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SUGDEN

A PERFECT
DISGUISE

Anna Sugden

A Perfect Disguise



A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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“Trick or Treat?”

The repetitive, high-pitched chorus was like nails scraping down a chalkboard for Jamie ‘Blade’ Wilkinson.

He was glad the local underprivileged kids were excited to be at this Halloween party, hosted by the New Jersey Ice Cats, but he’d be relieved when they were all finally inside the ballroom and playing the fairground-style games manned by the hockey players. The costumed children had to yell the traditional greeting to be allowed into the party by the two storm troopers -- aka goaltenders Ike Jelinek and ‘Monty’ Montgomery.

Blade’s ‘Bobbing for Skulls’ stall was right by the doors, so for the past half-hour, he’d heard every damn “Trick or Treat?”.

He’d hated that phrase since childhood, when every night during hockey season had literally been ‘trick or treat’, as he’d try to figure out if his old man had drunk enough to pass out. If he was the fun dad who encouraged Jamie to play hockey or the monster who resented his son’s skills and took it out on Blade with his fists.

Chris ‘Wilkie’ Wilkinson had blown out his knee in

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his first game in the NHL, on Halloween, and never played again. The hockey world had been shocked; young Wilkie had been tipped to be the next Gretzky. Blade's old man had battled depression ever since.

Normally, the Cats were playing on October 31st, so Jamie could avoid kids and their cheery chant. Not this year.

What was the Halloween equivalent of 'bah humbug'?

"Get over it," he muttered. The youngsters deserved his best effort. He adjusted his Zorro mask, then swirled the apples, printed with skulls, in the water-filled tin tub "Who's brave enough to take a bite?"

"I'll have a nibble." The husky words definitely did not belong to a kid.

Blade turned to see who owned the sexy voice.

Catwoman had never looked so good.

From the tip of the furry ears perched on her dark hair, through the black leotard which dipped tantalisingly low across her cleavage and hugged luscious curves, to the fishnet stockings and spiked heel, over-knee boots, which emphasised every inch of her long, shapely legs, she was a comic-book reader's wet dream. Her almond-shaped green eyes, emphasised by her cat mask, and her full, scarlet lips tempted a man to see how loudly he could make her purr.

Unfortunately, asking her to nibble him was not a suitable response with kids present.

Jamie cleared his dry throat. "Knock yourself out."

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As she bent low over the tub, Blade couldn't tear his gaze from her delectable ass. He grabbed a cold bottle of water and rolled it across his heated forehead. He was tempted to give his groin the same treatment to ease the raging erection tightening his jeans, but instead visualised a sheet of fresh ice.

Catwoman surprised him by snagging an apple stalk between her teeth and lifting the fruit out of the tub.

"Neat trick," he managed to say.

"Works every time." Her teasing smile undid the relief from the cold bottle.

"Are you here with your kids?" He hoped fervently she wasn't. He only dated women who were unattached. It was easier all round.

She shook her head. "My friend, who works in the Cats' front office, asked if I'd help out with crowd control." Catwoman leaned closer, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "In my normal life, I'm an elementary teacher."

For some reason, her words brought to mind his pretty, but off-limits neighbour. Weird. Whilst Daisy also taught elementary, her floaty dresses, sunny smile and sweet personality made her the complete opposite of the sexy woman before him.

A shame, because if Daisy were more like Catwoman, he'd have asked her out --instead of keeping things between them strictly casual. It wasn't that he didn't like the bubbly brunette. He did. A Lot. But she was too nice for a man with his demons.

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Jamie pushed aside the depressing thought. He couldn't change what he was. "You must have the patience of a saint, handling all those kids every day."

"Not really. But I've mastered 'the look'." She narrowed her green gaze. "That makes them behave."

"I'm impressed. I'm quaking in my boots."

"Speaking of which, I'd better do the rounds and make sure your young guests don't get up to too much mischief."

He didn't want her to go. Which was crazy. Blade didn't usually pay attention to the women at these team-sponsored events, but there was something intriguing about Catwoman. "Are you sticking around afterwards? The team's having a cocktail party for the volunteers."

She tilted her head, regarding him with those feline eyes. "That depends."

"On what?"

"If there's anything ... or anyone ... worth sticking around for." She took a neat bite out of the apple, before sauntering away.

Blade couldn't tear his gaze away from the sway of her hips. He hoped she didn't leave. He wanted to ask her out. Maybe explore that whole nibbling thing in private.

"Holy sex kitten, Zorro." Jean Baptiste Larocque, currently dressed as Batman, came to stand beside him. "That's one smoking hot pussycat."

"She's not in your league," Jamie growled.

JB gave him a knowing look. "But you want her to

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be in yours.”

