C & C welcome, not to mention needed.
Updated: 2-14-14

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Broken Palace
By: Angela Jewell
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Disclaimer: Didn't own them then, don't own them now . . . and yes, this fact still upsets me.

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Chapter 8
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"*Akane, dear, you know you can't stay in there forever. . ."*

"*Wanna bet?" Akane replied, not budging from her position against the locked door. Even through a thick layer of hard oak, she could almost feel Kasumi's disapproving frown on the other side; but she remained firm, determined to wallow alone in her misery. "I'm never leaving my room again, Kasumi. Ever!"*

"*Oh dear," her oldest sister whispered, "You don't really think she'll DO that, do you?"*

"*Do you know our sister at all, Kasumi?" Nabiki replied wryly.*

"*Oh, enough of this," Ranko muttered, kicking the door with her foot. "Oi, Akane! Come out already! Kuno kissed me too, but you don't see ME locking myself away and pouting like a five-year-old!" A suspicious sounding thud was heard seconds later, followed by an enraged "Ouch!" Akane, with her ear pressed to the door, suspected what might have happened and smiled.*

"*Oh my! Are you alright, Ranko?"*

"*Of course I'm not alright," the redhead grumbled out in the hallway, before turning to glare at her brother. "That HURT, you big jerk! What'd you go and hit me for?!"*

*Ranma glared right back. "Because you're an idiot," he returned flatly. "We're trying to get her to OPEN the door, stupid. Not lock herself away for life. What part of your brilliant plan did you actually think would WORK?"*

*Crossing her arms against her chest, Ranko scowled. "Well, YOU'RE her fiancé, aren't you? If I'm doing such a lousy job of it,* ***you*** *should go and comfort her then!"*

*Ranma frowned. "I'll pass, thanks," he replied quickly. He was useful in a fight, but when it came to girls and tears, he was useless.*

*But Ranko didn't seem to care either way. "That's so like you, Ranma," she scoffed. "A \*real\* challenge comes along, and you go running!"*

"*Hey! I've done my part," he told her, suddenly defensive. "I took care of Kuno, remember?! Besides, I'm a guy. Comforting is woman's work. . . and that's your job."*

"*MY job, is it?!" Turning to Kasumi, she frowned. "IS it my job?" she asked her.*

*Akane deeply wished the bickering twins would take their quarrel elsewhere. "Please, just go away!" she yelled, raising her voice loud enough to be heard. To reinforce her request, she punched the door in a vain attempt to scare them off. "If you don't," she added petulantly, "I'll run away and never come back!"*

"*Aww, come on Akane. . ."*

"*Yeah, don't be dumb," Ranko told her, still convinced that goading her into compliance was their best bet. "You tried that before, remember? You were gone . . . what? Four hours?"*

"*That's right," Nabiki added, eager to refresh her memory. "You stayed with the Saotomes until you and Ranko fought, then you came crawling back."*

"*I \*didn't\* crawl!"*

"*Stomped then?" Kasumi supplied helpfully.*

*Akane thumped the door for a second time. "I'm heading for my window now!"*

"*You move a step and your door comes down," Ranma warned her, not about to let his fiancée go traipsing around the city alone and upset. Luckily, Akane heard his threat loud and clear.*

"*Don't you dare, Ranma!" she yelled back, already imagining bits of her door lying scattered across the room.*

"*I call for a vote. All those in favor of breaking down the door," Ranko rallied, throwing her own arm into the air.*

*Kasumi gently guided the other girl's arm back down. "Maybe there's too many of us here," she suggested, hoping to diffuse a potentially messy situation. "Perhaps, if one of us were to offer to go in there, alone, she wouldn't be so overwhelmed and defiant. Would you like that, Akane?" she asked, addressing the door now.*

*Actually, no, Akane did* ***not*** *like that idea. But she worried her lip, considering her options. If she refused, she feared Ranma and Ranko really \*would\* break down her door—and she very much preferred her room intact, thank you very much. The alternative however was even worse. She could picture them all camped outside her bedroom, making a night of it, having snacks delivered as they tried to comfort her in their own misguided way.*

*In the end, she was left with very little choice in the matter.*

"*Oh, alright," she agreed reluctantly, knowing this was as good a deal as she was likely to get. In any case, it was better than having to face all four of them. Besides, she didn't* ***really*** *want to run away. What if she ran into Kuno again?! Unconsciously she shivered. Hitting him once hadn't been nearly redeeming enough.*

*Suddenly though, she heard the sounds of someone being forcefully shoved up against the other side of the door, and seconds later, Ranma's voice, raised in protest. "Hey!" he complained. "What gives?!"*

"*Akane, we're sending in Ranma!" Ranko informed her, shouting to be heard above her brother's noisy objections. "Maybe if he kisses you, you'll forget all about that toad Kuno."*

