started it, can’t handle it thrown back at you, huh?”

Kakashi’s mask shifted, his mouth opening beneath the fabric, but the words never left his lips. A sharp knocking at the door startling them apart. Sakura felt her heart beating at a mile a minute for so many different reasons, that she might just pass out.

“It’s time.” Kakashi said resolutely with a nod, it sounded just like a mission order. It steeled Sakura’s resolve once more.

“Let’s do this.”

The walk to the chamber was agonizing for Sakura, both too short and too long a walk, that horrible anxiety inducing middle ground that made her stomach churn. At some point in the corridor, Kakashi lightly placed the back of his hand to Sakura’s and held it there for comfort. It was a fleeting gesture, and one that only calmed her for a brief moment, the feeling returning tenfold as they paused outside the double doors.

"Deep breaths, you'll do fine." Kakashi assured her from her side, the tone in his voice a kind that she recognized from her days as a genin. And at that moment she believed him.

The room that was revealed to them was pitch black but for one light shining down and illuminating the long table. The lords of the fire country, advisers, board members, all sat around it. Kakashi strode in first, an eye briefly darting to her before eyeing the room like he would an opponent in days long ago.

*Treat it like a mission.* The words ran through her mind and stilled her nerves.
"Proposal 2973, planning permissions for the first children's hospital of Konoha. Campaigned by Doctor Sakura Haruno and supported by Lord Sixth, Kakashi Hatake." The announcement came from somewhere in the darkness, made more ominous by the sounds of the doors shutting and the last of the natural light snuffed out.

"Children's hospital..." Came the murmur, whispers and quiet muttering ensuing. Kakashi cleared his throat and there was silence. Sakura stepped forward ever so slightly, knowing this was her cue, this was her time to shine. So she began.

"For too many years now Konoha has been lacking an institution which stands on its own, catering to the patient needs and aftercare of our youngest citizens..."

"Too right!" Came an interruption at the head of the table.

"Yes indeed!" Was the call that followed. Sakura tried not to stumble in her spiel, but the surprise at the sudden comments could be dealt with later. She continued unhindered.

"While the main hospital of Konoha is indeed considered the top facility in the Fire Country, there is a shortage of space and specialized care for not only Konoha's children, but our young shinobi as well...."

"Yes, yes. We all know that there is a need for one. The only issue being...." An older voice grumbled from the middle of the room.

"Where to put it exactly?" Kakashi finished the sentence. Commanding that silence again.

Here Sakura witnessed first hand what her mentor had been referring to. While a woman spoke, men, or these men anyway, saw it as an opportunity to interrupt with their own opinions. Her voice didn't matter. Perhaps her age had something to do with it as well. Either way Sakura was growing frustrated and angry at the situation, at not being listened to. She felt Kakashi gently nudge her shoulder again. He was giving the floor to her, maybe he'd sensed her frustration, but it grew tenfold now. She didn't need him to fight this battle for her, didn't need him to rescue her before she'd even started properly. But it was about bigger things, and she needed to remind herself that too.

"A large plot of land recently became available to me and I am willing to offer it as a donation to the cause." Sakura spoke firmly.

"What land would this be, Doctor Haruno?"

"The remaining lands of the former Uchiha compound." Her words caused a low rumbling of voices around the room, Kakashi pulling a scroll from his pocket, it was handed to an attendant and disappeared into the darkness.

"You said, donation? You expect us to believe that..."

"Yes." Sakura interrupted with force, and now the room went quiet, for her. "Of course. There are lives of children at stake here, the worth of that land means nothing to me, other than a safe and suitable ground for construction. Because something needs to happen and it needs to happen now."

"How are these children at risk when they receive adequate care at the main hospital of Konoha?" The question this time came from an elderly woman, all the same Sakura poorly disguised a derisive snort before she answered.

"Adequate it may be, but none of you are doctors or medical professionals. These children, shinobi and citizens alike, are stitched up and sent home, then what? What of the children who require 24
hour care? What of the children with severe trauma and mental health issues? They fall through the cracks, that's what. This antiquated system needs to stop now. There needs to be change. And all that is needed, is funding for the building itself, equipment and staffing. We have the ability here, the opportunity, to teach a whole generation how to take care of their minds and bodies. We can make this an educational facility for young medics to train them in specialized fields. We can...

Sakura saw a palm rise at the end of the table, the authority in the action causing her to stop mid sentence. There was still a hushed silence about the room.

"You make all valid and true statements, Doctor Haruno, there is no denying that this is something that has fallen through the cracks as you say, for a long time. As elders of Konoha it is our duty to protect our own vastly growing numbers. Have you had any thoughts on who will be running such a facility?" She began to wonder if this was the Daiymo himself speaking.

"I would be taking that position, sir."

Kakashi shuffled next to her but said nothing. The room quiet until the head of the table spoke again.

"I can think of nobody more qualified. Thank you for your time. We need no further information, the matter will be put to vote now."

A random attendant appeared and ushered Sakura by the arm from the room, when the doors open she glimpsed a last look back at Kakashi standing there. Unable to see his face, just the outline of his white robes. He turned slightly and she saw the crinkle in his eye, a smile, then the doors shut him in there and she was left standing alone to trek all the way back to the conference room she'd been in earlier.

It hadn't occurred to her that the Hokage would have a vote in the matter at all. Perhaps she had been worried for nothing about this whole presentation. It all seemed rather anticlimactic. Sakura spent ten minutes pacing back and forth, then twenty minutes. So much that the muscles in her legs were a little tense. By the half hour mark Sakura wasn't so sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing to be kept waiting so long. She stared out the window forlornly, biting her bottom lip in nervousness now.

Perhaps she should have just let Kakashi speak, maybe she shouldn't have been so forward about her plans... But damned it needed to be said.

"You've got that look about you, lost in your own head again there, Sakura?"

Kakashi was standing right behind her, she'd been so dazed she hadn't even heard him come back in.

"Yeah, a bit. Is it time to go back in? Has the voting finished? Do they need more information?"

Kakashi stepped forward placing a hand to each of her shoulders.

"Woah woah, hold your horses there. It's all done now. The vote was unanimous."

Sakura's eyes went as wide as saucers. Unanimous? Really?

"Wha..."

"They'll be coming in to congratulate you shortly, I just wanted to... touch base with you, before you're bombarded by well meaning yes men."

"How...? How was the vote unanimous, and so quick? Tsunade used to sit in on these things for hours with not even one agreement being made..."
"Well, that was Tsunade, your current Hokage is a pretty sweet talker, if I don't say so myself..."

"But you hardly said a word during the presentation... What did you say afterwards?"

Kakashi looked at her, and it was a look that made her heart sore for a second, but irritation that he'd spoken for her was still brewing.

"Well, I cast my vote as 'yes', that was the only word I actually said after you left. My job was to stand there and look pretty after all. And then all I had to do was nod and accept compliments for how brilliant my former student is..."

She cut him off, leaping into his arms in a kind of bear hug, he spun her lightly on the spot. Sakura giggled at the feigned huff of pain he did at the action. She knew just how strong and capable he was beneath those robes, though not as much as she would like. But the excitement and happiness could not be contained, the hospital was happening, it was finally happening.

When they'd stopped spinning they stood there simply holding onto one another. Kakashi's eyes a mixture of things she couldn't quite identify, but she was altogether brimming with too many emotions of her own to be concerned right now.

"I honestly can't believe it! This is so wonderful! Thank you so much, Kakashi."

"I can't quite believe it myself, I've never seen those codgers make a decision so quickly, let alone unanimously... You must have some hidden talents I'm not aware of."

Sakura giggled again at the timbre of his voice and the thinly disguised innuendo. Kakashi was still Kakashi, it was silly of her to think he'd have spoken behind her back about the project. After all this time he really was someone she could trust and count on. She needed to let those insecurities go, needed to let him in. Her body stayed lined up against his, foreheads touching.

He was letting her in to his world after all, everything he had shared with her that drunken night, she remembered it all. With Sasuke it had felt like she was climbing a wall just to get a glimpse over the other side. With Kakashi it felt as though he'd simply added a swinging door, allowing her access when she dared to let herself far enough from her own fortress.

Putting that fortress up had been necessary, to guard herself, from Sasuke and from her mother's death. It had been a tool to keep her strong, keep her busy and working, and now all her hard efforts were paying off. It wasn't without a tinge of sadness, that Kakashi might not find it necessary to be there with her every night having dinner... It was something she needed to tell him before it hurt too deeply. Because she definitely still wanted him there. Always.

"Kakashi...."

There was a harsh knocking on the door that interrupted her.

"It can wait..." Kakashi murmured on her lips, pecking them through the mask before they separated. The doors opened and a flurry of people came in, an actual tidal wave of elders, some of which Sakura recognized. Iruka grinning wildly and proudly to her on his entrance. She returned the grin and glanced to Kakashi before leaving his side, something unnameable in his eyes again.

It can wait, it would have to.

* * * *
The minutes and hours began to slowly slide by. The usual pleasantries and boredom of the after meeting aftermath were no where near as bad with Sakura's presence in the room. She really did make the people around her better, just by being her normal caring self. It was beguiling to watch.

But Kakashi was also bitter, and no where near a better person for his thinking. He kept to himself, circling the outskirts of the hot room, pretending to talk to anyone and no one just to get away from people. He was a terrible person through and through. Because all he could think, while this joyous and much needed event had been approved, was that it would mean an end.

An end to his time spent alone with Sakura every evening. Although for all intents and purposes they were dating, she was going to be spearheading this hospital. The sole director. A job comparable in busyness to the Hokage's, and he would know. Seeing her would become a rarity, stolen moments in offices, coming home to reheated dinners...

It might have been selfish but he just didn't like the sound of it, and whenever he got within earshot of Sakura, all he could hear about was the project they'd worked so hard on... that was taking her away from him. It was a nonsensical thought, and it was bothering to say the least. And when something was bothering Kakashi he usually made sure that it stopped. But the more he looked at Sakura interacting with these ridiculous dignitaries and council members, the more he felt he was glimpsing a future where she was in too high a demand to be with him.

And that was his final thought before deciding outrightly to leave. He just couldn't bring himself to go without a word to Sakura, so he sidled up behind her and tapped her shoulder.

"You had enough already, Kakashi?" She teased before even turning around. He smirked.

"Something like that. Duty calls. I'll see you... later?" It was more of a vulnerable question that he intended, but in his current state it was unavoidable.

"Yes! Definitely! I need your help with.... something..."

Her eagerness, and then the deliberate dropping of her tone meant one thing in Kakashi's mind. Suddenly the room was stifling and unbearably warm. It was all he could do to nod in reply, ignore her giggling with all his might, coughing loudly to dissuade anyone from approaching him as he exited.His expression he tried his utmost to disguise as the norm. But whenever he was out of plain sight Kakashi found his eyes automatically grew to the size of saucers, his brain processing what had just transpired at a painfully slow pace, something that bothered him incessantly. Being slow at anything was not something he was familiar with, or wanted to be familiar with to any degree.

It felt as though he had teleported, blinking and finding himself suddenly in his overrun office. Overrun as in papers strewn over every available surface, stacks almost hitting the ceiling, the attempts to digitize some of these files had fallen short of successful. Just another failure to add to the list... He sighed before shrugging off the white robes, it was as if each day they grew heavier and more uncomfortable on his shoulders.

Kakashi attempted the usual busy work that might've once kept his mind from wandering down unfavorable paths. Except he was distracted still by the lingering invitation that Sakura had made and what exactly that might entail. The sensation that was building in his chest, the cocktails of emotions his head couldn't seem to get a handle on, it was all so very frustrating.

Here he was, moping in his own office for not being able to spend time with Sakura, when he could actually have been spending time with her. Kakashi raked a hand through his hair, succumbing to the kind of trepidation he had only ever felt in the battlefield. It followed that it would show up in other areas of his life now that the field was nothing but a distant memory. And that was something he
wanted to punish himself for as well, those horrible atrocities should never be a distant memory, they needed to stay fresh so that he could do his job properly.

Head down, Kakashi berated himself again while he continued to half apply himself to the tasks at hand. Whenever thoughts of Sakura inevitably surfaced it was with a surge of nervousness and treacherous excitement. He lost count of how many times he'd shaken his head in an attempt to snap out of it. It was late afternoon before it all boiled over to the surface.

"There's an A rank mission that needs assigning Kakashi-sama...."

"Would you drop the sama part already? How many times do I have to tell you..." Kakashi only just managed to rein his temper in before saying anything he'd further regret. He looked up apologetically to Shikamaru. "I'll look at the details and get back to you..."

"Are you feeling okay? You've been acting oddly these past few weeks... Even more than usual in fact."

"Actually, no, I'm not feeling okay." This sudden acknowledgment, out loud, to his diminished capacity... Kakashi wasn't sure who was shocked more, himself or Shikamaru. It made his head spin uncomfortably.

"Do you want to talk about it? I don't mind listening... You can count on me..."

Kakashi knew that he could, knew that he could trust Shikamaru just like he had trusted his father, just like he trusted Naruto. And the answer his mind formed to that question was also startling. Yes, yes he did want to talk about it. Just not here, not where he could be heard and judged.

"Actually, do you mind taking the wheel for a little while? I'm going to go get some air..."

"Ah, well sure. I can start by compiling available squads for that A rank..."

"Yeah, do that. Thanks, Shikamaru..." Kakashi was already standing and on his way out the door, one quick glance back with an appreciative smile to his ever reliable assistant. He could trust him to watch the ship at least.

It was already starting to get dark out, summer was well and truly on it's way out now, Kakashi was thankful for the shadows. It had always been natural for him to travel out of sight whenever he went downtown, but his mind so sketchy and unfocused, the darkness made it easier to remain unseen.

So lost in thought as he rounded on the familiar building, a singular purpose of going to a place where it would be safe to talk, that it didn't even cross his mind that the offices would be closed already. There was still a light on though, a hope, and he was a ninja after all. It didn't take much to scale the side of the building and find a way in, it gave him a perverse sort of rush, a wave of nostalgia for his Anbu days he never thought he would experience. Those ten years were terrible, one horror after another, to be wistfully remembering them was just more proof that he had gone soft.

The corridors were still familiar enough in the swallowing darkness, enough for him to navigate to where he needed to be. Like his feet knew where he should be going in the same way they sometimes took him to the cenotaph, and most recently to Sakura's apartment.

It might have concerned him for a second that the building was seemingly so easy to break into, but he was Hokage after all. Maybe it meant that he wasn't too rusty after all....

"Lord Kakashi, what are you doing here after hours?"
The door to Crane's office was wide open, the light streaming into the corridor. Although not a ninja in anyway, the doctor had already spotted and identified him.

"Oh, you know.... the usual..."

"Something happened?" Crane beckoned him in from where he sat at his desk.

Kakashi shrugged noncommittally. He'd never been in Crane's actual office before, only the adjoining rooms of plain couches and chairs for patients tears. He'd also never been so wholly alone with the man. The lights from the desk lamps being the only lights on in the whole building. He sympathized with him for a second, and the stacks of reports he appeared to be sitting on top of metaphorically. A sizable pile that rivaled his own at Hokage tower.

Crane didn't move from his desk, simply shifting papers around, signing a few before closing a folder. He seemed to be waiting for a verbal answer before giving Kakashi any undivided attention, or it could be just irritation at his late night paperwork catch up being interrupted... Kakashi would have felt the same if the shoe had been on the other foot. He hesitated.

"Kakashi, for goodness sakes. Shut the damn door and sit down. You ninja seriously have to be so roundabout when anything slightly emotional happens, yet you'll charge an assailant head on. It really baffles me still, and I've been doing this for years.... years Kakashi. Now sit."