“She’s a teacher,” he hedged.

“Interesting. Like Daisy.” His team-mate thought Blade’s hands-off policy was nuts.

“Does that look like Daisy?” Jamie laughed. “She’s more likely to be Snow White.”

“Ouch. Major typecasting, bro.” JB studied Catwoman, too closely for Blade’s liking. “There’s something familiar about her. She’s the same height and build as Daisy. Same dark hair and green eyes.” He sniffed the air. “Wears the same perfume.”

All that was true, Jamie realised. Still, much as he might wish otherwise, the resemblance was only superficial. There was no way sweet Daisy and sultry Catwoman were the same person. “Not possible.”

“I call ‘em as I see ‘em.” His friend shrugged. “Either way, you should ask her out, before you lose your chance.”

“Yeah? Going to try your luck?” Jamie hoped not. Most women found JB irresistible.

“Much as I’d enjoy her claws on me, I don’t poach. Can’t say the other guys are as considerate,” JB said, before strolling away.

Before Blade could respond, some kids in zombie costumes came up to try for apples.

As the afternoon wore on, his stall got busier. He watched Catwoman out of the corner of his eye every chance he got. Blade kept looking for signs that he was mistaken about her. But whatever physical similarities

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she shared with Daisy, the confident way she handled the boys -- especially the adult ones -- said his friend was wrong. Brushing aside his disappointment, he focused on the excited children.

Once the kids had gone home, the volunteers headed to the cocktail party. As Jamie and his team-mates joined them, he was pleased to see Catwoman standing by the bar with her friend. Time to make his move.

He strode towards Catwoman, determined not to let the opportunity slip away. Halfway there, he was surprised to feel a strange tug of guilt in his chest -- he felt disloyal to Daisy.

What was that about?

* * *

“I really thought your plan had worked.” Daisy Carturo took the champagne her friend Lilia offered. “That Jamie had seen me in a new light.”

“Trust me -- he did. You look so hot in that costume, I’ve seen you in a new light.” Lilia clinked her flute against Daisy’s. “If I didn’t love you, I’d hate you. I couldn’t squeeze one thigh into that outfit.” She indicated her flowing black dress, covered in sequined cobwebs. “I’m definitely more Addams Family, than Catwoman.”

“You make a fabulous Morticia.”

“Well, I have had a couple of offers to ‘be my Gomez’.” Lilia waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “I’m going to let my inner bad girl out to play.”

“You and me both.” Daisy shot a subtle look at the

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group of laughing, costumed players. “Or I would, if Jamie would do his part.”

He hadn’t made an effort to speak to her again. Admittedly, he’d been busy at his stall and had helped clear up once the kids had left. Still, he could have tried.

“He hasn’t taken his eyes off you all afternoon,” Lilia said. “He’s hot for you.”

“He’s hot for Catwoman, but what about the woman behind the costume? I got the feeling he didn’t recognise me, even though I gave him plenty of clues.”

Lilia rolled her eyes. “It’s not that clever a disguise.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to recognise me. Catwoman’s a whole different ballgame to Daisy Carturo.”

“That’s the point of the plan -- to show him there’s plenty of spice in with all that sugar.”

Jamie Wilkinson had moved into the other half of her duplex over the summer and they’d quickly become friendly. Even once school had started back and he’d begun preseason training, they’d continued to hang out together regularly.

The problem was it had never progressed beyond friendship. She knew he was attracted to her, but he refused to act on it.

Jamie had admitted, after an evening spent on her deck sharing a bottle of wine, that she was too good for him. She deserved a better man. He didn’t explain,

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other than to say he came from bad blood. Despite arguing that no-one was perfect and she could make up her own mind about who to date, he'd refused to budge.

Daisy had no idea if she came from good or bad blood, because she didn't know her father. Her mother had grown up in a 'free love' commune and hadn't worried about such details. While Daisy didn't follow the same philosophy, she wasn't the 'good girl' Jamie believed her to be. She was a normal, healthy woman.

Which was why she'd asked Lilia to help her change his mind.

"Heads up," Lilia muttered. "He's coming over. I'll be by the buffet when you're done."

Daisy fought the urge to fan herself as Jamie walked towards her. The silly costume which should have looked effeminate, actually suited him. The black, silk, open-necked shirt moulded to his broad chest perfectly. And, oh boy, what he did for a pair of black jeans. He even carried off the cape.

Behind the mask, his blue eyes zeroed in on her. The hot message in his gaze sent a tingle of delight through her.

"I guess you found someone, or something, worth staying for." His deep voice brushed over her skin like a caress, making her yearn for his touch.

"We'll see." She hoped she sounded more composed than she felt

"Perhaps I could sway your opinion over dinner sometime."