*Ranma and Akane \*both\* opened their mouths to object, but as always, Ranma's mouth was faster. "Ha! L-like I'd WANT to kiss an uncute tomboy like her!"*

*Akane bristled immediately, having missed the way his voice had trembled slightly. That* ***JERK****! Here she was, depressed and vulnerable, and he calls her a tomboy?! Itching for a fight, she threw open the door, looking for something, \*anything\* to distract her. And Ranko—good old Ranko—pushed her beloved brother into the room, quick to slam the door shut behind them.*

"*Dammit," Ranma muttered, glaring behind him. "Stupid Ranko."*

*Outside the door, Kasumi quietly fretted. "Are you sure sending Ranma in was a good idea?" she asked, her ears straining for any sounds of a beating. At the moment, all she could hear was Ranko snickering quietly beside her.*

"*Don't worry, sis," Nabiki assured her, waving her concern aside. "Ranma may be an idiot, but I'm pretty sure I know what Akane's thinking. Trust me . . . she \*wants\* him in there with her."*

"*Well, if you're certain," Kasumi replied, her own voice filled with doubt.*

*Inside, Ranma slowly turned to face Akane, taking in her shaking fists, and the fury in her dark brown eyes. "Yeah, well, looks like you're doing fine," he told her, giving her a jaunty salute. "See ya." Turning, he reached once more for the doorknob.*

*And Akane, releasing a strangled sob, fell to the floor behind him. Ranma quickly turned, surprised to see his short-haired fiancée now sitting on the cold stone tiles of her room, her head buried in her lap as she began to cry anew. How she'd gone from wanting to pound the snot out of him, to a weeping mess in seconds, he'd never know.*

*Still, Ranma couldn't stand to see her so upset.*

*Cautiously, he walked over and bent down beside her, reaching out a hand to gently touch her shoulder. "A—Akane," he faltered. "You alright?"*

*Wordlessly, she shook her head; little gasping sobs escaping through tightly closed lips. Silently, Ranma vowed to kill Kuno all over again. That dumb jerk deserved much worse than a good pounding. "If it makes you feel any better," he told her rather awkwardly, "I uh, already took care of that pervert . . . he'll be sipping his food through a straw for a week."*

*He heard her laugh softly through the tears, and then very slowly she lifted her head, still sniffling. "That's good to hear at least," she said, finally meeting his gaze.*

*Ranma could tell she'd been crying for a while. Up close, her eyes were red and a bit swollen, her face slightly flushed. Actually, all things considered, she didn't look half-bad. Not that he ever planned to tell her so. Reaching out a hand, he wiped away a few stray tears. "So stop crying, 'k?" he told her, his voice unusually soft. "You're ugly enough as it is . . . crying just makes it worse."*

*Akane knew he wasn't \*completely\* serious, and just this once, decided to let it slide. "Ranma," she whispered after a moment, careful now to avoid his eyes. "I won't blame you if—if you want to call off the engagement. There's no reason we should* ***both*** *suffer. . ."*

*Ranma's hands fell immediately to his sides, a strange tightening in his chest taking hold at her words. "Why?" he asked through narrowed eyes, suddenly suspicious. "Do you WANT me to call off the engagement or something?"*

"*No, of course not!" she yelled, much louder than intended. Composing herself, she added, softer this time, "I mean, I'm used to you, I guess. But . . . why would you want to be engaged to me? I'm a used woman now, dummy. No one would blame you if you decided to call the whole thing off."*

*Ranma stared at her blankly. "A what. . .?" he asked, utterly confused. "Why do you say that?"*

"*Because," Akane said very earnestly, "Kodachi said so. She told me, now that I've—well, \*you\* know—I've got experience, and you probably want someone who's pure."*

"*Uh. . ." At that moment, Ranma wanted desperately to be someplace else—****anywhere*** *else. "Listen Akane," he finally told her, afraid she'd start bawling again if he didn't speak up fast. "First of all, Kodachi's crazy, so what the heck were you doing listening to her for? And second, it's not your fault. That jerk kissed \*you\*, right . . . not the other way around?" Akane quickly nodded, and at the confirmation, Ranma visibly relaxed. "Well then, stop beating yourself up over it."*

"*Yeah, but. . ."*

"*But* ***nothing****," he insisted. "I don't think you're a—a used woman, or whatever. I'd never think that."*

*A faint smile touched the corner of her lips. "Really?" she asked him.*

"*Really," he assured her. "And besides, if it's upsetting you that much, there's an easy enough solution."*

"*There is?" she asked, looking hopeful. "What's that?"*

*Ranma grinned. "I'll just go kiss some cute girl, and we'll be even."*

*Akane's reaction wasn't exactly surprising. Her first strike he avoided on pure instinct—her second, dumb luck—by the third, he'd figured out her sloppy attack pattern, and captured her wrist as it flew past his head.*