He blinked solidly a few times before complying. It had been a long time since anyone, other than Sakura or Tsunade, had so blatantly spoken to him. It was more refreshing than it probably should be. Kakashi took the seat across from the desk, walking slowly before depositing himself into it. It was hard not to appear dejected. Crane finally cleared his desk, sitting back and folding his arms, regarding Kakashi in a way a school teacher might a troubled student.

"This is the second time that you've come here outside of your allotted time. I'm proud that you know you can come here whenever you need..." Crane's voice had dropped back into something much more familiar. "I hear congratulations are in order, the children's hospital got approved unanimously. I'm not sure what I found most surprising, that those old codgers agreed to a meeting time in the first place or the fact that they approved after just one meeting..."

Kakashi relaxed back in to the chair, not even bothering to suppress the chuckle at Crane's depressingly accurate comment.

"Yeah, well. You and me both..."

"You don't appear to be so happy about the development though. Something happen with Sakura?"

Kakashi sighed, steadied himself for the inevitable, the regrettable surging of emotions that he'd been unable to quell since he'd left that meeting. The regret, the guilt, the general feeling of being a terrible person.

"Nothing happened... that's just the thing."

Again Kakashi found it a relief and an oddity that the information made it from his brain to his lips without his express permission. It felt as if he'd been holding in a veritable dam of thoughts and now they were finally allowed to flow from his mouth. If Shikamaru hadn't said anything maybe he would never have made his way here in the first place. Crane sat, listening intently as Kakashi divulged last week's 'experiment' with Sakura, and the results it had yielded. That he was indeed in love with her, and she in return loved him. And it was a miracle in and of itself...but today... Today he had seen a future where they were both too busy to be with one another, a future where his want
to be with her was threatened by more urgent things. Because she was needed, this hospital was needed, it was all more important than his own needs. It was selfish.

He spared no detail. Down to the kiss they had shared, the quiet words that were spoken before they had both spent the night on the couch. And then he went on into more details, his thoughts today and how they had taken a downward turn the instant she was agreed on as sole director for the hospital. The way she had insinuated that he... help her with something later and what that might mean. It was like being out of breath when he finally stopped speaking. Crane sitting back in his chair still, arms crossed and nodding in the lamp light. He finally spoke.

"Lord Hokage, will you allow me to be frank with you?"

"You are usually..."

"Are you stupid?"

The question fell flat in the air between them, landing somewhere on the desk, Kakashi’s brow creased in confusion.

“Uh, pardon?”

“Are you stupid? Simple question really. I understand you may be a ninja genius or whatever, and up until just recently you pandered to me anyway you could just to get out of the room. You have remarkable intelligence for reading people, Kakashi. But when it comes to yourself, you’re completely stupid and illogical.”

“I’m not sure a therapist should be calling a patient stupid…”

“You’ve said it before, this isn’t therapy. Your exact words were, ‘this is just a check up and nothing more.’”

Kakashi narrowed his eyes just a fraction at the words. How wrong he had been.

“You think...my fears are illogical? That it?”

“As your doctor, therapist, friend. Yes. I am telling you that you don’t need to be afraid.”

“Haven’t I earnt the right to be afraid?” The words slipped with an edge of bitterness that he couldn’t take back or stop. The pause between the two men was palpable and Kakashi felt it in the pit of his stomach. He knew. “I know my fears aren’t rational, I know my heart is sound, and hers. I feel fine, happy even. But I felt fine before, how do I know that something isn’t....”

“You don’t know.” Crane interrupted forcefully. “Life is a crap pile, we just have to make the most out of whatever time we do get. And it’s time that you started enjoying what time you’ve been given also. Your options here, are to talk to Sakura, or do what you do best. Avoid the issue, send her on a mission or busy yourself, find another ridiculous excuse...”

Kakashi did nothing but breathe in the words, try to marry them with his own turbulent thoughts. Every ounce of him wanting to counter and argue with all the terrible things that had happened whenever someone got close to him. But Crane already knew all that. He knew it and he’d still said he was being irrational.

“This shameless ‘flustered’ innuendo you keep using with Sakura, have you spoken to her in depth about exactly.... Why she is unable to... unfluster herself?”
“Not exactly. It’s been more of a teasing reference if anything…” The answer came automatically though Kakashi was still quite lost in thought. Crane looked thoughtful himself.

“Maybe that’s something you need to discuss with her before you offer her any kind of…. Help?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea…”

“Kakashi, I know you’re referring to the ‘help’ and not the talking, and to be clear that ‘help’ is sex. You need to be more direct about this. While you have your own problems, Sakura is a different and unique individual. Complete with her own set of issues that are entirely separate from yours. My advice to you stands firm. Talk to Sakura. Use that damned brain of yours and apply it to this situation instead of wallowing in fear and guilt.”

There wasn’t any more he could say. Not for Kakashi’s mind anyway, he’d already stood and taken his leave before Crane had even had a chance to wish him goodnight. It felt an awful lot like defeat, that he was retreating from that office with his tail between his legs. The only person to ever rightly call him out like that had been Obito himself. When the night air hit his face, the thoughts of Obito seemed to lead him to the cenotaph before his mind had caught up. Those familiar letters calming him, just another security blanket. But talking to Obito had always helped before.

“Hey, Obito. I know you told me not to hang around here anymore, and I know it’s been… a while… Apparently I’m a stupid fool who can’t seem to make the most out of his time. Bet you would have told me that right from the start huh…”

Silence. The usual soul crushing and heavy silence that would have once put his mind at ease now only served to echo the words he needed to tell himself. Once upon a time they would have sounded just like Obito’s voice, but with each day it grew fuzzy and not as sharp in his memory. With a hand to the memorial Kakashi cast his eyes upward to the likeness of his sensei on the mountain.

Minato sensei would never have run from his feelings for Kushina, and she was just as delightfully terrifying as Sakura could be, and just as caring. Minato after all, was still the best man he had ever had the great fortune to know, even if he’d known him just a little.

“It’s time to stop being afraid.”

Kakashi this time was speaking only to himself, not to the memorial or to the stone likeness. He turned and began heading to the one place he knew he needed to be now. It probably wasn’t going to be easy, this whole dating thing, but where would be the excitement if it were easy? He’d always relished a challenge before, this…. Sakura, would be no different. She would always keep him on his toes, and it was with a smile now that Kakashi decided any trouble would be worth it. For her.

* * * *

With an exasperated sigh, Sakura slumped back onto her bed, wearing nothing but a camisole and a poor excuse for briefs. There was a thin layer of sweat glistening her entire body but it had nothing to do with the heat of the room. The air con was finally fixed and blasting cool air throughout her entire apartment.

What had heated her very skin and everything it touched was the damned chapter she had just finished of that stupid book. She’d dived into it the minute she’d gotten home, an attempt to distract herself from the lack of Kakashi, at the meeting aftermath or in his office later that day. It didn’t overly concern her, it was just mildly irritating when she wanted to be celebrating with him so badly. And the different ways they could celebrate were also running through her mind, adding to the heat coursing through her blood, dampening the sheets beneath her.
The book lay open on the pillow, Sakura had found herself lying on her stomach as she read. Her eyes shutting tightly each time it got too steamy, her body writhing against the bed, attempting to relieve some of the ever growing ache. For the first time in a long while she had been close, so tantalisingly close to release. But as close as she got to that edge the hotter and more frustrated she grew, that it hadn’t happened, that she was unable to do it herself. So now she lay back, literally throbbing with an unfulfilled need that might have been satisfied if she could just turn her brain off for ten minutes.

This time she couldn’t even blame it on the stupid book really. The scene itself had been so steamy and unexpected it had sparked a storm within her. Out of nowhere, the characters had only been walking on a pathway home, but then it had started to rain. Suddenly they were sheltering beneath a tree, and touching each other everywhere, and Alejandro was very capable with his fingers it seemed. Bringing her to orgasm twice while she writhed against the bark of the tree…

Sakura had instantly been equal parts turned on and jealous. It was kind of an ironic but painfully perfect ending to her day to be honest. An anticlimactic finish to a very strange day overall.

But good things were going to happen now with this hospital, her very own brain child. It wasn’t the time for her to be feelings selfish, not when something truly life giving was being built into the village. The thought causing her to sigh again more deeply.

“If you keep making that noise I’ll have to ask what’s wrong…”

Sakura didn’t move, though hearing a man’s deep voice like that in her own bedroom should have been enough to startle her, especially as she was in only her underwear and lying on the bed. But this voice was one that could never scare her, it only caused a thrill like ice through her blood, and her eyes open to see the familiar head of silver hair leaning against her door frame.

Kakashi had said he would find her later… though it was much later than she had anticipated.

“Kakashi, I thought you’d turned in for the night…”

“Sorry about that, I had some... things that needed sorting out downtown.”

“Did you get them sorted?” Sakura asked without moving a muscle, her eyes the only thing watching him. Kakashi hadn’t even entered the room fully.

“Yes.”

There was a soft look in his eyes and beneath the mask. Sakura nodded just slightly and he took that as cue to step inside her bedroom. His body making it only as far as the wingback chair at the side of the bed. Silently he deposited himself into it, Sakura could see and feel his eyes on her, never leaving. But they also never strayed from her face. She could tell he was trying his utmost not to roam over her body, as hot as she felt before now it was tenfold, and that heat was coming from Kakashi sitting one foot away from her.

“Now, are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?” He sounded legitimately concerned, his voice perhaps deeper than usual. She wondered if he was restraining himself from ogling her as much as she imagined.

“Just the usual…” She said with a smile, looking up to stare at the ceiling. Not trusting herself to be looking at him without a raging blush on her face.

“The usual being….unable to… unfluster yourself, I take it?”
She nodded without looking at him. The way his voice dropped was doing things to her stomach, it had a dark promise to it that was also making her mouth water. She bit her lip.

“Sakura, I know I’ve asked you before, but neither of us were exactly in the right frame of mind. Do you...know why it is, that you can’t satisfy yourself?”

Once upon a time, she’d have slapped him for asking that question, before she knew him so well. Now she could hear a softness in his voice, one that he reserved for when he was alone with her, on he’d used that night last week when he’d told her all the horrible truths about his one day off. And of all people she knew that he could be trusted, she could tell him anything at all, because Kakashi was Kakashi. And so she met his eye, locked in a gaze that was at once heartwarming as it was sincere, and the words came out.

“It’s not as if I don’t want to, and I do try, but it’s as if my brain doesn’t want me to. Like the damned thing won’t switch off so I can...well, get off. And I get close to it, but it’s like my thoughts chase the ending away, over the years it’s just gotten further and further away. Sometimes I stop before I even start, knowing that there’s no... well, happy ending.”

“Have you... tried it with another person?” Even as the words came from his mouth she got the distinct feeling that he wasn’t sure if he wanted the answer. But he remained firm in his eyes, keeping her focus hostage. And she wanted this conversation to keep happening, just like that night on his sofa.

“I have. Two years ago, just a random night with a random person. I got... what I needed and then swore never to do it again.”

“At all...or?”

“I don’t do random hookups, Kakashi. When someone worthy comes along I want to give them all of me, in every sense, not just the physical.” She spoke with a kind of sureness that settled any kind of nerves she may have had about lying in front of Kakashi in her underwear. She hoped with all her might that he understood the gravity of her words, and what they meant for the both of them.

When Sakura nodded impercipiently, Kakashi closed his eyes for a few seconds with his own nod and mask crinkle. There was a smile behind there. One of those tender ones she loved so dearly, and she found herself hating that fabric all over again for hiding it from her.

“What would you tell a patient, if they came to you with this problem?”

“I would refer them to see a psychiatrist, check them first for major issues of course... “ She sighed as the sentence trailed off.

“Have you considered talking to someone about it?”

“I have. But... there’s just... so many more important things they do with their time y’know? Helping one girl with a happy ending isn’t exactly worthy of...”

“Sakura.” Her name on his lips stopped her instantly, though he hadn’t said it loudly. “You are worthy. Of everything, of all the happiness the world can offer. And you deserve it, for all that you do for everyone else, for me... “ His eyes were determined and sure as he spoke and it was all she could do to stop hers from welling up. “There is no shame in putting yourself first, for once, and having a conversation with someone who can help. It’s necessary, and it’s something I have to do myself from time to time. Alright? Promise me you’ll put yourself first.”

She nodded, unable to speak, a smile on her lips the tears staying firmly in her eyes. He was telling
her about his own therapy now. He was giving her every view of him, something she hadn’t realized she had wanted for so long now. Kakashi himself looked more relaxed as he sat back a little, his elbow on the arm rest, hand to his chin. Looking thoughtful, and he changed from looking so loving and caring, to looking downright mischievous in an instant.

“Have you considered perhaps… that you just don’t have the right motivation?”

The cheek in him made her laugh, the serious tone of the room fading into the ease with which she loved about being with Kakashi.

“Oh, believe me, I have the motivation handy.” Sakura reached over, holding the damned book up with one hand before dropping it back to the adjacent pillow. The deep set chuckle from Kakashi made her light headed, such a sound should be illegal. She felt the telltale heat begin to rise within her again.

“Maybe it’s simply an issue of… technique?”

Her neck turned in a snap to look at him fully with a kind of aghast shock that he would even dare to say such a thing. The raised brow and undoubted grin beneath his mask made him look downright devilish with glee that he had surprised her.

But Sakura quickly remembered her own promise to herself to not to be the startled mouse anymore with him. That two could play at this game, and it had worked well before, in the library and the times they had frantically locked lips… So she had all the necessary proof that it would work again. She met his with her own impish grin. Her hand coming to rest on the hard plains of her stomach, his eyes darted to the action, a dark desperation suddenly behind the look.

“Well I might have been able to finish the job tonight if you hadn’t interrupted me… This is the second time you’ve done that, by the way.”

“Oh really?” He sat back and crossed his legs, still a hand to his chin.

“Yeah, and I was really close this time, really close….” she repeated for dramatic flair and it had the desired effect. He elicited that dulcet chuckle again, she could have moaned at just the sound of it, awakening some primal urge within her.

“Which chapter?”

“Twelve…” She sighed, adding a hint of breathlessness to it, just to goad him further.

“Tree or cave?”

And as usual, Kakashi found a way to foil her plans.

“Tree… There’s a cave? I haven’t got that far yet, wait… what happens in the cave?” Sakura wasn’t so impressed with his chuckling this time. “No spoilers, Kakashi!” Her bottom lip pouted out, she resisted the urge to poke tongues at him. There was a thoughtful pause before he spoke again.

“Don’t let me stop you…from finishing.” He’d said it quietly again, voice barely a whisper, as though he were unsure exactly what words were drifting from his lips.

Something like courage began to burn within her also, and somehow her body knew what to do, the hand that was on her stomach trailing delicate fingers up to her lips. She watched him following the slow gesture with his eyes and a hunger, a hunger that she was feeling too, Sakura bit her thumb in coy shyness. The slight twitching of Kakashi’s mask telling her that she was winning this battle, and
it filled her with satisfaction to no end.

The way he was watching, her own desires reflected back at her, it was as if a switch had been flicked. And she suddenly knew what to do.

“Seeing as you seem to be the expert…” she very slowly ran her fingers back down to her navel, “maybe you could observe and give pointers on my…. technique, as you put it…”

Kakashi’s brow raised, his eyes widening for just a moment, Sakura stopped in her hand’s movements. Waiting with bated breath to see his reaction to her bold move. Sakura wasn’t sure she trusted herself at this point, but she knew one thing, she could trust Kakashi. And she wanted this to happen. After what seemed like a heated inferno of an eternity he finally replied.

“I don’t mind giving critique on this experiment, and you did say you needed my help with something…”

Sakura chuckled breathlessly out of either relief or excitement she couldn’t be sure. She began to dance her fingers across her skin in teasing circles, Kakashi’s eyes following their every move now with keen interest.