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Yes! Mental fist-pump.

“I’m willing to give it a shot.”

“We’re on the road next week. How about Saturday?”

Alarms bells rang. If he’d recognised her, why would he explain? He’d know she had the Cats’ schedule stuck to her refrigerator.

“Okay. I’m glad you didn’t suggest a school night.”

He laughed. “You teachers are like us players -- no messing when you have to work the next day.”

His comment, paraphrasing one she’d made, had her wondering if he knew who she was, after all. “I can’t chastise a child for yawning in class if I’m doing it too.”

“I could pick you up at seven. Where do you live?”

Daisy’s heart sank. That was pretty conclusive. She was about to change her mind, pleading a prior engagement, but instead decided to use this as a final opportunity to make him see her as she was.

“Let’s meet at the restaurant,” she countered. “Then you won’t have to worry about taking me home afterwards.”

Jamie frowned. “I don’t mind, but if it makes you more comfortable ... sure. How about *Ma Bella’s*?”

“Great. I’ll see you on Saturday at seven.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” There was a wealth of promise in his voice.

“Me too.”

As Jamie rejoined his team-mates, Daisy walked

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over to the buffet. "Time for Plan B."

Lilia looked confused. "We have a Plan B?"

"Not yet. But we will by Saturday."

* * *

The last person Jamie wanted to bump into tonight was Daisy.

The guilty feeling hadn't disappeared by Saturday. If anything, it had increased. He didn't know why. He'd dated other women since he'd know Daisy. This was no different.

Except it was.

Blade knew deep down there was something special about Catwoman and it had nothing to do with how sexily she filled her costume. He didn't believe in love at first sight, but there had been an instant connection between them. Just as there had been with Daisy, an internal voice reminded him.

For sure -- only he could take a chance on a relationship with Catwoman. No way could he risk it with Daisy.

For all their similarities, the two women couldn't be more different. When he'd seen his neighbour yesterday, after returning from the road trip, he'd made a point of testing the water. He liked her and was attracted to her -- man, was he attracted to her -- but nothing she said or did changed his mind. She was too damn nice.

And off-limits.

There had been a sticky moment when Daisy had

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asked about the charity event. He'd hedged, saying it had been fun, but hard work. She'd given him a funny look, but had changed the subject to the latest antics of her pupils.

Blade closed his front door and was halfway down the steps, when he heard Daisy's door open. His stomach sank. He continued to the sidewalk, before plastering a smile on his face and turning to greet her.

"Hey ..." Before another word could leave his mouth, his jaw dropped.

Holy moly! Blade's brain froze, as his body flashed with heat.

That couldn't be Daisy.

Long legs in silky hose and skyscraper heels. A black, sparkly sweater dress that finished at mid-thigh and clung lovingly to every mouth-watering curve. Her dark hair swung loose around her shoulders. Her green eyes looked bigger, her scarlet lips fuller.

He blinked. She didn't morph back into the sweet girl next door.

Jamie was relieved, but at the same time bewildered. Words formed, but he couldn't arrange them into sentences. His mouth didn't want to work.

Then the pattern of sequins on her dress merged into a recognisable shape. A slinky, black cat stretched across her body from her hip, to rest its paw on her shoulder.

No. It was wishful thinking. His mind playing tricks on him. It couldn't be.

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His pulse jumped. Could it? Please let it be true.
As if she'd read his mind, her lips curved into a seductive smile.

Finally, he managed to speak. "Catwoman, I presume."

"Took you long enough to figure it out." Her husky voice clinched it.

Why hadn't he seen through her disguise? Hell, JB had even pointed it out to him.

He sighed. "I'm an idiot."

"No, you just judged a book by its cover." She tilted her head. "So, what's the verdict? Are we going for dinner? Or, now you know the truth, are you going to bail?"

He'd discovered two different, yet surprisingly complementary sides of Daisy. He wanted to explore this fascinatingly complex woman and see what else he could find. Maybe, at last, someone who could deal with the kind of man he was.

"I'm not completely stupid." Jamie held out his hand. "Besides, you promised me the chance to prove I'm worth hanging out with."

She laughed. "All right. I'm prepared to let you convince me."

As Daisy laced her fingers with his, a sense of rightness washed over him.

Who'd have known that beneath the trick of a Halloween costume, he'd find his perfect treat? This could turn out to be his favourite holiday, after all.

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Who's the lady behind the mask?

Ice Cats' forward, Jamie 'Blade' Wilkinson thinks his neighbour, pretty schoolteacher, Daisy Carturo, is too good for him. She deserves better than a man with his dark past. When he meets sexy Catwoman at a team charity event, he thinks he's found a more suitable woman to date. So why does she make him think about Daisy? If only he could have the best of both worlds.

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