

# Well, That's the Breaks!

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Rated PG

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Summary: Sometimes love just isn't enough... WHAM warning with a twist.

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He looked over at his partner longingly. She was typing away industriously at her computer, a pencil perched precariously, apparently forgotten, behind her ear. Her hair, which she had recently grown out past its former shoulder-length bob, was drawn back into a small ponytail at the back of her head.

He wondered briefly what she was working on. Something big, if he knew her. Governmental corruption, maybe. Or the exclusive on the takedown of a major crime network. Something that would make his current article on the shoddy quality of materials being used at the Metropolis Waste Reclamation Plant, which was causing bacterial contamination of the drinking water of several neighborhoods, look like the work of a first-year hack.

He wanted so badly to ask her out. On a date. On a real date. Not just one of those nights when she came to his apartment bearing pizza and a movie, and they ended up crashing on his couch for the night.

But she was his best friend. He hadn't told her everything about himself, but she still knew him better than almost anyone else on this earth. Every time he was struggling with something, she was always there for him. She always knew what to say, whether to use humor to get him out of the doldrums, or impatience to make him stop feeling sorry for himself. He didn't want to lose that. He didn't want to lose her. He wanted to see if they could be something more, but he couldn't risk what they had. It was too important.

He sighed and turned back to his computer screen, trying to remember where he had left off before his mental tangent had swept him away.

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She knew he had been watching her. He had been doing that a lot of late. For a moment, she thought he was going to actually approach her, but then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw him sigh, his shoulders slumped, and return to staring blankly at his monitor.

This was utterly ridiculous, she thought to herself. When she had first noticed this behavior in her partner, she had been very strongly ambivalent, and she had been absurdly grateful for the reprieve when he didn't approach her. But it had now been quite a while — on her timescale, anyhow — since she had made the decision to go for it. Now his reticence of taking the risk of taking their relationship to the next step was simply irritating, and not a little insulting.

Well, she had always been rather more impetuous than her partner. If he wouldn't be the one to say the scary words, she would.

Without giving herself the time to think through, and therefore doubt, her actions, she stood up and traversed the six short steps that took her to her partner's desk. It felt much farther this time. She almost turned back twice before catching her courage by the back of the collar as it tried to wriggle away.

She sat on the corner of her partner's desk. He pretended to keep working for a moment before noticing her, and then sat back in his chair and smiled at her, clearly trying to look relaxed and

offhand. He really was a crappy liar. As he sat back, his smile was a bit forced, and the tension in his body was obvious to someone who was trained to observe, to look beyond the exterior. Sometimes she really wondered how he could be such a good reporter with that total inability to make even a simple, believable excuse or white lie.

"So," she began in her usual direct, no-nonsense manner. "Do you want to go out for dinner tonight?"

"You mean, like, on a date?" he asked. There was a gleam in his eye comprised of equal parts terror and hope.

She gave him a look that clearly said yes, and to please pull his head out to somewhere where the sun actually *did* shine. He quickly took the hint.

"Yes, I would love to go out on a date with you tonight," he said, quiet sincerity permeating his voice.

They looked at each other in silence for a moment before she, remembering herself and where they were, quickly jumped off his desk. "Great," she said. "See you tonight." With that, she beat a hasty retreat to her own desk and quickly buried herself in her developing story to avoid thinking further about the possible ramifications and consequences of her spur-of-the-moment action.

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It had been a perfect night.

When he had met her at her door at precisely eight o'clock, she been wearing her most elegant black dress, her hair curling gently just past her mostly-bare shoulders, a dab of perfume daringly placed behind both ear and knee. He had matched her in a charcoal suit, looking so handsome that he had taken her breath away.

They had gone to a small, intimate restaurant where the dinners were excellent and the deserts superb. They had all but forgotten the food as they talked animatedly to each other: first about their current story, then moving on to the comfortable topics they would discuss when crashed on his couch some nights after hours of research, then finally telling things that they had never told the other before, despite their many months of being friends and partners.

The candle that lit their table, pristine and new at the beginning of the evening, was guttering in its own wax as they shared desert, taking their own forks to bring morsels of moist cake to the other's lips. This romantic gesture seemed almost anticlimactic after the quintessential evening they had shared.

After bidding him goodnight, she leaned against the cool wood of her apartment door, smiling to herself as she relived every detail of the evening. It wasn't the funniest, or the wildest, or the most exciting date she had ever been on, but everything seemed to just...*work*.

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It just wasn't working.

He sighed, staring into the mug of beer in a seedy downtown bar. How had it gotten so empty? He had barely taken a couple of sips...

His mind flew back to the last time he had left her in the middle of one of their dates. Her face had been...

Well, he didn't want to remember it anytime soon.

But he had *needed* to leave her. He hadn't had any choice. Yes, they had been in the middle of a date, but there were some things he had to do alone.