“I do need you…” She bit her lip again and closed her eyes tightly, she heard his intake of breath and it spurred her on. But she couldn’t open her eyes just yet. She wanted to imagine his hands on her while she touched herself, just as she had been doing before. And then her fingers dipped lower, rubbing languid circles to the dampness that awaited her touch, the swollen nub beneath so sensitive her back arched off the bed.

“You appear to have something in the way there…”

Gods his voice was so deep, it did things to her, hearing it so close as she touched herself so intimately only made it more palpable. She bit her lip hard suppressing the breathy moan that was sure to come out if she didn’t.

“Mmm… You might be onto something there…” Sakura’s fingers retreated for a moment, she groaned audibly as she dragged them underneath the fabric of her panties. Continuing the circling movements on her clit with fervor.

“That’s much better…”

Kakashi’s satisfied tone caused her to sharply intake breath, a surge of wetness coating her fingers as she worked at her release. But it wouldn’t do, she needed something inside of her, her fingers coaxing down to where she wanted them most. In desperation she began pumping herself with two fingers at a harsh pace. Pushing herself in sight of the edge she so desperately wanted to fall off. It was here that her eyes betrayed her, cracking open to spy Kakashi and his intense focus on her body.

He was now leaning forward in the chair, watching her that little bit closer, roaming her body with a look of molten heat. And up to her face, their eyes met and Sakura hastily bit back a moan, her eyes closing tightly again. Gods that look on his face, it was pushing her closer and closer…

“What are you thinking about right now?”

And his voice suddenly added to the mix, she didn’t fight back the guttural sound that spilled forth. The way he’d asked it, almost whispered, and urgent…

“You…” Her eyes opened again, her fingers never faltering in their relentless pace. Kakashi grunted in approval.
“Seems to be working well… what about me exactly? Hmm, Sakura?”

That was when she felt it, the first quiver, the first ripple of her walls taking her fingers in deeper. It wasn’t release but it was as close as she’d been for two years. So she kept going, groaning in between syllables.

“You… touching me… your hands… mmph…” She couldn’t produce any more coherent sounds.

“Good, keep going…”

He sounded so primal, and the praise only made her more heated. She wasn’t sure of herself in this little game but she was enjoying every second, every sound, every feeling… Sakura cracked her eyes again to see Kakashi had shifted, he was now standing beside the bed, looking down as she writhed and undulated against her own fingers. This view of him added to it again, built her higher, closer to the edge.

“You’re neglecting yourself Sakura…” Kakashi saying her name like that made her whimper unabashedly. “A body like yours deserves to be worshipped all over…”

She felt him lean over, grab the hand she’d fisted into the sheets beside her, and delicately he placed it on her chest. The pressure of where their skin had touched burnt, and the pressure she now felt of her own hand resting on her hardened nipples was an inch closer to sweet release. With her eyes opened hazily she watched his reaction, watched his stare that bore into her as she slipped her fingers beneath the cup of her bra. She watched his chest rise and fall rapidly at the same time she pushed the damned bra aside, revealing her bare breast.

With the same intensity as she pumped into her dripping heat, she began to pluck at her peaked nipple. The dual sensation making her gasp and arch back again, her leg beginning to quiver. So close.

“See isn’t that much better?” His voice was closer to her now, she barely registered the dipping of the mattress next to her. Not until she felt his hot breath on her neck. “You dive right in the same way you would a battle, Sakura. But you’re the kind of woman who deserves...attention, everywhere…” She moaned again with another ripple of her fingers, the noise of her pumping fingers adding to it all. “Every inch of you should be worshipped… Does it feel good, Sakura?”

“Mmm… Yes.. Oh gods, yes…”

“Just imagine how much better it would feel with my hands… my mouth… “ She moaned loudly as he pecked her neck with a brief kiss. “Is that what you want, Sakura?”

“Yes, yes….Kakashi… mmm, so...close…”

“Are you still thinking about me, Sakura?” It was deliberate the way he said her name like that, and she didn’t care one bit.

“Yes…”

“Good.” She felt him nuzzle close to her ear before he whispered. “Now, cum for me, Sakura.”

Something white hot like lightning tore through her mind, all she could see and think of was Kakashi, she could smell him and feel his heat. And then she couldn’t think of anything. The pleasure blinding all her senses for a moment. Her legs jerking, barely registering that he was also tangled in there beside her on the bed. Panting for breath, eyes wide open as she looked into his eyes, Sakura toppled over that edge. She jumped from it head first and Kakashi was there to catch her.
“You alright?” He whispered, his face hovering next to hers on the pillow so closely.

Sakura’s arms slumped back onto the mattress, still catching her breath and feeling the fluids trickling down her thighs and onto the sheets. She spoke when her brain finally allowed her to function again.

“Alright? Are you kidding… I feel fantastic…” She leaned forward and pecked him on the lips.

“Thank you.” She whispered, but he chased her, tugging his mask down at impossible speed and capturing her lips in a searing kiss. He pulled back after a moment and suddenly Sakura felt heated again. How she could be sated and turned on all at once was a mystery. But Kakashi had always been mysterious.

“That was a good effort for starters anyway…” He said hotly to her lips and she felt like a puddle.

“Starters huh?”
And another.

“Mnhmm. Just an appetizer. There’s still a lot of…critiquing I need to do on your technique.”

They both laughed into a deeper kiss and Sakura felt light headed as he descended upon her neck.

“Is that so?”

“Mmm, yes.” He spoke between lathing kisses up to her chin and back down again, like a man obsessed. “To start with, you’re far, far too sexy not to have any… toys at your disposal.” She chuckled as he continued. “I’ll take that as a yes…”

“Just one, actually. And I’ve never actually used it on myself.”

“A shame. Why is that? It could’ve have aided your….unflustering…”

She chuckled again, his attention diverted to nibbling her ear and Sakura felt actual goosebumps on her heated skin.

“You should see the thing, it was… scary…”

“I just don’t think you were using it right…”

Another chuckle. But this time, she felt Kakashi’s hand to her chin, tilting her to face him eye to eye. There was something about seeing him without his mask, looking at her this tenderly that melted any remaining reserves she had built.

“Sakura, earlier you said you wanted to give your all to someone worthy, but there’s something you need to know… You, you are worthy. Of every good thing and feeling, of all the best things and feelings. More so than anyone else on this whole earth. I think… you were flustered for so long, because you didn’t think you deserved it… But you need to know, that you are more worthy of love than any…”

She cut him off with a kiss, a tender one. Unable to hear another word from his mouth without physically showing him how much she wanted him, how much she loved him. Sakura poured it all into that kiss, and after a startled second, Kakashi reciprocated. It was not slow but not at a breathless pace either. When they parted for air Sakura shifted, placing her palm to his chest, pushing him down onto the mattress. Slowly he complied, as she rolled and climbed over top of him, eyes locked in a staring match. Straddling him now she attempted to put all her love into the kiss she placed on his
There was a saying somewhere, or a poem she’d read at some time, and it came to her mind as she scraped her hand down his chest. Love is but a durable fire, ever burning and from itself never turning. It was at once all encompassing and melting, but not insufferable, and not something to rush. Their foreheads rested against each other while hands began to roam previously unreachable places.

“Sakura…” Kakashi whispered before swallowing thickly. “I love you, all of you…”

She pecked him quickly before replying.

“And I love you too, all of you…”

Kakashi exhaled deeply, humming a noise in a kind of contentment she’d never heard from him before but found she loved more than any other noise he made.

“Good…” He whispered.

And as their lips began to brush against each others languidly, another noise entirely separate and unexpected caused them both to freeze. An incessant ‘tap, tap, tapping’ which directed their attention from each other.

A lone messenger bird attempting to break the glass of Sakura’s window pane. Kakashi immediately groaned like a petulant child, she tried not to giggle but may have just a fraction. She yelped as he lifted her easily from her position and deposited her back to the bed. Sakura covered her mouth with her hand to suppress any further laughter, Kakashi smirking at her without the mask as he stood. Her eyes immediately drawn to the bulge his pants barely covered.

“Hey, my face is up here, Sakura.”

When her gaze went back up she rolled her eyes at the sight of the mask back in its original position. Shaking her head. Kakashi huffed and directed his attention to the window.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming.”

“Is it one of yours or mine?”

“Hokage towers. I knew there was something I forgot to do…” He unfurled a scroll before shooing the bird away. “There’s an urgent A rank that needs seeing to… “ He sat at the end of the bed with a huff, Sakura came up behind him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I’m sorry, I’ll have to see to this…”

Kakashi’s hand came up to rest on top of hers.

“It’s alright. This experiment was successful but it was only a starter, right?”

“Right…” Kakashi replied before leaning back to peck her lips through the mask. “You just wait til the next experiment…”
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Summary

Getting close to the end now! Just remember while reading this... I only do happy endings.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As the sun rose over Konoha and the rays reached the windows of Hokage tower, Kakashi was reading the mission scroll before him. He’d now read it so many times the words had lost all meaning. The morning sun only illuminated how futile it was to be going over it repetitively. If there was another solution to the roster at hand both Kakashi and Shikamaru had been unable to find it, and that meant one thing. It had to be impossible, there was only one way and as much as he disliked it, there would be no alternative.

This A rank mission to the land of Grass would need the best medic nin on hand to be any kind of success. And while there were certainly other jounin he could send, and other medics that were qualified, none of them were suitable or available. Which left only one option. Sakura Haruno.

Kakashi lamented the only option being Sakura, half hoping that Shizune would be unable to do without her at the hospital so he could send another nin. But it would compromise everything. And even if he was sure to go down as the worst Hokage in history anyway, he wasn’t about to knowingly adjust a mission roster just to serve his own personal agenda.

He tried to assure himself that there would be time later to talk to Sakura about all that had happened, all the words that were left unsaid, the things he desperately wanted to tell her. And he would make it clear before she had to leave that this was not what he had wanted in the slightest… if he left for her apartment now then he would have a little time…

As if the universe was out to foil his every desire, the phone at his desk rang. For someone to call at this hour of the morning meant two things, it was either urgent, or a wrong number. All the same he answered, and it only took thirty seconds for him to immediately regret his decision.

Urgent call from the Hidden Mist Village.

Mei Terumi, the fifth Mizukage, has announced her successor.

Kakashi exchanged the bare minimum of communications with the nin on the other end of the line before hanging up. Closing his eyes and exhaling deeply, Kakashi pushed that matter aside for the moment. It would be sure to dog him for the next week anyway, but at this moment, time was of the essence and there were more important things to be attending to.

Shikamaru came through the doors moments later.

“I just heard. Where do we start first with the damage control?”

“For now, we don’t start anywhere. I need this shinobi task force moving as soon as possible, these four ninja to be notified and mobilized to leave this morning…”
Shikamaru took the piece of paper from Kakashi’s hand.

“I didn’t think you would find another squad... “

“Well, I had to at least try.”

Shikamaru looked up from the paper with a studious gaze.

“And why is that, Kakashi?” The question fell flat in the air around them, a heavier connotation behind it in Kakashi’s mind. “I understand hesitance to send the assistant director to Konoha hospital during a busy time, but Shizune said herself, the hospital isn’t busy...”

“No it isn’t. But the children’s hospital was approved just yesterday and there is a lot of work to be done for the new sole director... Also Sakura is one of the greatest assets to the Leaf Village and there should be discretion used when showing her off to the rest of the world. I know we’re in an unprecedented era of peace, but it doesn’t change the jealous nature of the villages.”

“I’m not so sure it’s got anything to do with the jealous nature of the villages... Kakashi.”

The insinuation here was not so subtle, Kakashi fought back the urge to instantly retort with, ‘and what do you mean by that?’ But instead the Hokage remained silent, in a staring match with his assistant, though there was nothing really at stake it felt just as intense. Shikamaru broke the silence with an exhausted sigh.

“Look, I get it. You don’t have to tell me anything, and you probably wouldn’t even if I just came out and said it directly. But I do know what’s going on between the two of you. I sent that messenger to find you at her apartment last night after all.”

Kakashi was glad for the mask on his face disguising any of the heated embarrassment that unintentionally flushed to his cheeks. In his haste last night, after what had happened with Sakura consuming his thoughts entirely, he hadn’t considered the implications. It was too late to avoid, but he lamented it being spoken of without Sakura present.

“I would appreciate...what’s going on between the two of us to be kept in the dark for now, I trust you implicitly of course...it’s just...”

Shikamaru smirked and let out a snide laugh.

“You’re such an idiot, sensei.”

Kakashi’s eyebrows jumped at the words. This theory seemed to be a popular one around Konoha lately and he wasn’t so sure that was a good thing for the current Hokage.

“Excuse me?”

“Look, I’m not about to broadcast this to the village or anything. It’s just, a nice change of pace to see you happy about someone. If it were anyone else I might not be so supportive, but you deserve it, Kakashi. Women have a tendency to make better men out of us after all... just don’t forget it, or they will remind you.” The brief shadow that passed over Shikamaru’s eyes as he spoke that last sentence was both ominous and hilarious for Kakashi.

“Thank you, Shikamaru. I appreciate it...really...” What passed between them was an unspoken understanding that there would be no more spoken about it for now. But knowing that support was there would make this at least a fraction easier. “Now back to this current chaos we’ve found ourselves in...”
“Yes. Damage control. Where to start.”

"First things first, this A rank takes priority, there are lives at stake."

"Right, I'll make contact with the squad right away, Hokage sama..."

Shikamaru left the room with haste, Kakashi feeling his stomach churn as the door closed. It was unclear if this was out of nervousness or hunger, but it was an uncomfortable in between place that did nothing to soothe his current thoughts. He wished that things would slow down and go back to the easy way it had been the last few weeks. Kage retirements aside, all he really wanted was to be able to leave work each day at a reasonable hour, and have that time with Sakura that he desperately desired. It felt like a reward for getting through his day, and it had been the saving grace of the last few months. Now whenever that time was robbed it just added to his frustrations.

It was a horrible kind of irony for Kakashi's thoughts, that if he’d just immediately accepted the mission roster at first, he could have spent the rest of the night with Sakura. They would have had time to speak the unspoken things. Though Kakashi doubted much talking would actually be happening... Occasionally images of Sakura's face contorted with pleasure would assault his mind's eye. It would probably continue to do so for the rest of time, even without the Sharingan that image was indelibly burnt into his memory.

It was then that he began to ponder on the idiot theory that everyone seemed to categorize him with lately. It was stupid, why he’d left her at that damned approval party. Instead of mourning over the lost time they may or may not have in the future he should have just enjoyed celebrating her successes. Though she hadn’t seemed too bothered by his leaving, it would only be a matter of time before the ‘duty calls’ excuse grew old. It was an excuse he needed to nip in the bud now.

Time passed, the rising sun's rays falling to the white Hokage robes that were still hanging on the back of his door. Today they would remain there, Kakashi didn’t need their added weight on his shoulders right now, he had enough on his hands. The hat too remained on the hook, Kakashi briefly glancing to the picture of Lord Third in a moment of apology for neglecting the tradition. Tsunade had only worn the damned thing once, but for Kakashi it was an ode to the Third, and the man that had been the only constant through his childhood… He was allowed one day without it surely.

There was a stern rapping on the door.

“Enter.”

Shikamaru opened the door, following behind him were four shinobi, Sakura included. One Hyuuga and two chuunin that would have suited the Anbu ranks in another time. He steadied himself when he looked at Sakura, trying every bit to remain as professional as possible. There was nothing in her countenance to give away what had transpired between them, just a determined look in her eye, she was here for a mission. This comforted Kakashi more than anything, reminding him of the mission...

“Reporting for duty, Hokage-sama.”

“Thanks for coming so quickly. The situation is growing more urgent, so I’ll be brief…” Kakashi tried to ignore how the temperature rose as his eyes locked with Sakura’s briefly. “A situation arose late yesterday afternoon just outside of the Hidden Grass Village, we received word that the outlying villages had been recently decimated by a natural disaster. Proper aid was dispatched immediately, but the aftershocks that followed from the first earthquake have been unrelenting, and the Grass village lost contact with many of it’s relief squads.”

