



ANNA  
SUGDEN

A PERFECT  
PICNIC

**Anna Sugden**

## **A Perfect Picnic**



A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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## A Perfect Picnic

*“The unexpected snowstorm that hit the tri-state area last night is causing havoc with Thanksgiving plans. More than twenty-four inches fell in the early hours, but the freezing rain which followed has made roads hazardous. A travel advisory is in effect for the next twenty-four hour, so don’t drive unless you absolutely have to.”*

Without opening his eyes, Will Hardacre reached across and slammed his hand on the radio-alarm button to silence the bright-voiced broadcaster. He knew all about the damn snowstorm -- he’d driven through it at 2 am, after the New Jersey Ice Cats’ flight from Nashville had finally managed to land at Newark. It had taken two freaking hours for what was normally a thirty-minute journey home.

He’d been so tired when he’d got to his apartment that he’d dumped his stuff and collapsed face-down on the bed. At some point, he’d woken, stripped off his clothes and crawled beneath the heavy quilt.

Turning his head on the pillow, he cracked open one eye to look at glowing dial of the bedside clock, then swore. Only 8:30. Time for a few more hours shuteye before he had to get up. There wasn’t practice today, as

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Coach Macarty had given the players the holiday off and the Cats didn't have a game until Saturday.

As he was falling back to sleep, Will heard an odd, muffled thump. He ignored the sound and was quickly out cold.

When he awoke again, it was gone noon. Grey light came in through the floor-to-ceiling, bedroom windows. Even though it wasn't snowing, heavy cloud shrouded the normally fabulous view of Manhattan. Looked like the storm hadn't passed over yet.

Darn. He was due at the Jelineks' Thanksgiving party later. Whenever the Cats were at home over the holiday, their goaltender, Ike Jelinek, and his wife, Tracy, hosted an extravaganza, to which the team -- especially those without family close by -- was invited. As his brother, his only living relative, was in the air force and based overseas, Will had been a regular at the party ever since he was traded to the Cats from Buffalo, five years ago.

With the continuing bad weather, the roads wouldn't be clear enough to get over to the Jelineks' place. Besides, even after ten years in the north-east, this Florida-born boy was not comfortable driving in the snow. His stomach rumbled at the thought of the delicious spread he'd be missing out on. Maybe he could get one of the local restaurants to deliver dinner.

It was then that Will realised he was really cold. "Damn, it's like an ice-box in here." His breath misted the air.

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Was his heating not working? Wrapping the quilt around his body, Will got out of bed. He winced as his feet touched the freezing, hardwood floor. Padding downstairs towards the kitchen, it was clear from the arctic temperature that something was not right.

When he checked the timer, he realised it wasn't on. Had a fuse blown? Then he became aware of the complete silence throughout the apartment. No hum from his appliances. In the kitchen, the digital clock on his microwave wasn't working.

The power was out.

That explained the weird thump he'd heard; the electricity cutting off in the building.

He definitely wouldn't make the Thanksgiving party. No power meant no elevators to get down from and, more importantly, back up to the 45<sup>th</sup> floor. Which meant dinner delivery was out too.

Depending on how long the electricity was off for, the food in his freezer would be ruined, so he could nuke whatever was in there. Will smacked his forehead. Duh. He couldn't do that, because the microwave wouldn't work.

Thanksgiving was getting better and better ... not.

At least his stove was gas. Will put the kettle on to boil water for coffee, scooped grounds into his cafetière, then headed back upstairs to get dressed.

He'd just finished brushing his teeth, when his doorbell rang. Even though he hadn't dressed yet, he couldn't ignore it. Given the circumstances, it could

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only be his neighbour -- their apartments shared the penthouse floor -- and she might need something. So, he grabbed the quilt once more and went down to answer the door.

Sure enough, when he looked through the peephole, Amelia Norris was on the other side.

His heart thumped heavily. Weird. Although she was beautiful and had a stunning, curvy figure, Will knew from the times they'd bumped into each other that she wasn't his type.

Amelia was a high-powered, advertising guru, who worked long hours and travelled constantly. Not that he was put off by successful, career women -- far from it. But Amelia was so driven and uptight, that he couldn't imagine her ever chilling out. From her buttoned-up suits to the tight twists she scraped her hair back into, she had a brittle, untouchable look. A frown often creased her forehead and she constantly reviewed stuff on her phone. Cool to the point of icy, she was polite whenever they rode the elevator together and she never encouraged conversation beyond a casual greeting.