He had tried to tell her about this side of his life a couple of times, but each time, the words got stuck in his throat.

A small, unwelcome voice in the back of his head whispered, "It almost seems as though you're ashamed of that side of yourself."

But he had nothing to be ashamed of, he told that voice angrily, throwing back another large gulp of the drink before him. It certainly wasn't as if he was hurting anyone...

The image of her face as he had gotten up to leave in the middle of a date this last time, the despair she had tried so hard to conceal under a brittle layer of anger, rudely inserted itself center stage into his head. He viciously pushed it away, forcing it to fall off the raised dais, arms swinging wildly, into the peanut gallery.

Another gulp of beer found its way into his stomach as he continued his interrupted thought. After all, it wasn't like he had a *problem*. He could stop any time he wanted to. He just... hadn't... this time.

'Or last time, or the time before that...' the small voice retorted softly. He stared at it stonily until crumpled in weary defeat.

He raised the glass to his lips again, only to find it empty. He scowled. He hated the fact that he had already drunk two beers, but still felt entirely sober. He lifted his mug at the bartender. "Another one," he demanded tersely.

Rolling her eyes, the bartender complied. She knew that with this one, you just had to keep the drinks coming. The man could drink a veritable river. But, as long as he paid his tab at the end of the night, it was no skin off *her* nose. He was usually a pretty good tipper. Dropping a new mug in front of him with a loud clunk, she returned to her far more pleasant fantasies about the steely-tight buns of Metropolis's most eligible bachelor and resident do-gooder.

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Not only was it not working, it was an unparalleled federal disaster, she thought dismally to herself. Hearing the distinctive ding of the elevator as it arrived at the bullpen, she quickly dashed away the treacherous moisture that threatened to fall from her eyes. She stepped out of the elevator and walked slowly to the desk that had for the past few years seemed more like home than any apartment she had ever owned. She had never had much luck with men, but until now she had never known how much it was possible to hurt...

It had seemed so idyllic at first. She could barely bear to think of those times... their first date.

The wool was ripped painfully from her eyes pretty quickly after that. Often, in the middle of their dates, and lately even at work, he would get a far-off look in his eyes and start pulling at his neck and swallowing painfully. She had begun to hate this tic, which always signaled that within a very few minutes he would be gone with some lame excuse.

Sometimes he wouldn't even bother to show up at all.

She had tried to talk to him about it. He usually just told her brusquely that there were things he had to do. He never said 'alone,' but the word resounded between them with every lame excuse. Sometimes she got the feeling that he wanted to tell her more, but if he did, it had never passed his lips. She had probably just imagined desperation she had sometimes glimpsed in his eyes.

She had arrived at her desk. She bent down, placing the box she had carried from her apartment onto the scarred wood and then slowly filling it. Soon, her desk was empty of all but the grit accumulated during her many years of pounding the pavement and chasing stories.

Taking one last look around the newsroom that had been her home — her very lifeblood — for so many years, she sighed. There were so many good memories here. Of Kerths, of half-crazy sources, of shouting matches with Perry...

Then her eye fell on *his* desk, and the little bubble of laughter that had crept into her throat vanished. Her smile died as yet unborn. There was a lot of pain here, too. A mire of rejection. After they had broken up — a jagged scene she had *no* intention to relive in the near future — she had tried to keep going, to act as if nothing had happened, to pretend that they could still be friends and partners. But they couldn't. It was like they both, all of a sudden, weren't even sure they *liked* each other anymore.

So she was running away. She only hoped that Anchorage was far enough that her memories, her broken dreams — the veritable nightmare her life had become — wouldn't be able to find her.

Quickly, resolutely, not giving herself the chance to dither (again), she took a thin envelope out of her bag and stuffed it under Perry's door. There was no way he would be able to miss it.

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Perry sighed as he turned the envelope over in his hands. He stared fixedly at the pristine expanse of white blemished only by the hastily scrawled "Perry" as if he could make it disappear with the power of his mind alone. A forlorn hope. He knew what this envelope held. It held the end. He was about to lose one of the two best reporters he had ever known.

For a moment, Perry allowed himself to mourn the Pulitzer that would never be. Both of those kids were great reporters, but together, they had — well, they *had* had — something magical.

He had hoped that fate would smile down on those two; that garlands would be thrown at their feet, but — well, that was the breaks. Literally. Elvis had left the building, and there was nothing the Colonel could do about it this time.

Perry steeled himself as he opened the envelope and removed the single sheet of paper it enclosed. He read it quickly, hoping against hope — but he wasn't the editor of a great metropolitan newspaper (indeed, the best newspaper in the world!) just because he could yodel.

There was no doubt now. The hottest team in town had gone cold. The magical partnership of Norcross and Judd was at an end.

THE END