“Shouldn’t we be sending an entire squad of medics for such a thing, Hokage-sama?” The Hyuuga
asked, Sakura interjecting.

“I suspect that the earthquakes or aftershocks were not naturally occurring at all.”

“That’s right, Sakura. This appears to be targeted attempts on the Grass Villages medic nin, leaving them vulnerable to attack.”

“The other Hidden Villages are unaware that we suspect as such. All have sent aid to the affect outskirts of the Grass Village as well, but there is more to do toward the epicentre of the earthquake, and we’re unsure if any aid has reached that area. Which is where you come in…” Shikamaru stood at Kakashi’s side, skimming the report as he spoke.

“Get as close to the center as you can, heal as many as you can and provide aid where necessary. But your main objective is to determine if this was the cause of natural events or if something more sinister is at play. Either way, we need to recover the Grass medic nin. They are an invaluable asset to the village and can’t do without them for long.”

Sakura nodded sharply to Kakashi, her eyes still focussed and determined. The ninja standing beside her all beneath her rank, she would be the lead for this mission.

“Question, sir.” The raven haired chuunin spoke, an exceptional Inuzuka kunoichi, Kakashi nodded for her to continue. “Surely the nin of the Grass would have equipment to measure the earthquake and determine if that is what occurred?”

“Yes, and all that seismograph tech was destroyed before the event. Which is one of our main causes to suspect that some form of foul play is at work. You will need to prepare and move fast, you have until the hour is up to do so, send word once you have arrived to the outskirts of the Grass Village. Your mission is to aid wherever possible, investigate anything suspicious, do not engage should you find anything. Report back immediately. This is an A rank mission and it comes with certain dangers, so be prepared should there be an attack.” Kakashi thought on his words as he eyed each of the ninja in turn. “Any questions?”

There was a collective pause as they each shook their heads, no questions. Kakashi stood before he spoke again.

“Alright, you have an hour. Prepare thoroughly.”

He nodded his head, Shikamaru already walking toward the door, the others turning to follow. But Kakashi wasn’t about to let Sakura out of his sight without speaking to her.

“Sakura, if you don’t mind, a quick word?”

Her eyebrows raised as Kakashi stepped out quickly from behind the desk to shut the door behind the others. They didn’t appear to notice which he was glad for in the moment. As soon as it clicked shut he locked it also, turning himself to find Sakura was meeting him halfway as he rushed toward her. Immediately tugging the mask down his face with her nimble fingers he wasted no time in assaulting her lips.

He had suspected it would go this way, hands roaming over each other with feverish wanting. With that door locked there was no way they wouldn’t be touching each other. Tongues battling for the upper hand, Sakura boldly pressing herself against him. It would be so easy, to push her onto that desk, to plunder her entire body. Ravish what was soon to be his in that primal possessive way that was brewing within him. But an urgent voice spoke in his mind, and it sounded an awful lot like Crane speaking.
Reluctantly they separated, Kakashi taking a deep breath and resting his forehead to hers. His eyes were shut but he could feel her hooded and heated gaze on him. He would be a goner if he looked her in the eyes right now, words needed to be said.

“I wish there was more time, believe me if there was anyone else I could send I would…”

“Shush now, it’s okay, we’ll have all the time in the world later… for experimenting.”

The way she said it should be made illegal, it was all salacious and too tempting an offer. Kakashi cleared his throat out of nervousness, trying to shake the words out by force. All the blood had rushed from his brain to other parts…

“It’s… it’s more than that. I shouldn’t have left yesterday after the hospital was approved, I should have stayed to spend time with you and celebrate, I’m sorry I…”

“Kakashi, it’s fine, really.” Sakura spoke with a giggle that had him opening his eyes to take in her smile. “I know you’re busy, and I like how we got to celebrate later… loved it even.”

He stepped back a little to lean against his desk, taking Sakura’s hand with him, she followed and at this height he met her square in the eyes.

“No, it’s not fine. I mean, how celebrated was more than fine, but my leaving wasn’t. I should be relishing every minute that I get to spend with you, alone or otherwise. I won’t make the same mistake again, I’ll enjoy every and any second that you can spare me…”

“Kakashi…” Sakura stepped forward and between his legs, running her hand over his cheek, he’d even forgotten that his mask was down. “What’s going on?” The concern dripping through her voice.

“I just… this mission is the start of it. I know it’s unavoidable, I know there’s no logic behind this…fear. But as long as I’m able to spend any time with you, I’ll consider myself luckier than any man…”

“Fear? What are you afraid of, love?”

Kakashi paused, stealing his nerves for the next words to fall from his mouth and the bombshells that would surely fall afterwards.

“Losing time, with you. Yesterday I caught a glimpse of the future. One where we’re both too busy to spend any real time with each other. And let’s face it, the Hokage and the sole director for the children’s hospital are going to have precious few hours to spend alone with each other…”

“You’re an idiot, you know that?”

Her interruption caused his jaw to actually drop open.

“Excuse me?”

“You, Lord Hokage, are a complete moron. A genius in other areas sure, but this… this just proves it. Did you really think I would have no time to spare for you? The man I’m in love with. Did you honestly think that I would take on a position with no help at all to manage the place?”

“Uh…”
“Kakashi, I do love you, but seriously. I’m 25 but even I’m not stupid enough to take on a position as sole director. Hell, Shizune knew that was practically a death sentence, it’s why she has several assistant directors…”

“Uh….”

Sakura shook her head a little, watching him with those captivating green eyes that were swimming with an unnamed emotion as she spoke.

“If you had hung around yesterday, you would have heard me talking to the council members about it. They completely backed me up on my decision by the way, said it was an ingenious idea.”

“And what was…”

Sakura cut him off.

“I named Ino Yamanaka as joint director. Her talents are wasted in that flower shop, and she is looking to get back into active duty now that her son is a little older. She’s the ideal co-director. With her capabilities alone, just think of all the children that we will be able to save….”

Kakashi hadn’t been aware of holding his breath though suddenly it felt as if all the air in his lungs had completely abandoned him. He had forgotten to breathe, and now as Sakura spoke, it felt as if that sweet air were regenerating him.

He really was an idiot.

“Oh, well then…that’s good news.”

The words fell from his mouth in a jumble but he was unable to speak much further than that. Pulling Sakura roughly to him and capturing her in a searing kiss. She made that same quiet yelping noise in surprise and it satisfied him to no end. This kiss held the same heat and urgency from before, but to Kakashi it felt infinitely better, because now he was able to give in to it with entire impunity. Surrender completely and allow himself to enjoy this moment of happiness that had been bestowed upon him.

Kakashi knew that this wouldn’t, couldn’t last forever, that she would be leaving on that damnable mission soon enough. But the way she was gripping onto him, her hands roaming up to tug at the strands of his hair, the sensation far too pleasurable to be legal. He didn’t want this to end just yet.

The kiss slowed, morphing into something so caring and tender it felt like the most precious thing he’d ever received. Better than any gift. Better tasting than any meal he’d ever eaten. Kakashi sighed heavily when the kiss finally petered out, unsure exactly how much time had passed while they had been joined at the lips.

“We’ll have plenty of time for this…” Sakura brushed a brief small kiss against him, “…and more, when I get back from the mission.”

The way her voice dropped with the words and more held a darker promise that caused the temperature to rise in that office. Kakashi had to clear his throat before he spoke, as if the ability to speak had been stolen from him with that kiss.

“Of course.” His eyes drifted open to meet hers. “We’ll make time.”

“Exactly.” Sakura beamed at him with a smile he would be sure to indelibly etch into his mind to look back on later. “I’d better go get ready. I’ll be seeing you soon, Kakashi.”
Her smile dulled just a fraction before she planted a peck on his lips. When she withdrew this time he noticed just how kiss swollen her lips were, the surging feeling of pride he felt at this was a novel experience for him.

“Take care…”

“Of course. You take care of you too.”

Sakura stepped back toward the door, keeping her eye on him all the way. Kakashi watched her closely until the door was closed and he was left alone. The only trace left of her being the lingering impression on his lips and the dissipating heat of the room. With another sigh that reverberated deep within his bones, Kakashi finally moved from where he still sat on his desk to the chair behind it.

The hand that automatically came up to readjust his mask caused him to jolt a little in surprise, his mind had been palatably blank since the door had closed him in. Until a single thought presented itself.

“I should’ve said I love you….”

* * * *

A week had passed, a week of trudging through heartache and ruin, a week of constant aftershocks and tremors that had every person around her on edge. Sakura found herself kneeling amidst the rubble. The closer they had gotten to the epicentre of the quake the more frequent and violent the shaking had become. There hadn’t been a moment to spare since their arrival in Grass country.

Sakura had expected to see some terrible things when they reached the Grass Village, but even the outskirts were decimated. What little housing remained standing and safe to enter was overcrowded with the flow of injured refugees from other areas. There was no way she could just leave them in that state. Sakura had summoned Lady Katsuyu at her first chance, enabling the summons with her own chakra so that she may continue toward the centre while healing those left behind.

The drain on her usual chakra stores only began to take effect on the third day without rest. Stealing moments when she could, Sakura had slept only enough to keep her going. She was too needed to be sleeping for any length of time. But as they reached the very center Sakura was met with a dire decision.

The others in her squad had done as much preliminary searching as they could with their surroundings so unpredictable. There had been only one severe aftershock that morning, the Hyuuga of her team discerning trace amounts of chakra coming from the ground at the very centre of the quake. But now they had come further than any other relief effort, and there were signs of desperation all around her. People half dead and buried beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings crying out with what remained of their voices. Hoarse and tired from wailing for days without water or reprieve.

As a medic she could not, would not leave these people for a second longer. She had to act now and she had to act smart. The others could follow up on the potential threat, but this is where she needed to be.

“You guys go on ahead and inspect the chakra signature while you can…”

The other three stopped from their various positions to ogle her incredulously.

“And just what do you plan on doing?” The Hyuuga asked as he approached her.
Sakura didn’t answer right away, she stood back and started the necessary hand signs. It was going to take a little time to accomplish and she would need every second to save as many of these people as she could. Her concentration needed to be faultless as well.

“First and foremost our mission is to aid wherever possible, and as a medic nin I will do just that. So stay out of my way and let me save these people.”

The chuunin looked mildly irritated but it morphed into a kind of stunned awe within seconds. Because Sakura had finished her hand signs, and had released her Strength of a Hundred seal.

“Miss Haruno, there’s really no need to go so far for these people…”

“Of course there is. These are people. Innocent people and our allies who need help. And I will provide it. So I will say it again, stay out of my way, before I make you.”

* * * *

The days went by more slowly than Kakashi would dare to admit to anyone other than himself. But he also had to admit, Mei’s resigning at this time was actually perfect. As in, the uproar it had caused following the other Kage’s retirement had kept him busy enough to make the days go by. It was just the nights he lamented. Eating dinner alone in his office. Watching, waiting for any sign of a certain A rank mission being finished. Time itself seemed torturously slow as soon as the sun went down.

The brief report he had received from their arrival to the Grass disaster had been just that, brief. While he had every confidence in the ninja that had been sent with Sakura, and even in Sakura herself, it didn’t ease the impatience within him.

More often than not he found himself staring blankly out of his office window. Things were changing outside this village. Almost all new Kage’s in office. And it was reassuring to see that they all came together in a time of natural disaster. There was hope for the fickle peace that they had fought for, perhaps, just maybe… he wouldn’t need to hold this office for much longer either. Kakashi had hope for that scenario at least, something he had scarcely allowed himself to do before.

In this scenario he would be the one cooking dinner for Sakura after her long day at the hospital. He would be home and waiting for her, just like he was waiting now. Albeit this was not the safe and homely daydream that he had been imagining.

It had been one week of living in this strange kind of limbo, where one eye was fixed to the incoming reports, the other glancing to the village gates. As the sun made its final descent Kakashi could just make out the main road that lead to the gates. There was nothing to indicate any incoming squads, there were barely any people out wondering to begin with. Summer had finally made way for Autumn and the last few nights in particular had been a good deal cooler. Kakashi hoped that Sakura had at least packed something warmer to wear…

“There you are! I finally found you.”

A familiar thump and a scraping of wheels.

“What do you mean Guy? I’m always here.”

"Well that just isn't true. Some days I come in here and you're already gone, but not at home... Other days I come earlier and you have vanished to some mystery location. You're still so goddamn cool and mysterious Kakashi, I can't stand it."

"Yeah, well. I'm only cool when I'm not wearing the hat." He gestured to the Hokage's white hat
hanging on a hook. Guy made a chuckling kind of sneer and Kakashi turned his attention back to his window view of Konoha.

"Kakashi..." Guy's voice held that damnable concern, using his unique ability to see through Kakashi's facade as always. "I heard about the children's hospital approval, congratulations."

"Mmm. Sakura did so well. It's a pity the Mizukage's retirement has taken up the majority of the news, but she'll get the recognition she deserves once it's built and doing good for the village."

Silence stretched between them, Kakashi liked to think he knew his friend well enough to judge when the man had something important to say. So he kept his silence while he also kept his view over the darkening village. He expected his comrade to bring up the prospect of his own retirement again, he expected... well something of that nature. But Guy remained uncharacteristically silent for a while, and it wasn't until Kakashi actually turned his head to meet his friends eye that he spoke.

"So, who is she?"

Another pause, this time Kakashi was at a loss for words. Guy beat him to the punch.

"And don't deny it. I know that look in your eye, I haven't seen it in a long time but I still recognize it. She must be pretty special."

"Yeah." Kakashi smiled at the sudden admission that left his lips. "Yeah, she is something else."

"I knew it." The grin on Guy's face was only there for a moment, sharing the same brightness that could have rivaled even Naruto's smile. "Then why the long face, old friend?"

"Its... complicated."

"For you to admit that she's precious to you, that's... well. I know you Kakashi and that's something not to be taken lightly."

Kakashi sighed and sat down in his desk chair, reaching eye level with Guy now. He considered telling the whole truth, right from the start. He considered outrightly divulging just who this precious someone was to him. But it was also something he had not discussed with Sakura herself, and therefore he didn't feel entirely comfortable in discussing the particulars without her present.

Then again Shikamaru already knew, it would only be a matter of time before the rumor spread. He found he couldn't lie to Guy either in this instance.

"That doesn't make it any simpler, Guy."

"So she doesn't have the same feelings for you then?"

"Oh no, the feelings are... very mutual." Kakashi couldn't help the smile tugging on the side of his lips. While knowing his mask covered the subconscious act he knew that he couldn't hide it from Guy.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Aside from being a busy Hokage myself, and her having a whole busy life of her own... There's an age difference which others might find... unacceptable."

"So quit."

Kakashi blinked a few times trying to process the two words Guy had spoken so nonchalantly.
"That doesn't solve the age difference. Or what other people might think of us..."

"Is it over 20 years? The difference?"

"Ugh, no. 14 actually."

"So what. And who cares what anyone else thinks as well."

There were no words that formed in Kakashi's mind as he continued to implore his friend with his eyes alone. This thing with Sakura had come on so strongly it was not something he could just ignore, and she felt the same. It wasn't that he expressly cared about what others thought of himself, but she, her name was something he could never see dragged through the mud. And certainly not because of him. Not after all the hard work she had gone through to accomplish what she had.

Guy interrupted his thought processes, wheeling closer to him.

"You've told her then, how you feel?"

Kakashi nodded yes.

"Kakashi, everything you do, everything you've ever done, has been for the sake of others. And I've watched you do it with only small sparks of happiness here and there throughout our whole lives. I'm not the only one who knows this, the village does too. You've found someone special, you should be with her, no one can deny people's feelings for each other."

Guy nodded at his final sentence as if to solidify his point. Kakashi smiled, both with his eyes and his mouth.