Only today, she looked different. Her dark hair was down around her shoulders, in a wavy, sleep-tousled mass. A faded, pink and white, flowery robe covered what looked to be a matching sleep-shirt. Instead of her normal skyscraper heels, she wore fluffy, pink, slipper socks. He'd never seen her looking so ... ordinary.

No. Ordinary implied that she wasn't as attractive as usual. She was. Maybe more so. She looked warmer,

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more approachable. And like she'd just rolled out of bed and come across the hall. His groin tightened at the thought. Will shook his head and adjusted the quilt, aware that he wore nothing underneath.

Amelia rang the doorbell again, prompting him to open the door.

"Good morning." His voice sounded gravelly.

Her gaze narrowed as it swept over him. "I'm sorry to bother you," she said briskly, looking at a spot somewhere over his shoulder. Her cheeks turned pink, as if she'd realised how little he was wearing. "I know you came in very late last night. In fact, I only beat you in by about twenty minutes. Your flight from Nashville was probably hit by the same delays as mine from Tampa. And then the roads were horrendous, weren't they? I'm glad I had the company chauffeur bring me home. I wouldn't have felt safe driving myself. They don't get snow like this back home. Anyway, I hope I didn't wake you."

Surprised, not only by how much she'd said -- more than all their other encounters combined -- but also that she knew where he'd been playing, all he could say was, "Nope."

"Oh good." She held up a mug, which said *Wish granted -- I'm a California girl*. "I don't suppose you have a gas stove? My induction cook-top doesn't work and I'd give anything for a cup of coffee."

Will hesitated. Not because he didn't want her in his apartment, but hello ... naked beneath the quilt. Then

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he told himself not to be an idiot -- she'd never shown the slightest interest in him, so she probably wouldn't care what he was, or wasn't, wearing. "Sure, come on in. I'm actually making some right now."

"Thanks." She sighed. "You're a life-saver."

As he stepped aside to let her enter, the shrill whistle of his kettle rang out.

Will led the way to his kitchen, where he turned off the burner. He poured boiling water into the cafetiere. "While this is brewing, I'll go upstairs and toss on some clothes." He walked out into the living room and turned on the fire. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

She looked down at her outfit, with a wry smile. "Don't worry if you can't match my sartorial elegance."

Will laughed and headed up to his bedroom, taking the steps two at a time. As he put on a pair of sweatpants and an old Ice Cats' hoody, he mused about the woman downstairs. Not only did she look different, she was like a whole different person.

One he found himself eager to get to know better.

Will shoved thick socks on his feet, then hurried back to the kitchen to finish the coffee.

"How do you take it?" he called out to Amelia, who was seated on his sectional couch.

"White, no sugar. Thanks." She looked chagrined. "I'm sorry. I would have been a better guest and brought cookies, but my cupboards are bare. I really need to find someone to take care of that. Of course,

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that requires finding the time to actually research a business that does stuff like that.”

“You should try Making Your Move.” Will handed her a steaming mug, then sat at the far end of the sofa, propping his feet on the coffee table.

“I thought they only did relocations. They moved one of the VPs that recently joined our company.” She wrapped her hands around the mug and took a sip. “Ah, that hits the spot.”

“They do. But recently they started Helping Hands, which provides all kinds of extra services for people like us. They do a bunch of stuff for me, including cleaning, laundry and making sure my kitchen is stocked with food.”

“That sounds perfect. Just what I need. I’ll check them out. Thanks.”

They sat quietly, drinking coffee. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable, but companionable. Go figure. Then he found himself thinking about ways to get her to stay longer, so he could get to know her better. Maybe see what other secrets lay beneath the surface.

“I wonder how long we’re going to be without electricity,” he said, after a few minutes.

Amelia put her mug down. “The building’s maintenance guy says we should be back up and running before tonight, but since the power’s out across most of northern New Jersey, don’t hold your breath.”

“Not the ideal way to celebrate Thanksgiving. Did you have to cancel plans?”

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“Only a lazy day in front of the TV.” She shrugged. “I’m not really a holiday person.”

“I’m often travelling or playing over Thanksgiving, so it’s not a big deal for me either.” He explained about the Jelineks’ party. “Clearly, I won’t make that now.”

“I’d planned to order in dinner, but I guess my Thanksgiving meal will be made up of whatever I can find in my kitchen.” Amelia wrinkled her nose. “I think I have granola, though I may have to borrow some milk from you.”