*What Ranma \*hadn't\* counted on, was the forward momentum that continued to pull her towards him . . .*

*With a cry of surprise, Akane crashed into his chest, the added weight pushing him backwards onto the floor—dragging her right along with him. When Akane finally lifted her head, it was to find herself unexpectedly sprawled over her fiancé's body, their faces hovering only inches apart.*

*Both stared, frozen in place, eyes suddenly wide. Akane could feel his chest rising and falling gently beneath her; the weight of his hand still there at her wrist. . .*

*But then she remembered Kuno . . . his face moving towards her seconds before he took her lips, stealing away her very first kiss. Her throat grew tight, and her eyes stung as feelings of shame and guilt washed over her. "I—I'm sorry, Ranma," she told him, as she made a move to get up.*

*His grip on her hand immediately tightened. "Wait a sec," he ordered quietly, and Akane paused, surprised to find that he'd stopped her. He stared back at her, suddenly serious. "I was just kidding, you know—about the kissing thing. You know I'd never kiss anyone else."*

*Akane watched him carefully, and after a moment she sighed, looking away. "I know," she said at last. "You're too honorable to do something like that. Even if you wanted to, you'd probably hold yourself back."*

*Beneath her, Ranma stiffened. "Is that really what you think of me?!" he asked her, his voice incredulous. "That I'd kiss just* ***any****one?"*

"*Well, wouldn't you?" she accused.*

*Ranma was very tempted to start shaking her until she started to see reason. "You are such an \*idiot\*, Akane!" he said instead, disbelieving. "After all this time, do you REALLY think I'm only with you because I'm honor-bound to be?! That I couldn't weasel my way out of this thing if I really wanted to?" A thought struck him then, and he snapped, suddenly furious, "Is that why you're with ME?" he demanded. "Did you \*want\* him to kiss you? Is that what this whole thing's been about?!"*

"*No, of course not!"*

"*Then what is your problem, Akane?! If you feel guilty for Kuno, then fine—make it up to me. But don't keep harping on the dumb thing and cause trouble for everyone. It was KUNO for gods' sakes—the kiss couldn't have been THAT great!"*

"*Well, EXCUSE ME for worrying!" she shot back, angry tears gathering in her eyes again. "Next time a guy kisses me, I'll be sure to thank him on your behalf!" Again, she moved to stand, but Ranma's grip on her arm was like steel.*

"*That's not what I meant, and you know it!"*

"*Then what DID you mean, you jerk?!"*

*Ranma hesitated . . . but only for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he let it out very slowly. "We've been engaged since we were born, Akane—after thirteen years, you're \*stuck\* with me. No idiot like Kuno is going to change that—no matter how many times he kisses you. THAT'S what I meant," he told her, his expression firm. "So stop worrying . . . alright?"*

*Akane stared at him, tears welling again in her eyes; though this time, they had nothing to do with anger. "Do—do you really mean that, Ranma. . .?" she asked him, silently praying he wasn't building her up simply to let her fall.*

*Realizing the implications of everything he'd just said, Ranma blushed like mad. But he nodded for her, just once—too embarrassed to say anything more. And yet . . . even after his declaration, for some mysterious reason, Akane's crying didn't stop. She continued on, fresh tears falling down her cheeks.*

*For the second time that day, Ranma reached up with his free hand, lightly brushing her tears away with the tips of his fingers. "Ah, geez," he whispered, suddenly guilty. "I didn't mean to make you cry even more." Using the end of his sleeve, he began to dab at her eyes, hoping to cut the problem off at its source.*

*Akane laughed lightly under his ministrations, touched in more ways than she could possibly say. At that moment, it hit her—just how much she'd wanted Ranma to have her first kiss. How much she'd wanted \*all\* of her firsts to be with him.*

*. . and all of a sudden, Ranma paused, his arm suspended in mid-air.*

*Even though her tears had basically stopped, there had been something in her eyes just then—a look he couldn't identify, but wanted desperately to see again; and part of him wondered, had Kuno seen that same thing?*

*A feeling came over him, one that had been occurring more and more frequently as of late. Suddenly, he wanted very much to touch her . . . to confirm once and for all that she really* ***was*** *his . . . that Kuno and all those other guys didn't stand a chance. This feeling, it wasn't exactly new, or even surprising—he'd known how he felt about Akane for two years now. But knowing and acting—those were two very different things.*

*But if an idiot like Kuno could do it . . . there was no reason* ***Ranma*** *couldn't.*

*With some hesitation, his hand reached up to brush her cheek, his touch lingering. "Akane," he whispered, having come to a decision. "Sorry, but . . . if you don't move away in the next couple seconds, I'm going to kiss you." Akane stared down at him in surprise, and then waited for the punch line. Any minute now he'd call her a gullible moron, and laugh at her for being dumb enough to believe him.*