"Thanks, Guy. I appreciate it."

Another nod.

"You're welcome. So what, did you have a fight with her or something? Why aren't you out wooing lady love at this very moment?"

Kakashi's eyebrows raised marginally at the 'wooing' reference, feeling as if he'd aged another ten years just hearing the term used.

"Actually, she's not in the village right now..."

Guy laughed so loudly it reverberated in Kakashi's ears.

"So that explains the pining Hokage staring out the window act. You miss her that much, huh?"

Kakashi nodded imperceptibly. He did miss her, but he wasn't so sure that any words he strung together would convey exactly how he missed her. It was like that trip to the Sand where he’d turned to speak to her though she wasn’t there with him. Every night when he ate, every afternoon at the time when she would usually drop the hospital reports off. Every morning as he walked to the office, past her apartment building, past the hospital.

All roads lead back to Sakura.

“I do miss her. I miss her sometimes when she’s in the village too.” Kakashi rubbed his face at Guy’s scoff laughter. “I don’t know how it happened exactly but it did, and I’m glad it did.”

“So am I, old friend. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you quite this deep before. She must be one hell of a
woman to land the eternal bachelor copy nin!"

“She certainly is.”

The silence stretched again, until the dreaded question finally surfaced.

“So, why isn’t she in the village?”

There was no way he could lie to his oldest friend, above most others, he trusted Guy.

“She’s on a mission.”

“Ah.” Guy put a thoughtful hand to his chin. “Complicated, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Guy had a unique ability to understand things without so much conversing actually happening. And Kakashi also knew that the man was no fool, though he certainly had played the part of one in the past, there was no way he wouldn’t know. A horrible sinking feeling surrounded Kakashi, a dark thought that while Guy was okay with the age difference, dating a former student was perhaps crossing a line. He couldn’t even bring himself to meet Guy’s gaze.

“I’m happy for you “

Kakashi’s eyes snapped to Guy’s, what he saw reflected in them was a level of care mixed with concern that touched at the inner workings of his heart. So much so that he was dumbfounded into silence, unable to even react.

“Really, Kakashi. I may be a somewhat biased observer, but I truly believe that you of all people deserves at least a little happiness. And I know for a fact that you would never let her down, which is what she deserves also... after... well, what am I saying. I'm proud of you rival, I really am. Don't think this means I won't be challenging you any less! Just because you've been revitalized by the fountain of love doesn't mean I won't kick your...."

Kakashi’s body was moving but it was instinctual and not in his control. Jumping up from his chair and crossing over to Guy in a few short steps, crouching and embracing the man, cutting him off as he spoke. Guy made a huffing kind of shortle before reciprocating with a pat on the back.

"What's this now.... physical signs of affection? She really has done a number on you Kakashi and I love it!"

Kakashi released him, standing and then sitting on the edge of his desk directly in front of Guy.

"I take it, you know... who it is without me saying then.""I may be slightly limb impaired but I'm not blind. It would take a fool not to see it, but maybe it's just because I know you so well. But yes, Kakashi. I know, and honestly I can't think of anyone more perfect for your... needs."

"Needs?"

"Well, you are pretty high maintenance old friend. I love you dearly but that's simple fact, a pretty well known one actually..."

"Wait, so everyone thinks I'm... high maintenance? What does that even mean?"
"You're a smart man Kakashi, a genius even, but sometimes.... I don't know what it is, you just act like..."

Kakashi felt the words fall out of his mouth without his express permission.

"An idiot."

"Yes! That's exactly it!"

While he released a somewhat dramatic sigh Guy reeled back in fits of laughter. After a few seconds of feeling sorry for himself Kakashi had a singular thought, *if you can't beat em',* before giving in to the laughter himself. The overwhelming relief and exoneration that his friend had gifted him, it was more than Kakashi could ever thank him for coherently. It was better than he could have ever expected and more. It was when the laughter petered out that the feeling was tarnished, but only slightly.

"I know you're worried at what others will think, but those who know you, and her... would never..."

Guy was cut off as the door to the office slammed open, an out of breath Shikamaru standing there looking disheveled as hell. At that same moment a messenger bird flew directly to the window with an ominous red scroll taped to it's leg. An Anbu agent also appeared next to Shikamaru, immediately kneeling down as if awaiting an imminent order. Kakashi barely had time to blink.

"What's happened?" Guy spoke for him, Shikamaru finally caught his breath.

"I'll save time before you open that report, A rank mission to the Grass Village has been completed. The whole squad has made it back and is currently in critical condition..."

"Critical? In Konoha hospital?" Guy at least still had a voice.

"Yes, only one member of the squad is in intensive care. The others have reported that the threat they originally found has been eliminated, though the orders were not to engage. It appears as if they had no choice in the matter."

Kakashi was already on his feet, reaching for the scroll at the window and feeling his blood turn cold.

"Kakashi-sama, unfortunately it seems as if your original hunch was correct. A rogue group of Madara sympathizers united to taking over their own village, using a combination of earth style jutsu that were masked as natural disasters. Their intention was to win over what remained of the survivors by being the only ones able to reach the epicenter of the quake. And since they were controlling the jutsu, it would have been easy for them."

The masked Anbu spoke and Kakashi knew without a doubt that it was Tenzou behind the mask. Except it didn't soothe his words and the effect they were having on Kakashi. Because they weren't telling him what he wanted, desperately needed to know. What had happened to Sakura...

The answer he held in his hand. Unfurling the scroll as the others spoke, he hastily scanned the words for what he needed to find. She was alive, but she was...

"It's Sakura, Kakashi-sensei..." Shikamaru spoke with an added softness that he might've later imagined, but right now he just didn't care for any of this. His head shooting up to stare at his assistant. "I think the entire village population would have perished if not for her actions..."
"Reckless actions." Kakashi interrupted, louder than he had intended. He was already heading for the door. "Sakura is Sakura but that doesn't make what she's done anything more than reckless, foolish..."

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think..." he half spat as he slammed the door behind him and sped off into the night. Unable or unwilling to bring himself to look at any of the others reaction to his behaviour.

His blood was running cold, his focus singular. It felt like an eternity before he reached the hospital, though he would later only remember a blur of lights and forgetting to breathe. How bad would the damage be? The question slithered into his mind like a poisonous serpent ready to taint his every thought, every feeling. The scroll had told him the truth, she had used every ounce of her chakra, and her stores, to save every person that she could. She had healed her team enough for them to survive after the ambush. She had done everything for everyone else and left nothing for herself.

She had been in a coma ever since.

It wasn't without precedent, she had done this before in trying to replenish Naruto's ridiculous chakra, using all of her own to do so. But this time it felt different. It felt more....careless. Though he realized that it was anything but. Sakura always cared, without prejudice.

Kakashi realized as he reached the hospital itself that it wasn't Sakura that he was angry with, it was himself. All the things left unsaid, all the precious minutes he had wasted, not being at her side.

Never again. He would never make the same mistake again.

The corridors felt like a veritable labyrinth before he found her, racing around each one, sliding past the few people who were around at this time of night. He searched until he finally found her.

In her own private room, a large window revealing the bed she was laying in with Shizune tending to her, was Sakura.

The intensive care unit was generally a busy place in times of disaster or need, but this night, now that he was looking at her unconscious form...it all seemed empty. Like they were the only two people in the entire building. Kakashi caught Shizune's eye and it unfroze him from the static state he'd fallen into, and he finally remembered to breathe.

Shizune straightened herself and walked over, leaving the sliding door open as Kakashi stood rooted to the spot in front of that window.

"How is she?"

Was that really his voice?

"About as well as we could hope for in this situation. Sakura really is exceptional, just a fraction less chakra and she would be too far gone for even me to save." Shizune's brow furrowed as Kakashi was too concerned to try and appear impassive. "She'll be alright, Kakashi. It's just going to take time. She'll need care, plenty of rest, though knowing Sakura it will take some convincing to get her to cut back a bit on the workload."

"When...when will she... wake up?"

At this Shizune looked solemn as her eyes drifted over to Sakura's hospital bed.
"Well, we don't know. She's never been pushed this far before... It took Lady Tsunade weeks to wake up after Pein's attack on the village, and she attempted to save just as many people..."

Kakashi's head snapped back to Sakura.

For all the urgency he felt to get here, to be with her, to see her. It didn't do any good. He couldn't make her heal any faster, not right now. All he could do was be there and wait for her to wake up, and then he could force her to rest if need be. Take care of her the way she deserved.

"What concerns me most is that she will need to be carefully monitored for a while, to make sure she doesn't overdo it. I'll try keep close eye on her..."

"I'll do it."

Kakashi cut her off without much ceremony, not even bothering to look at Shizune as he stared fixedly at Sakura's resting face.

"What do you mean? You're Hokage, you can't just..."

"Who else is there to take care of her? Who else is going to be there for her? I'm not... watching her go through this alone. I'll be the one to take care of her now. Always."

Shizune seemed to be unable to fathom what he had said for a moment, they remained silent and both watching as the monitors connected to Sakura beeped and whirred.

"I'm sure... She'll be up in no time. There'll be no need to worry too much, this is Sakura after all. We should be planning a big party for when she wakes up, properly celebrate that children's hospital!"

Kakashi barely processed Shizune's forced optimism, he was certain it was something she might have once used on Tsunade herself in desperate times. But it was not going to work on him.

"There's no planning, no tomorrow, no next week or month. Not until she wakes up and I can..." *have her in my arms again.*

But he couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence out loud. Shizune finally seemed to understand. Placing a gentle hand to his shoulder as they both watched Sakura sleep. This was going to be a long night, but Kakashi no longer cared. He would watch her every breath while she was still breathing, waiting for her to wake up.

Then *he* would be the one to take care of her.

There was just one thing he needed to get out of the way.

"Shizune, call Naruto. Tell him I need to speak with him urgently."
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Summary

This is it, the final chapter. An epilogue will follow in the coming weeks.

Thanks to everyone for the support of this little story. It means the world.

Kakashi, at one time, had been very used to the noises of hospital machinery. So much so that it had been somewhat of a soundtrack that could lull him to sleep at any given moment. But not tonight. He couldn’t bring himself to close his eyes for any longer than the necessary blinking, watching the gentle rise and fall of Sakura’s chest was the only thing reassuring him. It was the only thing keeping the fragile hold of his sanity intact.

It was illogical to panic at this moment, he knew that Sakura would be alright, he trusted her strength more than any other kunoichi. She was also in the best place now, under the watchful eye of Shizune and himself. But this had been a wake up call for Kakashi, and one that he was not going to ignore.

It was time to make some changes, and while those wouldn’t immediately take effect, the ball needed to be rolling now more than ever. And for the first time in his life, since the passing of this father anyway, Kakashi did not care what the consequences would be for his actions. There was something much more important lying here in front of him.

Hours or minutes may have passed. Conversations with Sakura sporadically played through his mind again and again. The most damning words, the ones that stood out the most, being his own.

We’ll make time.

Kakashi hadn’t meant that as a promise to her, but he was going to carry it out to the letter. Gradually the shock of what had happened faded into quiet concern and impatience. It was late in the day, or early in the morning, he couldn’t really tell. Gods knew what time it was but he just didn’t care to figure it out. But still, where the hell was Naruto? It was negligent perhaps, to be this eager, especially considering that the changes were not going to be overnight. But each day, every hour, every minute was precious. He couldn’t afford to waste a single one of them.

All he could do with his time while he waited, was plan. And it was as if that very thought process reignited some long dormant part of his brain. Not that being Hokage wasn’t challenging in itself, but there was something about his mind that applied to dire situations in an instant. It was almost like a comfort, and the reason he had sought out so many projects over the years. But this, with something so special at stake, this had that exhilarating feeling that meant something. And suddenly the minutes and hours were flying by.

Kakashi had a plan, it was just lucky for him that his plans usually worked out perfectly.

It was about the time that he vaguely noticed the natural light seeping through the curtains and from the windows that the door opened with more fluster than the usual nurse check up. The hurried footsteps to the room meant that it could only be one person.

Naruto.
The blond was silent as he entered, nodding to Kakashi, though his eyes never strayed from Sakura. At some point in the night Kakashi had shuffled the chair to be closer to her bedside and had remained there, he was reluctant to move even now. But disturbing Sakura while she rested was also not an option.

“They told me she was completely drained after saving all those people but I didn’t expect to see her so…” Naruto trailed off as if he wasn’t quite sure of the word he was looking for.

“Yeah, I know.” Kakashi didn’t need to hear the word to know what he meant. Seeing her like this, so still, so pale. It wasn’t natural, something akin to Naruto refusing ramen.

There was a pregnant pause as the pair quietly watched their sleeping comrade. It was a surreal experience being on the other side of this situation. How many times had Sakura been at their bedside caring for them tirelessly through the night, for several nights in a row sometimes. Kakashi shook himself out of it. Now wasn’t the time for reflection, it was time to put the plan into action. He stood, the action prompting Naruto to finally speak.

“You wanted to see me, Kakashi sensei?”

With the adding of ‘sensei’ Kakashi finally broke his longing stare, taking in the sight of the young man standing at the end of the bed. Naruto would probably never drop the word even as Hokage.

“Yes, I did.” He cleared his throat before shuffling begrudgingly away, gesturing to Naruto to step back. The further away from Sakura he stood the smaller she looked, the more heartbreaking it was to see her in such a position. Something which Naruto picked up on, as only he would.

“She’s going to be okay, sensei.” He put an arm to his shoulder, concern dripping through his voice and pouring from those azure eyes. “This is Sakura after all, she would never let something like this take her out for very long.”

“I know… I know.”

As usual, Naruto’s piercing and infectious optimism seemed to reach into his very soul. It was enough to shake him out of the stupor he had suddenly fallen into.

It was time.

"I haven't seen you this worried since Sasuke was being held in Konoha prison."

The mention of Sasuke caused the feeling of urgency and concentration he'd held moments ago to be tainted with confusion and worry. Again he forced himself to shake it off and continue, there was too much at stake to be worried about Sasuke.

"Listen, Naruto. I've spoken with Shizune and Sakura is going to need careful monitoring for a while, until she gets back to full strength at least. The effects of releasing that seal are treacherous..."

"Yeah, I've seen what it did to Granny Tsunade. Alright, she can stay with me and Hinata until the baby comes..."

"No." Kakashi interrupted him. "No, that won't be necessary." Naruto, when he was confused, looked every bit like the child he'd once tied to a post in the training field. An almost spitting image of Obito, and it tugged at Kakashi's heart further as he spoke. "I will take care of her."

There was silence for a moment before Naruto spoke, although now it was with the voice of a man and not the child he'd briefly glimpsed.
"You've got a whole village to look after Kakashi sensei, why don't you leave Sakura to the rest of us."

"No, I can't do that. She's..." Here the pit of his stomach dropped though he made every attempt to mask it and continue. There was no need to fear, Naruto was married to Hinata now, if there were lingering feelings for Sakura they would be long extinguished. That being said, he was still their former sensei, who knew how he would react to that line being crossed. But it had to be said now. "She's... I need to be the one to do this, to be there for her, no one else."

Kakashi studied Naruto's face for any hint of a reaction to his words. In his eyes he thought he saw a flicker of something, but it passed and he was no longer able to read him. Naruto had really grown up and suddenly, Kakashi was unsure of exactly when that had happened.

There was one thing about Naruto Uzumaki that remained unwavering, and that was his ability to surprise Kakashi. Always, with that almost ethereal way of reading other people's emotions and understanding them in an instant. It had always made Kakashi want to believe in him, and now he just hoped that it would work in his favor. And maybe, just maybe, Kakashi had managed to gain some of that ability himself. Perhaps Naruto would also believe in him, though he'd done little to deserve it.

A moment passed and Kakashi had to wonder if Naruto had actually understood the gravity of what he had meant. Perhaps his words had fallen short....