“We could pool our resources and eat together. A Thanksgiving picnic, right here, in front of the fire.”

She didn’t respond right away and her uncertainty showed in her expression.

Figuring she was worried about spending time with a virtual stranger, Will held up his hands, palms out. “Seriously, just dinner and some nice wine.”

“Oh, I know and it sounds good. That’s not why I hesitated. I’m not sure what, if anything, I have to add to our impromptu smorgasbord.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure we can muddle through. How about you provide the wine?”

“That I have.” Amelia stood. “Okay, I’ll change into something more festive and be back shortly.”

He got to his feet and followed her to the door. “I’ll leave the door unlocked, so you can let yourself in when you’re ready.”

Will enjoyed the sway of her hips, even in the fluffy robe, as she walked across the hall.

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She turned, at her door, and fluttered her fingers at him. “See you shortly.”

“Looking forward to it.” And he was. This was turning out to be an interesting Thanksgiving, after all.

\* \* \*

Water biscuits, Belgian chocolates and Pringles. Oh, and a fancy jar of olives. Which was weird, because she didn't even like olives. A pathetic haul.

Amelia rolled her eyes. At least, she had a couple of bottles of Italian, red wine and some expensive champagne a client had given her. She also had her mom's picnic basket. Wicker, lined with red and white gingham, and containing a matching tablecloth, it would add a nice touch for the impromptu picnic. And she could pretty up the occasion with candles. Didn't she have some festive serviettes left over from a company gift hamper too?

As Amelia filled the basket with her contributions, she felt as giddy as a teenager about to date the captain of the high school football team. Although, back then, she wouldn't have had the nerve to look one of those jocks in the eye, let alone actually go out with one.

Which was pretty much how she'd reacted to Will from the first time they'd ridden the private elevator to the penthouse floor together. She'd get tongue-tied and have to pretend an intense interest in the emails on her phone. Ridiculous, when she had no problem sharing space with her male colleagues or clients.

Of course, none of them looked like Will. With dark

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hair, dark eyes and that constant five o'clock shadow on his strong jaw, not to mention his smile, he was so handsome, he took her breath away. And as for his body ... phew! Amelia fanned herself at the memory of him answering his door this morning -- all tall, broad and gorgeous. Not to mention practically naked. The knowledge of which had, to her embarrassment, turned her into a babbling loon.

Thankfully, he hadn't seemed to notice, she thought, as she dressed in a deep red, sweater and black leggings. He couldn't have, otherwise he wouldn't have invited her to share a festive picnic with him. Even under the circumstances, Will probably had countless other women he could have spent the day with other than his kooky neighbour.

Buoyed by the thought, Amelia swapped out the pink slipper socks for red ones to match her top. A touch of mascara and blush -- okay, and some lipstick -- finished the job.

Picking up the basket, she remembered she had ice cream in her freezer. She added the container to her meagre offering, then headed back across the hall to Will's apartment.

She found him in the kitchen, pulling plates out of a cupboard. "I'm back."

He nodded at the picnic basket. "A modern day Red Riding Hood -- without the hood."

"Does that make you the wolf?" She arched an eyebrow.

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“Sure, as long as I don’t have to dress like Granny.”

“Uh no.” She laughed.

“Phew.” He mocked wiping his brow. “Frilly bed-caps and flannel nightgowns aren’t my thing.”

“I don’t know. All that lace would contrast perfectly with your scruff.”

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw. “I thought about shaving, but it’s a holiday.”

“Well, don’t worry on my account.” She set her basket on the counter. “I’m afraid, as predicted, my cupboards were pretty bare. I hope you did better.”

Will swept his hand in an arc to indicate the breakfast bar loaded with packages. “We lucked out. My refrigerator was stocked while I was away. I have cheese, ham, salad fixings and some fruit. It’s not turkey with all the trimmings, but it’s a decent spread.”

“That’s impressive. I’m embarrassed to add my contributions. Though I did bring dessert and, of course, wine. Plus, I have everything you need for a picnic in here.” She pointed to the basket.

“Then we’ve got all the bases covered.” He set the plates on the counter. “Let’s load these up and then settle down in the living room.”

They worked easily together. The conversation was light, often joking.

“Perhaps I should be grateful the power is out, as this and microwaving are pretty much the limit of my cooking skills,” Amelia admitted.

