

# A Jenga Piece a Time

*by* Veronica Purcell

Ryuu had spent months doting and chasing after Mei from their last year in middle school towards their second half of senior high school.

Finally, after much gentle persistence, she had returned his feelings and had agreed to go out with him in a way that all people harboring one-sided love would want their feelings returned.

It was a dream that had come true for someone like him.

Now, he didn't count himself as an ugly guy. On the contrary, a lot of girls had told him he was "too" cute and a pretty boy. Oddly, he was never asked out on a date by any of those girls. So it seemed he was just "one" of those guys girls felt comfortable around but wasn't a man for dating and doing the xxx deed.

'Cute like a puppy huh?' He had concluded on the day he had thought his heart had been broken by Mei.

It was White Day during their second year of senior high that he had decided to man-up and confess to her. When he saw her hug another boy's present as if it were a special treasure, it made him retract his steps and run off to cower on a park bench like a sorry excuse for a loser.

At that time, he had been ready to give up on his feelings and be happy for her. But, she found him on the bench. His feelings for her kept his heart captive. Especially, when he saw her angelic face was flushed as if she had been running around for hours.

'You idiot!' Mei had cursed when she pulled him off the bench and pressed a tender kiss to his lips that was smothered with the discarded chocolates he was going to give her.

That moment sealed their dating relationship. Ryuu felt confident that his life was going to be better. After all, he had the girl of his dreams by his side, and everything he had worked so hard for was turning out well.

The day he met Mei's brother was the day his perfect world started crashing down like one Jenga piece at a time.

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The first piece to fall was Mei's reluctance to do more than kiss him. In fact, that time they had kissed on White Day was the only passionate moment they had shared as lovers.

From that point on, her kisses were brief and amicable. At first, he assumed that she was shy so accepted the little passion behind them. He was happy to walk her home and become a more integral part of her life.

Escorting her home to her apartment had become such a regularly routine that her neighbors had started greeting him cordially as if he was the one living there. He had learned from the old lady next door that Mei lived with her older brother and father. Although, it was rare to see the father home as he traveled the country for his work.

'Aah, did she used to bring home the rough boys. I'm glad she has a nice boyfriend like you,' Old Lady had said to him, which ticked him off.

He was glad Old Lady had left things at that. It made him conscious not to involve himself too much with Mei's neighbors from that moment on.

Yet, the conversation left him wondering if she really did seem him as a boyfriend or more as the safe guy to hang out with. Either way, he couldn't complain. So, he had decided to accept their relationship for what it was.

He spent a lot of time in her room. However, the time spent there saw him completing her class sheets and/or covering on her part of cosplay costume designs for upcoming events. It was only fitting since he was in the Cosplay Fashion Club with her and was able to do his own class work quicker so had time to help her out.

He remembered the first day he had signed up to the Cosplay Fashion Club and was chewed out by the club president because of his only reasons for joining was because Mei did. As he became more involved with club activities, he discovered a genuine passion for dressmaking and fashion design. He had received a lot of accolades and support for his work too. So much so, that he had

decided to enter the fashion industry when he'd graduate from high school.

The second, third and fourth pieces to fall was meeting Jun, her older brother by four years. Jun's attitude to Ryu, upon first meeting, could only be described as a feeling of being hated. He had only said "hmm?" to Ryu at that time but the cold expression in Jun's eyes to Ryu had said it all.

Ryu had made certain to check for Jun's whereabouts before going home with Mei afterwards. Luckily, Jun had just started work as an employee of a major corporation so the amount of times he would catch him at Mei's place was virtually non-existent.

At least that was how it was during their first month of dating. During the second month of Ryu dating Mei, for some reason, Jun would arrive home early and always precisely at the moment Ryu was ready to leave their apartment for the train station and way back to his own home.

Mei made it her brother's obligation to walk Ryu to the station. Despite Ryu's assurance that he was a man and it was alright to go home on his own. Even his reasoning of the duty being unfair to Jun's time didn't sway her.

'I know Sweetie. You're so soft and peachy, even men can get the wrong idea. My brother is a judo expert. You'll be safe with him,' Mei had gently reasoned with Ryu.

It was enough for Ryu to participate in the obligation. He didn't understand Jun's little resistance to the duty. Their walk back to the station from their apartment was uncomfortable for Ryu and filled with awkward silence.

Regardless, the routine had continued for two months to the point that Ryu started to feel comfortable around Jun but that didn't mean he was liked by the guy.

Jun had kept the attitude that he was only doing it for his sister. Of course, it was a guarantee to see that her boyfriend wasn't going to be around to sneak into her room and do a surprise attack. As if Ryu could or would want to pull off such a thing with the girl he adored.

It was at the start of Ryuu's third month dating Mei that Jun had expressed a personal opinion of him with little words during their usual obligatory walks.

'You know, you're too nice for your own good. Dumb like a lamb,' was what Jun had said.

Ryuu's reaction involved spits of outrage and an undying love confession for Mei. This reaction was quelled with Jun's hearty laughter.