So lost in his own turbulent thoughts he'd failed to notice the small but growing smile on Naruto's face, and the way his eyes had softened.

"I'm so happy you finally found your person, sensei. And I'm so happy that it's her... It's about time." Naruto had an oddly soothing note to his timbre, one that was usually absent. It caused Kakashi's eyes to fill without his express permission, it was so very much like Minato and it absolved the last remaining dregs of his guilt.

It took a moment for Kakashi to find his voice again, and it was only when Naruto clapped a hand to his shoulder that he was able to speak.

"Thank you, Naruto... Truly, I..."

"No need to thank me. I should be thanking you, she's not with some miserable brooding bastard that can't stay in one spot long enough to save his life..."

Kakashi unexpectedly had to hold back a small chuckle at those words. But there were much bigger fish to fry, much more important things to be discussing right now. His absolution had given him even more clarity. He cleared his throat.

"The reason that I called you here... Well, there's no easy way for me to just say it. But, I need for you to be ready."

Naruto nodded.

"You can count on me."

"I knew that I could. And it's not going to be an instant transition, I'm not that much of a terrible Hokage, well..."

"You're not going to drop me into a shit show like the other Kage did to their successors, I can't believe that old man Raikage threw such a tantrum about it."
"Yeah, tell me about it. But all in good time Naruto, for now, I just need you to fill in for me. Learn the ropes as it were, Shikamaru is more than equipped to help you with the rest. I just... need time..."

"You got it sensei. Leave it to me."

"I've got a plan in place, the majority of the work is just paper shuffling that I can do from my home office. This is going to be a gradual transition, I know you've been preparing for this your whole life, but if we do this over the course of the next year or two..."

Naruto's head was bobbing up and down as Kakashi spoke, the two huddling together talking, they both were caught completely by surprise at the timid rasping voice from the bed.

"Ka..kashi? Naruto? What..."

Mid sentence he stopped speaking, they both slowly turned to see two green eyes watching their every move. In two large strides Kakashi was by the bed, kneeling and taking her small hands into his.

"Welcome home."

Any residual anger he may have felt about Sakura's actions during the mission was snuffed out. She had done what Sakura would always do in that situation, help any and all that she could. Her ability was incredible, and only she could have pulled it off. Kakashi doubted that even Tsunade could have saved so many people and lived to tell the tale.

"Sakura, it's so good to see you!"

But her eyes were fixed on Kakashi's. Blinking slowly before she spoke again, it was plain to see that she was beyond exhaustion still, that she would not be able to speak to them for very long.

"What were you boys talking about over there... so serious..."

Naruto opened his mouth to speak with a sheepish grin on his face, but Kakashi purposely beat him to the punch.

"Just you, and how seriously amazing you are."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, now get some more rest."

Her eyes were closed before he even finished the sentence, fallen back into blissful slumber. Begrudgingly Kakashi relinquished his hold of her hands and stood.

"Don't you want her to know, sensei?"

"Not just yet, sorry Naruto. For now, I don't want her to think of anything other than getting better. Besides, I don't really want her temper to spark until she's strong enough to handle it anyway."

"Huh, what do you mean temper?"

"Well, I imagine she'll consider my retiring to take care of her as a sign of weakness on her part. But the truth, the truth is... I've had enough, I can't waste any more time. And I can't think of a better reason, or person for that matter, to retire for."

His words were unhindered by doubt or shame, falling freely as he watched Sakura's sleeping face.
The concern for her well being still tugging on his heart, but lessened by the sound of her voice, seeing a smile on her face. It had recharged him. He glanced up to Naruto to find a decidedly devious look on the young man's features, one that he was all too familiar with. Kakashi made a preemptive sigh.

"Y'know, if you're that worried about her finding out, for now... I could..."

Naruto made a very quick hand gesture, his signature move, transforming into a mirror likeness of Kakashi.

"Naruto, you of all people know how Sakura feels about that clone jutsu. She would beat the both of us to a pulp if she knew..." With a puff of smoke Naruto returned to his usual self, with a look of terror replacing the mischief on his face. "Besides, it's a gross misuse of chakra, you'll drain yourself...."

"Kaka-sensei, look at who you're talking to here." Naruto gestured to himself rather cockily, Kakashi couldn't help but huff in amusement.

"Even if it is you, with your ridiculous never-ending chakra stores, it's still a bad plan." Kakashi paused thoughtfully. "Though if you have any other ideas on how to avoid her temper, I'm all ears."

The two fell into silence for a short while. A sudden tiredness consuming what was left of the adrenaline that Kakashi was running on. Naruto sighed.

"You've been here all night, why don't we go get something to eat and iron out the details. We'll have you back here before you know it."

Kakashi appreciated that Naruto wasn't going to pester him to leave for any longer than absolutely necessary. It was a comfort to know that he understood that the place that Kakashi needed to be, was next to Sakura. For as long as she allowed him anyway. Others had tried to force him to go home to rest, but there was no point, no rest would be forthcoming while he was separated from her.

"I'm hungry enough to handle ramen this early in the morning... Let's go."

For now, putting the plan into place was all he had left to do, before he could focus all his energy into helping her. Being with her. Everything was coming together.

* * * *

Sakura was beginning to grow frustrated by the tiredness that consumed her body and mind. It was impossible to tell just how much time had passed, it was all a blur of barely there memories, which could also have been dreams. It was frustrating, the moment she finally got the strength and awareness together to get words out and speak, she was engulfed by sleep once more.

It was punishment for using every ounce of what she had in her body, and she knew that well enough. It didn't make it any less irritating though. The last moments of that mission also replayed in her mind, the way her body had crumpled the minute she learnt of the villagers safety.

Then suddenly she thought she could hear a voice, barely a whisper, and it was that voice that pulled her to consciousness. It was Kakashi's. Like a beacon calling her forth from the darkness.

It was hard to open her eyes, which alerted her to the fact that they had probably been shut for some time. Thankfully the room was softly lit as she finally managed to flutter them open. The sight that caught her eye had her suddenly *very awake.*
This was not Konoha's hospital. Or any other room that she recognized.

The bed was larger than her own, the room more ornately decorated, books lining the walls. The ceiling was high with a dimmed chandelier glimmering. Sakura's gaze followed down from the roof to her own hands, though she scarcely recognized them as her own. There were at least three IV's connected to her left arm, the tubes didn't disguise just how much strength she had lost. These hands were all bone with no muscle.

There was one thing, one person she did recognize, even though his back was facing her. She would know that silver head anywhere. It explained why she had felt no panic at awakening in a strange room. He always had a way of calming her.

The sound of his voice was the proof of that. Without turning to face her Kakashi spoke.

"Now, what shall we read today Sakura? I know you were never a fan of my reading Icha Icha, but maybe you would consider giving them a chance now?"

"Not in this lifetime, Kakashi." Her words were hoarse but just loud enough.

The book that he had pulled from the shelf clattered from his hand to the floor.

"Sakura! You're awake..."

It was almost childlike the way he stepped so quickly to be beside her and she felt a grin already tugging on her lips. There was no time to pause and take in the sight of him, Kakashi was already crouched down and embracing her tightly. Sakura couldn't help but giggle as she breathed him in. She wasn't sure how long she had been out for, but it felt as if she had been missing him for an eternity.

"Welcome home..." He murmured into her hair.

"Good to be home... Wait, where exactly is home? The hospital wasn't this fancy when I left."

Kakashi chuckled and pulled back to look at her.

"We're at my place, I figured you'd get more rest here. I hope that's alright." A gentle hand was tucking the hair behind her ear, paired with the look in his eye it was enough to make her melt. "You're really awake, I'm so..."

Sakura could bear it no longer, closing the gap between them and placing her chapped lips to his masked ones. She felt him inhale deeply, felt the way his hold on her became tighter as they merged even closer together. When the kiss stopped Sakura was in a daze that had nothing to do with chakra exhaustion, which was a fresh relief.

"It was so much harder to wake up this time, I'm so sorry."

"You did what you had to do, Sakura. I'm just glad you came back to me."

"How long was I out for? I can't remember anything since the mission..."

"Ah, well about that... You see..." Kakashi was not allowed to finish the sentence, the door to the room swung open violently, an out of breath Shikamaru standing at the frame.

Surprisingly for Sakura, Kakashi did not relinquish his hold on her. Something she was all at once giddy and excited about, he didn't want to let go of her and she could tell.
"Kakashi sensei, that problem is now a big problem... Oh Sakura! You're awake!" Shikamaru stepped into the room with a grin which she returned in kind.

With an exasperated and almost feral sounding growl, Kakashi took a look at Sakura before briefly pecking her on the cheek and standing just as quickly.

"Right, I'm on it, I'll be right back..." He implored to her while lingering his hand on hers, "Don't go anywhere, I'll be right back..."

"Kay." She nodded with a smile.

"Do you want me to organize someone to be here with Sakura, Kakashi?" Shikamaru asked while Kakashi was striding across the room, he paused for just a second. Sakura decided to answer for herself.

"I'll be okay on my own, I'm feeling great."

"You sure?"

She nodded yes to the both of them and could tell Kakashi was grinning under his mask.

"I'll be back soon." He said before hurrying at full speed out the door. There was a moment where he and Shikamaru exchanged a look that she could not quite fathom. But it was too late to ask, he was long gone.

"I haven't seen him move that fast since Guy challenged him to that race..." Shikamaru scratched his head and they both laughed. "It really is great to see you awake Sakura, you had us worried there. Nice job saving those villagers though, I gotta hand it to ya..."

"Thanks Shikamaru. How did the rest of the squad fare? Did any of them need major treatment?"

"Uh, not that I can remember."

"What, so none of them were admitted?! That's insane..." Sakura threw the covers off and made to stand up. Her strength returning to her by the second. "They weren't in any fit state when I last..."

"Woah, woah. Hold your horses there. They were admitted when they got back, but they are all assigned to other missions right now, I couldn't tell you with any certainty how they are now..."

"Other missions? But there was so much clean up to do, so much damage, how... how is that possible?"

"Sakura... Just how long do you think it's been since the earthquake?"

Shikamaru was now sitting in a comfortable armchair by the bed. And at his question she had to take pause at everything around her. It couldn't have been more than three days surely, that was the usual aftermath of releasing the seal. Though she'd not only released that seal... she'd used every single drop of chakra she could squeeze out.

"I'm... not sure. Has it been a week already?"

The look on his face gave it away in an instant.

"More than a week.... You've got to be kidding me... How long have I been out for?"

"Well... I don't know if I should be the one to..." Shikamaru tried to defer but there was no way she
would let him now.

"Tell. Me. Shikamaru. How long has it been?" She spat every word out and watched him shift uncomfortably. Eventually he stiffened and met her eye and she knew she had won him over by force.

"Sakura, I don't know if there's a right way to tell you this. But it's been two months... since you were brought back from that mission."

"Two months?!"

The shock washed over her in waves, the first one making her gasp for air, the second causing her to grab hold of the sheets to ground herself to something. Then she was looking around the room for something, anything that might reassure her.

Shikamaru appeared to be still talking about the clean up and relief efforts at the Grass Village, but it turned to white noise, drowned out by Sakura's own thoughts. Next to the bed, on a small table, was an overflowing tower of books. There had to be at least 50 volumes precariously stacked on top of each other, and with what she had awoken to find, Sakura came to the obvious conclusion. Kakashi had been reading to her. That was the thought that brought her mind back to clarity. He had been with her. This was his home after all, and he had wanted her there to rest. Suddenly losing two months didn't seem like such a terrible thing if she'd been able to spend them with him. Even if she wasn't conscious for it.

Shikamaru followed her gaze.

"He continues to surprise me, y'know. Kakashi."

"Tell me about it." Sakura spoke quietly. "I can't believe he brought me here..."

"Well, he figured that if you were in the hospital, you would bound to be disturbed in your rest. And he's probably right about that too. He said you were too much of an asset not to let rest and recover properly.... At least, that was the excuse he told the others."

"Excuse?" Her eyes snapped to Shikamaru in confusion. "What do you mean excuse?"

"Sakura, the man has barely left your side." Shikamaru let out a chuckle with a softened expression. "I haven't seen him work so hard for something, someone, in the entire time he was Hokage."

Though sweet and thoughtful Shikamaru's words may be, there was one word that stood out like a sore thumb. A careful and deliberate man, an intelligent man, she knew that he never said anything unless he meant it. Which made her next question all the more terrifying.

"What do you mean, was Hokage?"

The look of terror on his face was instant and he stood up as if to try and hide it. Or to get out of range of her fists. Frail as she may now appear to be, there was surely some way she could throw him into the next village.

"Ugh, forget it, just a slip of the tongue. Well I better be heading off now Sakura, be sure to call if you need anything while Kakashi is out..."

He was gone before she had the time to shuffle herself to the edge of the bed.

Maybe she was just tired and deluded, all those months lying in a bed. As a doctor she knew that it
might be some time before her strength returned to her properly, but at the moment all she felt was *starving*, with just a dash of confusion to fuel it. All she cared about at this moment was getting some food in her stomach.

It felt strange to be removing IV’s from her own arm and not that of a patient. All the same she made sure to do so carefully. Tsunade had spoken to her at length of the side effects releasing the seal would have on her body, so she knew now that recovery would come swiftly since she had been given ample time to rest. Unlike her mentor she didn't need to waste any of her energy maintaining a youthful appearance, so that chakra could immediately be channeled to the appropriate places.

With a deep breath she concentrated, trying her utmost to focus despite all that had happened this morning. While she managed some of her objective, there were two words echoing around her mind throughout, *was Hokage*.

Getting to her feet wasn't nearly as hard as she thought it might be. Her strength really was fast returning to her. It appeared as if Kakashi had been right about the rest she had needed. With small steps, which turned into larger ones, Sakura set out on her next mission. Find the kitchen, find some food.

Throughout the large and ornate house Sakura couldn't help but seeing those little touches that were so very Kakashi. Though very few pictures on the walls in the hallways and rooms, there were books *everywhere*. Not in a messy way, they were in special little nooks and cubbies, in careful positions it seemed so that he could just pick them up as he walked past. She could see him, in her mind's eye, coffee in one hand and book in the other. Going from shelf to shelf looking for that perfect volume for whatever lazy afternoon he'd managed to find.

By the time she found herself in the kitchen, Sakura was seeing him everywhere, and it had become a longing. Wanting to see him properly. The comforting feeling of being here, in his home, was still palpable but it was a poor substitute for the man himself. It was almost like she belonged there. She chalked it up as a side effect of being in the house for so long with Kakashi taking care of her.

It didn't strike her as odd to find a veritable arsenal of take out boxes in the man's fridge. They were neatly organized in a pattern she recognized as freshest on the top shelves. Without much more thought to the matter, Sakura grabbed as many as she could carry, not even bothering to heat the majority of them. Her stomach was well and truly controlling her every move at this point.

In true Kakashi fashion there was no television in his house, only books. So she sat there in comfortable silence as she ate, gorging herself and hoping that Kakashi wouldn't think so poorly of her for raiding his fridge. The more her hunger was sated the more her mind returned to clarity, and questions began to form.

*How had he been able to take care of her so dutifully?* It surely couldn't have been all on his own, but there was no other person here...

Slowly, one by one, Sakura began to piece together a string of memories that she had only considered dreams. Memories of waking briefly to find Kakashi there, handing her glasses of water, brushing her hair... A thousand different things came to her so suddenly it managed to quell the almost insatiable hunger. It left her out of breath and confused all at once.

Sakura sat at the kitchen table trying to let her stomach and her mind settle but she could not find peace. A familiar antsy feeling began to gnaw at her, a restless impatience that once she would have silenced by working herself to sleep. She knew she needed conserve her energy, that she wasn't completely back to her former strength just yet, but it didn't make it any easier.
With little else to do, Sakura deposited herself on the vast sofa, the one she had slept on the night of Kakashi's birthday. She remembered that night with a tinge of sadness but smiled at it all the same. Everything about it, everything about him, it was so wonderfully surprising. And she truly loved every second that she had spent with him, conscious or otherwise. Not knowing what else to do, she decided to spend the time reading, waiting for him to come home to her.