He chuckled. “That about sums mine up as well. But

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then, I eat most of my meals elsewhere. You probably do too.”

“Exactly. Plus we have a good selection of local restaurants who deliver.”

“Yeah, I have a mean dialling finger.” He picked up a couple of filled plates and started to carry them into the living room. He halted in front of the window, where thick, grey clouds continued to obscure the view. “Looks like more snow is on the way.”

Following him, she groaned. “Just what we need.”

“At least we have everything we need here and don’t have to go out. I’m pretty sure I have flashlights somewhere. Perhaps I should hunt them out, so we’ll be able to see what we’re eating.”

“I brought candles.” She set them around the room and lit them. They cast a cosy glow that warmed the room. “There -- much nicer.”

“Definitely. Thanks.” Will put the plates on the coffee table, then went back for more.

Amelia laid her mom’s tablecloth on the Navajo rug in front of the fire and set out the cutlery and serviettes, adding to the picnic feel. Once all the food had been brought in, Amelia poured the wine, while Will tossed some large cushions onto the floor.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Will held out his hand, indicating she should sit. “Best seat in the house.”

She dropped onto one of the cushions, curling her legs under her. Will joined her, leaning back against the sofa, his legs stretched out.

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Amelia handed him a wine glass. “We should make a Thanksgiving toast.”

“I’ll pass that over to you. I’m no good with fancy words. You’re the advertising guru.”

She laughed. “I have a creative team that comes up with the clever slogans, but I’ll do my best.” She raised her glass. “To power cuts and good neighbours.”

“And spur-of-the-moment picnics.”

“I’ll drink to that.” She clinked her glass against his.

As their gazes met and held, her breath caught at the desire smouldering in the depths of his dark eyes. An answering need tugged deep in her belly.

The warmth filling her cheeks had nothing to do with the heat from the fire.

Amelia dropped her gaze and drank her wine to ease her suddenly dry mouth. She cleared her throat, but her voice had a husky edge. “This is a pretty impressive spread. I don’t know where to start.”

“Just dive on in.” She was pleased to hear the rough note in Will’s voice too, as he handed her a plate.

Their conversation was a little stilted to start with, but thanks to the food and wine, they began to relax. They discussed their jobs, their busy lives, their lack of families. How much they enjoyed sport, reading and computer games. How much they hated olives, shopping and ironing. Why they weren’t big holiday people. Although the sky darkened, the golden glow of the flickering firelight and candle flames enhanced the feeling that they were cocooned from the outside world.

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Once they'd eaten their fill, they continued to talk. Amelia could feel herself growing sleepy, but was having such a lovely time, she didn't want to leave. Instead she slid down a little, then a little more, until she was lying on her side, her hand tucked under her head. Will did the same. Their voices grew softer.

Her eyes grew heavy and eventually drifted closed.

\* \* \*

Will wasn't sure what woke him. He didn't remember falling asleep and had no idea how long he'd been snoozing. All he knew was that he didn't dare move. Amelia's head rested on his chest. His arm cradled her snugly against him.

And it felt really good.

It was now fully dark outside. Yet, he could see lights in nearby buildings. Then he heard the hum of appliances and heating. The electricity must be back on. Disappointment filled him. His time with the soft, warm woman in his arms was about to end.

Will sighed silently. He wished that everything that had happened today, especially how well they'd got on, meant their relationship would change ... that they'd even have a relationship, beyond being neighbours ... but he knew that was unlikely. They would go back to an occasional hello on the elevator or when their paths crossed in the lobby.

He frowned. Since when did he give up so easily? Things would only return to the way they'd been if he let them. And he wasn't about to do that.

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Amelia stirred. Her eyes fluttered open. Her gaze had that slightly unfocused, not fully awake look.

His heart thudded as he waited for her reaction. He fought the urge to hold her tighter.

She smiled softly.

Will couldn't resist brushing a kiss against her lips. She tasted sweet and sexy. The heady combination made him want more. He hesitated, his mouth barely a breath away from hers, giving her the chance to stop him.

Instead, she lifted her head slightly and pressed her lips to his.

They lay like that for several minutes, then shifted so they were lying on their sides, arms wrapped around each other. Their kisses grew hotter, longer. Her fingers thrust through his hair. His hand stroked the length of her back.

When he caressed the patch of smooth, bare skin between her top and her leggings, Amelia stiffened.