'Seriously, what is that? What the hell has my sister done to you? Ryuu, for your own good, give her up,' Jun had said between fits of laughter.

However, his laughter died to a cold and serious tone on the words of, "give her up."

Ryuu saw a truth of Jun's view of him. Albeit a good for nothing boyfriend of his sister's.

He had left Jun with a promise that he would never hurt Mei before he left the man's side.

On the fourth month of Ryuu and Mei's dating relationship, Ryuu had stopped taking Mei all the way home. Instead, he'd escort her halfway to the station and make his own way from there. As such their relationship began to unravel with distance coming between them.

Their distance became more physical when they were eventually separated into different third year school programs, since he had decided to continue on to tertiary education suited for the fashion industry and she was preparing to enter the workforce.

They started to have less reasons to see each other. Although, Ryuu had made sure he messaged and spoke with her constantly over the phone. Every moment he was free, he'd send her an "I love you" text.

Mei's reciprocation wasn't the same. Her replies arrived later and farther apart. Her responses were limited to a few words and phrases that were repeated as if on a template.

The killing blow was when Mei sent him an unusual text that said, "We need to talk."

For the first time, in a long time, he escorted her all the way home.

Ryuu was desperate to make up for their lost time but her attitude of indifference made it awkward for him.

When she didn't let him into her home but sat on the landing steps of her apartment balcony instead for their talk. He knew it was about the end of their relationship.

'I'm sorry Ryuu. I thought I could fade out from us but that wouldn't be fair to you.'

Ryuu's ears gradually became deaf to the truth of her feelings for him. How she had liked him as a friend, adored him as a person she could run to but never really saw him as a love interest. She really wanted too, in the end, it didn't work out.

'To be honest, I don't feel you saw me as your woman at all.' She had thrown at him, which stirred his anger at her for the first time in their relationship.

He demanded her reasoning for it and felt his perfect world crumble when she drilled home her reason of having felt like a third wheel between Jun and himself.

'You let him walk you to the station so many times. Then it's the way your eyes saw each other. I just knew.'

Wasn't it her that pushed Jun on to him? Preposterous! Stupid! It had all been for her. Sure the guy was good looking and decent enough. Never had he felt that way about him. In fact the guy hated him. Right?

'I don't get! I really don't! Your brother hates me. Why would I see him that way? A man at that.' Ryuu had tried to reason with her.

The conclusion in her eyes told him she wouldn't believe another word that came out of his mouth.

'But I've loved you for so long Mei...'

His pain and outrage energized his legs into an escape from her truth.

He stopped his "I love you" messages to her the next day and turned his heartbreak into focus towards his studies. Love was

foolish and the foolish believed in love. So he was going to give it up.

His Cosplay Fashion Club friends were the only connection he had of Mei. Even they eventually stopped association with her after she had quit the club.

Mei had completely stepped into another world that was far apart from him and all that they were. He stopped seeing her around altogether.

Life had dulled into a monochrome world for Ryuu; during the time leading up to and past his exams.

When he had received first pick acceptance into a world famous fashion design program of a leading university, his heart didn't feel the joys of it. His passion had run cold.

It was Christmas Day when Ryuu's aimless walk took him back to the park bench that he and Mei had shared that first, tender, kiss.

Unlike that time, the atmosphere was bleak with grays of winter and misery. His body was soaked through and heavy with heartbreak. He felt lifeless as he sat taking hits from the rain's countless beating.

'I've been looking everywhere for you. Waiting and hoping for your return. Now that I have you. Please don't run from me anymore.'

Ryuu looked up and saw color seep back into his life. Warm hues reached for his numb heart. His body's coldness was thawed with the tender embrace that wrapped around him so tight he couldn't let go if he had wanted to.

He felt a burning passion and loving intentions from the person hugging him. The person's heart was drumming so hard against his own chest; it was painful.

'I love you Ryuu. I'm sorry. I love you...'

Over and over the person spoke to his heart until he couldn't take it anymore.

'If you love me then be honest with me.' Ryuu had responded carefully. 'You hate me right?'

'Hate you? No! I've been in love with you from the moment I saw you chase after my sister when she was a middle school student. I couldn't say anything because your eyes were only looking at her and I hated that.'

Ryuu was still unconvinced; scarred from the hurt the man's sister had given him.

'Why didn't you say anything earlier? Even when it was clear we weren't dating anymore.' Ryuu had come to answer as soon as he had asked.

'Isn't it obvious? Do I have to spell it out?'

Of course Jun hadn't needed to.

On that Christmas Day, Ryuu tasted a kiss more passionate and meaningful than the one that Mei had granted him.

Jun had thawed out his cold heart. All doubts of the man's feelings for him was replaced with an unbiased, desperate and pure meaning of love.

He felt at peace in Jun's arms.

'I suppose I could come to like you. It depends on how much you're willing to chase after me.' Ryuu had teased Jun.

'All the way to hell and back. Again and again. I'll hold you until you can never escape from me.' Jun had promised Ryuu.

They sealed the deal with another passionate kiss.