She wandered slowly back to her room, deciding to read whatever book Kakashi had chosen and dropped on her waking. She was unsure if it would suit her tastes upon picking it up, but Kakashi had taught her not to judge a book by its cover. She wondered if he had the next volume of *Alejandro's Passions* somewhere on one of these shelves but she couldn't bring herself to rifle through it.

If she trusted anything, she trusted Kakashi's judgement. Book in hand she decided to sit on the armchair instead of the bed, she had been in bed for too long as it was. As she reclined back more memories began to flicker in her mind's eye, Kakashi in this very chair, reading to her and sleeping. She even recalled his lying down beside her, comforting her after a particularly grueling dream.

Sakura skimmed the pages of the book, not really paying attention, her mind was in another far off place. It wasn't restless or antsy, this place she had fallen into, it was calm and peaceful. It was something that only Kakashi was able to provide for her.

The feeling was so all encompassing, so blissful, that it lulled her to sleep in the chair while she watched the clock on the wall tick by.

* * * *

Darkness had caught up with him by the time Kakashi finally reached the house. He'd spent the better half of the afternoon cursing anything and everything that kept him tied up for so long, keeping him away from home, from Sakura. It had been frustrating to say the least but finally he was allowed his freedom.

He had never been so relieved to be heading home, even though he had only been gone a few hours at most. He just hoped Sakura was still okay. The overwhelming relief he'd felt at seeing her so lucid, so awake, the kiss she'd placed on his lips... It have given him a boost of energy so intense that it had been an almost frenzy by the time he'd gotten to Hokage tower. A rush that made all his work suddenly urgent.

The situation had been unfortunate, and just as Shikamaru had described. Between himself, Naruto and some of the finer administrative assistants in Hokage tower, they had managed without incident. Whoever put their trust in technology to keep records safe was an idiot, at least in Kakashi's mind. Utter chaos broke loose as soon as that technology ceased to work properly.

Kakashi nodded to the Anbu guard as he entered his own home, the lights were on. The first thing he noticed were the empty leftover containers littering the table. He chuckled to himself before heading straight to Sakura's room, a distinct memory of Tsunade gorging herself with food after her own recovery. It was elating to him that Sakura was on the right track for her health, that she would be back to her own self in no time.

And there was so much he needed to tell her, so much time that he wanted to spend with her.

Kakashi opened his mouth to speak as he pushed past the door, only to swiftly purse his lips closed. He sighed quietly.

There in the armchair, an open book in her lap, Sakura was asleep. In the exact position he had been
sleeping in for the last two months each night. Her coloring looked infinitely better, she wasn’t the small frail woman who had been lying helpless in the bed. She was back to being Sakura. So that was some small consolation to her being already asleep now that he was finally home.

Gingerly so as not to disturb her slumber, Kakashi retrieved a blanket from the bed, removing the book before delicately draping it around her. She sighed softly in her sleep. Before he left, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Deciding that if he got more work done tonight, he would be able to spend more time with her the next day when she was better rested.

It had only just past 7pm but the sky outside was already black, winter was well and truly on the way. When he switched the lights on to his home office Kakashi yawned before shaking his head. It would be a long night, but the reward would be well worth it.

The work was tedious and mind numbing, though instead of spending precious minutes grumbling about it, Kakashi absorbed himself in it. Cataloguing all the planning permissions and building invoices that had been lost by the errant computer system in Hokage tower. Finding the staffing contracts and everything else, it had been a mess. And then there were all the mission reports that hadn’t be logged properly. Some of it resulting in no payment. Kakashi felt more like an auditor or care taker than Hokage right now, but that was fitting in itself.

He wasn’t going to be Hokage for much longer anyway.

So caught up in what he was doing he failed to notice time slowly dripping by. When the door creaked open sometime past midnight he had actively pull himself out of his work to realize what was going on.

It felt like a dream.

Sakura was standing at the doorway to his office, in a long night shirt, towelling her wet hair.

“What are you doing up?” He asked with a smile despite the worried tone, she smiled back.

“I actually came in and told you I was having a bath about an hour ago.” Sakura cocked her head and sighed. “You’ve been going at it for a while now, you would have once told me off for doing the same thing y’know.”

That smile on her face, the way the night shirt clung to her lithe body, the way her wet tousled messily about her shoulders. She looked so good. So healthy.

It was like being able to take a breath of fresh air after being held captive in a cave underground for months. He chuckled softly.

“I apologize, I had no idea, which is idiotic because I’ve been thinking about all day… is you.”

“Likewise.”

Their eyes met, each with an expression of love and longing reflected back. Kakashi sat back in his office chair, taking in the sight of her fully as she stepped into the room, looking around.

“This is a nice office, I never thought you would be the type to take your work home with you.”

“Well, let’s just say I do what needs to be done. How come you’re awake?”

Slowly Sakura was walking around the room, taking in what she could in the lamp light from the desk, making her way toward him at a snail's pace.

“Well, I fell asleep early this afternoon, and then couldn’t get back to sleep. Guess I’ve been lying
down for too long. Two months too long.”

“Shikamaru told you, huh?”

“He did.”

“Sakura, I’m so sorry, if there was a way to wake you sooner... Shizune and even Tsunade herself...” at this she stepped toward him more quickly.

“Kakashi, no it’s okay, really. You don’t ever need to apologize to me, remember? Besides, you were the one taking care of me this whole time. Because of you I got to recover fully, and I feel fine, better than fine actually.”

Her words soothed him more than any medical jutsu he’d ever received, and as she sat herself on the edge of the desk beside him, Kakashi found himself instinctively reaching out to touch her. Being able to do so with entire impunity was a novel he didn’t think would ever wear off.

“Good. That’s a relief...” Absent mindedly he ran his hand up her leg to rest on her knee, rubbing soft circles into her satin skin. He was ever more certain now that he had never touched something so beautiful, so wonderful, live giving... Sakura really was a miracle.

“It took a little while but... I remembered some things, after I woke up.”

“Oh?” Kakashi continued his tracing of Sakura’s skin, breathing in every second, an almost overwhelming feeling of peace washing over him.

“Mmhmm, I remember you reading to me, being with me, taking care of me... Some of it is blurred like it might be a dream but I know that it’s real, all of it.”

Her words were soft, bewitching, in the dim lamp light he could see that emerald color of her eyes and it held him captive as she spoke. Sakura stood without hurrying bringing herself close until she actually seated herself on his knee. Her hands reaching, lingering to either side of his face, all the while her eyes never left his. It was one of those moments he knew he didn’t need the sharingan to remember in exact detail, her warmth on his lap and the closeness of her, it was all he’d ever need. Kakashi didn’t blink as she furled down the edges of his mask to his chin. As close as she was he expected her lips to meet his, and it made his head light and his heart beat fast in his chest. But instead she asked a question.

“Before I thank you properly, Kakashi, I need to know one thing.” For a moment he thought her next words would be grave and it almost burst the bubble he had been floating on. But it was no such thing. “Please tell me you didn’t use shadow clones to take care of me and run the village?”

He laughed in equal parts relief and amusement.

“You’re laughing, but you know how I feel about reckless use of shadow clones...”

“I promise, Sakura. I did not use clones to take care of you. Not once, even though Naruto might have suggested it on the odd occasion...”

“I knew it...”

“Well I made it pretty clear that if the woman I’m in love with doesn’t want me to use that jutsu, I’m not going to use it.”

There was a reflective pause, each with knowing smiles on their faces. Kakashi anticipated what was
to come, and while he may have been worried at her reaction before, he knew now that it was ill founded. He was an idiot after all, the evidence was irrefutable.

“You made time for me…”

“I found a way, yes. And Sakura, I’ll always find a way for you.”

“Why do you keep saying my name like that?”

“I just want to say it as much as I can, now that I have you home…”

Her forehead came to rest on his, he could tell that there were tears in her eyes unshed, he could see them while she was this close. But they were happy ones so he didn’t mind as much.

“Did you retire...for me?”

“Yes…” He said it quietly and felt her body shift. “But not straight away. It’s going to be a gradual succession, a brilliant plan of my own making if I do say so myself….”

Sakura shifted to elbow him in the ribs before huffing a laugh and wiping an errant tear. She came to settle against his body.

“So modest, the man I love…”

“You forgot handsome…”

“Oh, did I now…. Smart ass.”

“Why yes, I am a smart ass, though there are several rumors going around the village about my being an idiot.”

They both chuckled softly and there was a pregnant pause before Sakura spoke again.

“You didn’t have to do that y’know.”

The answer came to him quickly.

“Yes, yes I did. It’s time. And I need… to be with you, as much as I can, while I can. Besides, in a year or two, if… I mean, when, my plan all falls into place, Naruto will be completely one hundred percent ready. It will be seamless, a thing of beauty and then I can…..”

Sakura cut him off, her lips meeting his in such a demanding way that it was impossible for him to keep track of his thoughts. Kakashi met her halfway, though he was so desperate not to hurt her in any way, his hands gripped into the arms of the chair. His eyes opened lazily before closing again, Sakura was lost in this kiss and not stopping, and he was so eager to fall in with her.

But so frightened.

“Kakashi….” She pulled her lips from his, her body writhing in his lap. When her leg swung over to straddle him fully it was all he could do not to rip that shirt from her body. She peppered kisses to his lips, though it was obvious to Kakashi that she was asking an indirect question with her actions. Her hands dipped down to rest on his belt buckle, he had to clear his throat before he could speak intelligibly.

“I don’t… want to hurt you… I only just got you back.”
“Shh…” One of her fingers touched his lips to silence him. “You, could never hurt me, ever.”

And as soon as that finger dropped so did the very last of his restraint. With a huff and a deliberate jerk of his hips he closed any remaining space between them. Melding their bodies together with a kiss so desperate it was as if his life depended on it. Groaning at the feel of her warm body on his, the way her hands gripped at him through his clothing. Too many layers of clothing separated them from each other, and it was the only thing now that needed to be torn away.

Kakashi lamented briefly on the lack of softer surfaces in his home office, wanting to lay her down on the floor and ravishing every inch of her... But if anything he was a patient man, he could hold out just a little longer. Without breaking the passionate onslaught of his lips, Kakashi stood while holding her tightly to him. When her legs wrapped around him there was a distinct shift, a carnal signal, an invitation of trust that this was something they both wanted and needed.

When they started to move, still kissing with a ferocity Kakashi had never known before, he cursed that his hands were settled in holding her body to him. Wanting desperately to be running them over every dip and curve of her body, and though she was heartrendingly light, he did not want to risk dropping her. There would be time to explore her body when they reached their destination.

The frantic walk to his bedroom was paused a few times. Unable to take much more Kakashi had pressed her lightly to the wall briefly, in which time she had divulged him of his shirt and unclipped his belt. Kakashi had settled for ravenously consuming those delectable moans that drifted from deep within her. Hands gripping her behind in a rhythmic motion, he just couldn't get enough of the feel of her, the taste of her. It was like a drug, addicting and all consuming, yet so precious and fragile he had to keep his wits about him. Growling at exercising his self restraint, Kakashi began moving once more, the giggle she made into the kiss did little to ease the racing of his blood.

Later on he would be unable to remember how he'd managed to even turn the light on beside the bed. What he would remember for all of time, was the way Sakura had slid down his body so enticingly, lightly scratching his bare chest in a way that sent every ounce of blood to his groin. Immediately his hands went to the hem of her night shirt, pulling it up and over her head slowly, revealing the gift that lay beneath.

She stood before him wearing nothing but plain white panties and a flimsy camisole. His lips were back on her in an instant, unable to resist the call of her skin, the smell of her, the warmth. It started at her lips and went to her neck, reveling in the sounds she made as he struck sensitive spots, all the while his hands gripped at her skin. It was a fugue that surrounded them both, groaning as he felt her swiftly unbutton his pants and tug them down.

What he hadn't anticipated, or rather, what he hadn't even dared to anticipate, was just how badly Sakura wanted him as well. In one fluid motion she placed her flat palm to his chest and pushed him back lightly until he was on the bed. In an instant she was on top of him, the unrelenting kiss taking over once more.

No words were necessary, there were things that Kakashi wanted to tell her, but for now he needed to show her. Flipping them both, she made a small yelping noise that was his second favorite noise of all time. His mouth made a journey down her neck, to her collarbone, to the volley of her breasts.

He had meant it before when he had said that every inch of her should be worshiped. Kakashi would have reminded her, but not now, not at this moment. He needed to show her, with his hands, his mouth, his body. All of him.

He was going to make her feel worthy of all the love she didn't feel like she deserved.
Moans and a sharp tugging of his hair spurred him on. Travelling further to her navel, kissing openmouthed and nipping lightly at the taught expanse of flesh. It felt like an eternity before he reached his destination, and by that stage all rational thinking had abandoned him, there was only one thought fueling him. To heavily pleasure this woman.

Still no more words were spoken and they didn't need to be. It was as if they knew instinctively what needed to happen. As if the kisses and touches had passed a thousand times between the eyes before the flesh, and it was familiar even though it was the first time.

The thin damp layer of her panties was the first part that caused him to growl audibly. The scent of her was intoxicating. Kakashi tried to maintain some gentility as he peeled that damn fabric down her legs, but it was not without impatience. For as soon as she was revealed to him, his mouth, his tongue, began devouring her core. The response from her was instant. Her back arching into the bed, somehow he managed to hook her legs up and over his shoulders, using one hand to press down on her stomach to keep her where he wanted her.

With his tongue flat on her bundle of nerves he felt her walls tighten around his finger as it tentatively entered her. The first orgasm ripping through her with a whimper as his hand began to shake and jerk. To Kakashi it felt as though he had barely touched her, but it was enough, Sakura tugged at his hair in a motion indicating where she wanted him. Lazily he made another journey with his lips, kissing his way back up her body, removing the camisole on the way with some assistance. By the time he reached her mouth Sakura was in such a frenzy she was trying to rip the boxers from him with such harshness it almost made him smirk.

His member finally free and standing to attention, while he kicked down the last offending article of clothing, Sakura gripped him. Pumping slowly, languidly, experimentally before swirling her thumb around the tip and making his eyes roll back into his head. A groan ripping itself from his throat. The sensation was almost too much, he broke the kiss, coaxing it into a slower rhythm before hazily regarding the look on her face. That way she bit her bottom lip before she pumped him, the blush on her face from the fresh orgasm, it was all seared into his memory banks. He never wanted to forget it.

It was Sakura that broke first, unable to take the space that remained between them, guiding him to her quivering heat.

With a tenderness he didn't think himself capable of, Kakashi kissed her, this time slowly and softly as he pressed himself inside of her.

The heat and tightness threatened to undo him in an instant, the way she guided her hips upward to draw him in deeper. It was slick and inviting, but so very tight. He winced in suppressing the urge to pull back and ram into her with the force of the lust he was feeling. It was a losing battle. Gripping her hip with one hand Kakashi found himself lightly thrusting at first before the floodgates opened.

When he first fully buried his length inside of her, the fluttering of her walls around him, the way her eyes were rolling back into her head at the size of him. That was what broke him. The rhythm that built between them was at once fervent and urgent, harsh pants and desperate undulating of her hips and Sakura tipped over the edge once more.

With each orgasm the urge for Kakashi to whisper to her grew, *come for me, only for me*, it was possessive and primal. But he would have time for that later. All that mattered right now was this feeling between them, to finally become one with each other. The temptation to push her over the edge again and again was too much, his fingers brushed and plucked at her sensitive nipples, his other hand sought out the swollen nub between her legs. The circles he teased around it as she came apart over his hard dick were enough to make her moan loudly into his mouth, he swallowed it as if it were the only thing sustaining him.
It was one word from Sakura that pushed him over the edge. One word that was half garbled and breathy as she moaned her release in his ear.