"I'm sorry." She pulled out of his embrace and sat up. "That shouldn't have happened."

Damn it. He'd gone too far, too fast. "I'm the one who should apologise for getting carried away. Don't let my mistake spoil a lovely day and our fun picnic."

"No, of course not. It's fine -- it was me, as much as you. I kissed you back." She fiddled with her sleeve. "But it sounds like the power has been restored, so I should go. I'm sure you have plenty to do."

He didn't want her to leave.

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Will sat up and crossed his arms. “I plan to sit right here and enjoy what’s left of today. I may put the TV on later, catch a football game or watch a movie, but that’s about it. You could stay. Keep me company.”

She bit her lip, looking tempted.

“I promise to behave,” Will pressed. “We could order in that dinner.”

Amelia didn’t answer right away; probably trying to find a polite way to refuse. He prepared to put on his game face, to hide his disappointment.

Then, she smiled. “You do have a much better TV than me -- perfect for watching the Thanksgiving game from Dallas. And I have a hankering for some moussaka from Stavros’ diner. My treat since you provided most of our lunch.”

“Sounds good.”

“There’s only one thing you need to do.”

Anything she wanted. “What’s that?”

She leaned forward and ran her finger over his mouth. “Forget that promise to behave.”

And then she kissed him.

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Welcome to the world of the New Jersey Ice Cats!

Books in the series:

[A Perfect Distraction](#)

[A Perfect Trade](#)

[A Perfect Catch](#)

[A Perfect Compromise](#)

Coming Soon: [A Perfect Strategy](#)

Short Stories:

[A Perfect Selection](#) -- Containing:

[A Perfect Party](#)

A Perfect Lucky Charm

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A Perfect Bouquet

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## **A Perfect Distraction** **A face-off—head vs. heart**

For Jake Badoletti, this year is all about his career. He has a rare second chance to make the most of being a pro hockey player, so no parties, no scandals. Too bad he's met a woman who could sideline those plans. Maggie Goodman is not his usual type—right down to being a single mom. Still, the sizzling connection with this gorgeous brunette can't be ignored.

With a little juggling and a lot of focus, Jake manages to have the game *and* Maggie. Then his performance on the ice suffers and a scandal erupts. Now he can't afford the distraction of Maggie...even if she is perfect for him.

## **A Perfect Trade** **A win-win negotiation?**

Truman "Tru" Jelinek's life is pretty much off the rails. With his professional hockey career on thin ice, and his personal life falling apart, he's ready to implement some serious changes. Helping Jenny Martin—the only girl he's ever loved—make her dreams a reality is a good place to start.

There's just one problem: Jenny doesn't want his help. She barely wants to speak to him. But Tru is prepared to negotiate a deal that even Jenny can't refuse. As trading favors turns into sharing passion, he has to face the truth that when it comes to Jenny, the game is far from over.

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### **A Perfect Catch** **He's the perfect catch...for now!**

When it comes to romance, Tracy Hayden is *not* looking for a rematch. She's had epic passion—and problems!—with professional hockey player Ike Jelinek. Brilliant on skates and magic in bed, his too-traditional-for-her views were like a bucket of ice water on their affair.

Then an injury takes Ike out of the game, and everything changes. Suddenly he needs her services-providing business—even though he once claimed it was their biggest problem. Tracy's determined to be professional, despite the sizzling attraction between them that won't go away. Maybe they need a second fling to fix that!

### **A Perfect Compromise** **Theirs is a game of give-and-take...**

Schoolteacher Issy Brandine has a plan to build a stable, secure future for herself. No settling for second-best. Anything more than a sultry Caribbean fling with hotshot hockey star Jean Baptiste Larocque isn't part of the plan. A New Jersey Ice Cat with the ultimate hockey trophy in his sights won't fit into her low-key lifestyle. Except a surprise pregnancy changes everything.

Issy knows her child deserves more than a part-time dad. With JB's eyes on the championship that will redeem his career, compromise is out of the question. But love—and the baby between them—might prove that nothing is impossible.



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*No turkey, no pies and no power!*

When a Thanksgiving snow storm knocks out the electricity, Ice Cats' forward, Will Hardacre, and his sexy, but workaholic neighbour, Amelia Norris, are stranded on the 45th floor of their apartment building. A traditional festive feast is out; the best they can do is pool the sparse contents of their kitchen cupboards. Could a candlelit picnic help them discover that they have more in common than their address?

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