*But instead, Ranma lay there calmly, the intensity in his eyes very real. With her heart pounding, Akane watched him, growing more uncertain with each passing second . . . all while finding herself unwilling to move away.*

*True to his word, he waited, and when Akane still hadn't budged, he took her silence as consent. Without another word, he guided her face down to his, touching her lips gently with his own; their first kiss feather-soft and warm.*

*Even with the barest of contact, Akane's lips felt like they'd been brushed by a live wire. A pleasant tingling sensation danced across every point that Ranma touched, and even after he pulled away, the feeling remained; his kiss lingering like a ghost. Akane placed a finger to them in wonder, her eyes locked on his.*

*He was staring back at her with the softest of expressions, and she could feel her insides begin to melt. With Kuno, she'd felt revulsion and horror . . . with Ranma, it had felt right.*

*This time, both of their heads seemed to gravitate to one another, their eyes drifting closed as the distance between them vanished. Again his lips touched hers, not quite as innocently this time; and soon after she could feel his hand tangling in her hair, pulling her closer as he deepened their kiss.*

*Soon, she was losing herself in Ranma—captivated by the feel of his lips against hers; the subtle scent of ice cream and honey; his fingertips dancing in her hair. Tilting his head, and parting his lips, he began to apply more pressure, gently coaxing her mouth open with his own.*

*Akane parted her lips for him, and Ranma's tongue slipped within to tangle playfully with hers—sending little shock waves throughout her entire body. A low moan escaped her lips as Ranma smiled against her, and tugging gently on her wrist, he pulled her body even closer; lost as much in her, as she was in him.*

*If they hadn't needed to breathe, if they hadn't heard their siblings right outside the door . . . they might have never pulled away.*

*But Ranma did, a bit reluctantly, she hoped, as his navy blue eyes stared back at her, a soft smile spreading slowly across his face. "There," he told her, very quietly, his hand brushing back a strand of hair that had fallen before her eyes. "Now we're both used."*

*Akane's heart suddenly felt like it would burst. "Ranma . . ." she whispered, overwhelmed.*

*And then she heard Ranko pounding loudly on the door, yelling irritably, "Are you guys done in there?" Then, as an afterthought, "Ranma—you still alive?"*

*Much too soon, Akane remembered the position they were in. Embarrassed, she quickly scrambled off her fiancé, her eyes glued to the door—terrified that any minute Ranko would burst in and say, "HA! I KNEW it!"*

*But Ranma still had a hold of her wrist. He brought her up short, effectively stopping her from moving clear across the room. Turning to face the door, he yelled back, "Just give us a minute, would you?! Geez," he muttered, annoyed at the interruption.*

*Finally, he turned back to Akane, trying helplessly to fight back a blush. "Umm. . . do you feel better now?" he asked her, putting a hand behind his head in embarrassment.*

*Feeling bashful herself, Akane nodded, her eyes focused on the ground.*

"*Ah, good," Ranma told her, finally releasing her wrist. "It was kind of silly to be so upset over it in the first place, don't you think? I mean, at least now you know what a \*real\* kiss feels like." He looked at her side-long, grinning from ear-to-ear and Akane laughed.*

"*Come on," he told her, hoping to reclaim the last of his dignity as he climbed to his feet. "Let's go grab Ranko and walk around the courtyard. If we stay here much longer, I have a feeling Kasumi's going to try and move in."*

*Akane stood as well, her smile still firmly in place. Even if their union was their family's idea, she was glad it was Ranma she was engaged to and not some pervert like Kuno. "Thanks for cheering me up, Ranma," she told him sincerely. Then, looking thoughtful, she added, "Even though I thought you'd be terrible at it." She stuck her tongue out at him, and then laughed.*

"*Real cute," Ranma complained, though he grinned himself—caught up in his fiancée's good mirth. Together, still smiling, they opened the door to greet the relieved faces of their siblings. . .*

. . . And slowly, back on the ship, Akane awoke.

Feeling unsettled, she looked around the cabin. . . memories of the last few days suddenly at odds with being thirteen and locked in her room. Here, there was no Kasumi or Nabiki; no one pleading with her to open her door; to tell her that a kiss from Kuno wasn't the end of the world.

But *Ranma* was there, standing at the foot of her bed . . . the angry scowl on his face a good indicator that this time he wasn't there to cheer her up.

Akane lifted her eyes to the ceiling, trying desperately to remember how things had gotten to this point . . . and how she could possibly put things back the way they were meant to be.

But part of her worried. . .

She had a feeling she knew how this was all going to play out.

. . .And it wasn't going to end with a kiss.

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THE END
Chapter 8
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A/N: Alright, from here on out, the rating will come into play. So you've been warned!