"Ka...Kaka...shi...."

His name, said in such a way, it undid him in an instant. With a few powerful and erratic thrusts he finished inside of her. Too caught up in the moment to consider any kind of consequences. Too elated and blissful to think a singular thought that wasn't to do with his own happiness.

Panting quietly, eyes imploring each other, Kakashi rested his forehead to hers. They smiled briefly before sharing a kiss that was not at all urgent or insanely desperate, though it still held a fire that threatened to burn with every second. This was love, contentment, fulfillment.

The kiss continued as Kakashi dropped to his side, suddenly all too aware that he might be crushing her under his weight. They lay turned in to each other, kissing for another moment before pulling apart.

He wanted to ask her if she was okay, ask if he had hurt her at all, but his brain had not yet returned to normal functions.

"Wow." She whispered, hands stroking the unruly spikes of silver hair. A dazed smile on her face. He grinned back at her.

"You okay?" He finally was able to manage, bringing his fingers up to her still damp hair.

"Fantastic..." She sparkled. “You?”

“Somewhere between amazing and satisfied, which I haven’t felt in a long time…” Kakashi added with a sheepish grin. “I think the word I’m looking for is ‘happy’.”

“I think you might be right.” There was a huff of amusement shared between before they both went back to basking in the glorious aftermath of what had happened.

Lying there beside her, limbs entangled more than he thought humanly possible, Kakashi had never felt quite so comfortable with another person. And of course, that other person would be Sakura. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

“Can I stay?” She whispered as his eyes half closed.

“Stay forever.”

Time was a variable neither of them seemed to notice passing in the peace and quiet. Clinging to each other, they brushed sweet kisses to their lips before both falling into sleep together.

* * * *

Sakura woke to warmth and sunshine, with a heart so full of happiness her eyes snapped open with excitement just to make sure it hadn’t been a dream. But there he was, on the pillow beside her, just as she’d left him. In sleep he looked younger than he should, she had to wonder if he’d been successful in copying Tsunade’s ant aging jutsu. But she knew better than that really, it was the absence of worry that made him look so peaceful, so young, so happy.

Not wanting to move and disturb his sleep, Sakura lay there for a while just watching him. His hair an unkempt mess, she began to worry that her own would be a mess, falling into bed like that while it was wet. God’s knew where she’d left the towel last night, somewhere strewn on the floor of
Hokage mansion with the rest of their clothes. She suppressed a giggle at the thought, but all the same began to fidget to discern the damage on her pink locks.

Just as she wriggled an arm free, Kakashi grumbled something and pulled her tighter to him.

“Good morning…” she whispered tentatively, he made another intelligible noise.

“Not yet…” it was muffled as his face buried into her chest. She couldn’t help the giggle this time. The sound seemed to be effective in waking up parts of his body at least. After a moment his lips were back to kissing her skin. “It is a good morning…” He spoke in between pecks making his way slowly up to her lips, “I wish we could stay here all day.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” She nipped at his lips on their arrival. “Why can’t we do just that hmm?” Purposefully she ground herself against the hardness between them, he hissed.

“Well, as irresistible as you are, vixen… There’s something special I need to show you today.” Kakashi laved kisses to the soft spot behind her ear, down her neck. “So I vote, we get that out of the way now, and then we can spend the rest of the day uh….”

Sakura giggled, knowing that whatever he had in store for her would likely be worth it. And she could thank him for it later properly.

“Okay, I’ll go get ready then. You have more of my clothes in my room, right?”

“There is, but you don’t have to wear anything if you don’t want to…”

“Kakashi!” She scolded though it was without any real enthusiasm. He was a hard man to resist.

Sakura eventually extracted herself when Kakashi allowed her. She took great pride in taking a longing glance back to the bed, seeing him in all his glory. It flushed her to see that he was regarding her exactly the same way, watching her every move like a predator.

“Sakura, if you keep looking at me like that, I won’t be able to hold back this time…”

“Oh, so you were holding back hmm?”

“You have no idea… the things I have in store for you…”

“Likewise.” She quipped, watching the dark lustful shadow that crossed his eye with glee.

Eventually the two of them were dressed and respectable enough to leave the bedroom. Kakashi was insistent on her taking it easy despite her protests that she felt completely well and able, better than that even.

So, at his insistence, she took hold of his arm as they walked through the village. Stopping for coffee along the way, the same place they had gotten coffee that day they had wandered through the village scouting. It was the same happy feeling in her chest that she had felt that day after being honest with him, but tenfold.

They spoke of many things, all the events and catastrophes she had missed while she was resting. In seemingly no time at all it appeared as if Kakashi was actually taking her out of the village itself, until he stopped walking altogether. She eyed him with confusion.

“Where, are we?”

“You don’t recognize it?”
Sakura looked around more thoroughly, but in all honesty she had absolutely no idea. There was something about the trees that was familiar perhaps.

That was when she spied it, directly behind Kakashi. She’d been so fixated on him she had failed to notice the fencing and equipment laid about. The outline of a newly built building, a freshly constructed and large development. And the sign that read above them.

Coming soon, Konoha Children’s Hospital.

Sakura gasped.

“Oh my…”

“I’m sorry, I wanted you to wake before they started construction, so you could be here for it. But they couldn’t wait any longer, the builders were available…”

“It’s been hard to find builders…” She mumbled not knowing where the words came from exactly.

“Yes, that’s right. I wanted to show you, they just completed the first wing. Would you like to see?”

“Yes!” The answer was immediate and excited, she couldn’t contain the joy, squeezing tightly on his arm. With a chuckle they stepped inside.

It was the first of the administrative buildings, perhaps not exciting to anyone else, but to Sakura this was the culmination of everything she had ever wanted to achieve. The good it would finally be able to do, the love that had fuelled this project… in more ways than one… It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

They walked through the empty white hallways, there wasn’t much to see, but Kakashi stopped in particular outside a closed door. He eyed her with an affectionate and heated gaze as he opened the door, by the hand he tugged her inside the room. She looked around it, there was nothing to see, except one large desk. The room was large in itself, but this desk was comparable to the Hokage’s.

On it was a thin box.

“This is for you.” He gestured to it.

With a confused but warm smile she released his hand and wandered over to it. Lifting the lid up to find a single name plate.

Dr. Sakura Haruno - Director

“This… is your office.”

His words fell on deaf ears, for underneath the plate was a small note. It was handwritten by the man standing just beside her now, the words written causing a single tear to fall from her eye.

Sakura,

May your new journey be filled with as much joy, wisdom and sense of purpose as you have given mine.

Love Kakashi.

She held the piece of paper with shaking hands, placing it back in the box as if it were as delicate as a paper bomb, before throwing her arms around Kakashi’s neck. He huffed in surprise at the contact
and sudden weight he held.

“I love it.” She whispered to his lips.

“Good, because I love you…”
An Epilogue

Chapter Summary

This is it my loves. The epilogue.
Thanks for all your support and love <3 it means more to me than I can put into words.

APPROXIMATELY 36 MONTHS AND 27 DAYS LATER….

Drink in hand, Kakashi took in the view from the top of Hokage tower, leaning on the railing. The setting suns orange light on his shoulders and nothing else. A tangible weight had been lifted from him on this day, a long awaited reprieve that had taken his entire life's work to get to, and he was already enjoying every second.

His comrade standing beside him now bearing that weight, and it had only been half a day but it was already obvious.

“Chin up, Naruto. It wasn’t that bad…. Sort of…”

“Sensei, I missed my own inauguration…”

“It all worked out in the end though, we figured out a way, Konohamaru didn’t seem to mind.”

“I missed my own inauguration, because I was knocked out by a three year old…”

“Ah, well. That detail is perhaps regrettable, but no one needs to know…”

“Ugh, I guess you’re right. What a start though, I finally make Hokage and I’m already an embarrassment…”

“Hey now, no more of an embarrassment than the sorry excuse standing next to you.”

The statement seemed to break the tension, Naruto finally smiled for the first time since his arrival. The dark circles under his eyes likely to become a permanent feature now appeared more shadowed in this light. It was strange to see someone so youthful looking so aged in just one day.

“This whole time y’know, I just… I wished the Pervy Sage had been around to see me become Hokage. Feels like I’ve let him down already.”

Kakashi turned, leaned on the railing but looked towards the carved mountainside. To his own sensei. That sentiment from Naruto meant more than he could possibly describe in words alone. It was as if, in that moment, he grew closer to him. Sharing this similarity in manhood, and while he was grateful for the company, he wouldn’t have wished that fate on his own student, his friend. But there was something he could do about it now.

“Naruto, take it from me, he’s watching you as we speak, and he is anything but disappointed in you. You’ve done so well, so much already. You could never let him down.”

Though he spoke to Naruto he maintained eye contact with Minato’s stone likeness. Wishful that his words got through to his son now, gave him the peace of mind that he deserved. And he would
continue to provide him with any guidance he could for as long as he could. Just as Minato had done for him.

“Thanks sensei. That means a lot…”

“And what am I, huh? Chopped liver?”

“Iruka sensei!”

So caught up in thought Kakashi failed to notice Iruka’s arrival to the terrace. Smiling that proud smile as he stood next to Naruto.

“Just look at you, who would have thunk it, huh?”

“Oh, Iruka sensei, shucks…”

“Knocked out by a three year old so I hear? Did I teach you nothing?”

In an act that was more affection than violence, Iruka rubbed a closed fist into Naruto’s hair, Kakashi had to chuckle at the exchange. Downing his drink with a smile.

“C’mon Iruka, it wasn’t like that…:"

“Uh huh. Well, still. I’m proud of you, Naruto. Let’s face it, you can’t do any worse than your predecessor.”

“Good evening to you too, Iruka.” Kakashi nodded to the man, Naruto’s peeling laughter a little more subdued than usual, but still intoxicating all the same. The sun was now dropping further, he checked his watch just to be sure. Ten minutes to go. “And with that gentleman, I shall retire for the evening… get it… ‘retire’, oh nevermind. See ya later.”

“Wait, you’re leaving Kakashi sensei? The party is just getting started!”

“Oh, I think he’s partied enough for one day…” Iruka crossed his arms and shook his head. “Don’t think I saw you without a drink in your hand all day long, poor Sakura bringing them to you faster than you could drink them.”

“Drinking for two are we sensei?”

Naruto’s words were dripping with an unspoken secret, and Kakashi could see it on his face, he’d never had a good poker face. Kakashi raised a brow in reply, knowing it was futile to keep secret much longer. Hell, everyone was going to know soon enough…

“You know?”

“Hinata told me. Can’t hide that from the Byakugan y’know. Congrats sensei, I’m happy for you two.”

Iruka made a comical show of looking between the two of them.

“Wait a minute… You’re telling me…”

“Sakura is pregnant, yes. Though we were waiting until after today to tell anyone.”

“Hinata used to do that too, before she wanted anyone to know, order a drink and hand it straight to me before anyone got suspicious. I swear it almost killed me a few times...:”
“Well, you have no excuse for not being able to hold your liquor these days Naruto.”

“Kakashi, I had no idea. Congratulations!” Iruka clapped him on the shoulder, looking genuinely as if he were holding back tears. “The bachelor finally settles down. You are making an honest woman of her…. Right?” The hand on his shoulder suddenly turned harsh.

“I’m working on it…” he mumbled looking down to his watch. 8 minutes to go.

“He’s been a bachelor for so long Iruka sensei there’s gotta be at least a dozen illegitimate children in this village alone…”

“Naruto!” Iruka turned and clocked the blond on the head.

Kakashi couldn’t help but laugh, his heart was light, *it was almost time.*

“Well, I better be off, it’s almost dinner time. Can’t be late…”

At his words both Naruto and Iruka turned to look at him as if he were a ghost.

“Quit it sensei, you’re creeping me out…”

“See ya.”

Kakashi left with time to spare. Dinner was always just after 7pm, and it was always shared together. At this moment, he knew that Sakura would be just arriving to their shared home, unlocking the door. He knew that she would head straight to the bathroom after discarding her satchel and keys to their respected spots. He knew that she would be tired, being four months pregnant and on your feet all day was a diabolical combination that had started to wear her down. So he knew that while she waited for the water to fill the bath she would sit herself on the edge of the bed, and perhaps pick up the book on the nightstand.

That was the plan anyway. Kakashi smirked to himself, it was just lucky his plans usually went off without a hitch. All the experiments so far had been successful.

* * * *

It had been a day, wonderful and amazing to see her friend achieve his dream, but it had been *long.* Sakura had been at work until the inauguration, there was still a hospital to run, then straight afterwards she had gone back just to make sure things were in order. It perhaps wasn’t necessary, everything was running smoothly after all, but it was habit and hard to break. She would always be thorough in her work, even if she all she really wanted to do was vomit constantly.

It wasn’t professional to be channeling chakra to the morning sickness, it was just something she was going to have to deal with and push through. Really it was a small price to pay for the excitement she still felt, the butterflies of happiness, this child was going to be born into the most loving home she could make for it. And Kakashi wouldn’t let her down in that regard, he would never let her down, or their child.

But she was allowed to be tired and fed up after an especially long day.

To add to her frustrations, people had kept handing her drinks throughout the festivities, despite her insistence that she needed to get back to work afterwards. The phrase, ‘if Tsunade could do it drunk, so can you’, was used more times than she could count. It had taken every excuse in the book to sidle away before she could pawn whatever glass of alcohol it was onto Kakashi.
Thank goodness he could handle his liquor.

It didn’t surprise her that the door was locked and the lights were off, Kakashi would never be late for dinner though, he wouldn’t be too far behind her. She’d have to make a veritable feast for him to soak up the alcohol he’d consumed today, he probably wasn’t in any fit state to help her either.

Sakura chuckled to herself as she hung up her coat and removed her shoes. Drunk Kakashi was at least entertaining, she may even be able to convince him to read to her or give her a massage. Or both.

Running a tired hand through her hair, Sakura wandered slowly to the bathroom, hoping the hot water would relieve some of these aches before Kakashi got home. In a trance fuelled by exhaustion, Sakura failed to notice the subtle changes to the bedroom as she walked through to the bath, didn’t see the deliberate and small touches Kakashi had made.

Later on she guessed that was his intention, all part of the plan, but for now she remained in a daze. She ran the water in the bath, deliberately hotter than usual, turning to remove her shirt. Her feet were aching, she sat herself on the edge of the bed while she waited for the bath to fill.

Finally she noticed.

A single rose lay on her pillow, she picked it up curiously. It wasn’t unlike Kakashi to leave something sweet and thoughtful for her to find. She smiled, standing to place it on the dresser.

On the dresser she found a book that hadn’t been there this morning, the title she recognized as the latest in a series she and Kakashi had been reading together. Her smile grew.

Behind the book was a note. Folded like a card, with an ‘S’ on top of it, there was no doubt that it was Kakashi’s handwriting. Sakura looked around her shoulders first, out of paranoia or a sense of something else, before she picked up the paper.

The words written on it were so perplexing the entire world around her faded away. No noise, no movement, nothing. She didn’t register the water being turned off or the shadow of someone moving behind her.

For all the paper said, was ‘Turn around’.

Brow furrowed in confusion Sakura slowly turned. There kneeling before her, was Kakashi, down on one knee. In his hand, tucked between his thumb and forefinger, was a ring. A glimmering piece of silver with an emerald set into it. Her eyes went wide, darting between the ring he offered her and the look on his face.

Mask down, smiling crookedly in that way he always did when he surprised her, Kakashi took a deep breath before asking the question.

“Sakura, marry me?”

It was hard to get the words out, something so unexpected and wonderful had taken her so off guard.

“Of course.”
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!