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PLAN

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A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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“A hockey jersey isn’t a costume.”

The long-suffering tone of Drake Spencer’s eight-year-old nephew was worthy of a teenager. Mason had always been smarter than his years. And he’d caught Drake out.

“It’s the best I can do, Mase. Unless you want me to put a sheet over my head and pretend to be a ghost.”

“You don’t have any white sheets.”

Drake snapped his fingers. “Darn. A navy blue ghost wouldn’t cut it, huh?”

Mason snorted. “Seriously?”

“What if I borrowed Monty’s goaltender’s mask? I could be a horror movie villain.”

Dumb idea. His nephew was too young to know about Jason. Besides, modern masks looked nothing like the white one in the famous slasher pics. Plus, Ice Cats’ goaltender, Chaz ‘Monty’ Montgomery’s latest bucket wasn’t scary, with snow leopards on the sides -- supporting the charity which protected their hockey team’s signature cat -- and a red daisy across the back for his florist girlfriend, Kayla.

Mason nixed the idea anyway. “Nah, then you’d look weird ‘cos you wouldn’t be wearing pads.”

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Drake should have thought this Halloween plan through better. What had started as an impromptu idea for how to approach the hot brunette down the street was quickly turning into a logistical problem. And time was ticking. Costumed kids were already out, on both sides of the leafy avenue. His doorbell had rung almost constantly for the past hour as the Halloween tradition got underway.

His nephew, dressed as Harry Potter, shifted impatiently from foot to foot. “You could be a zombie. We could rip up some old clothes and then go to our house and borrow some of Mom’s make-up.”

“Good idea. But I’ll see what I can find here. I don’t want you to miss out on valuable trick-or-treating time.” Plus he needed all the time he could get to impress the woman over at 231, who seemed immune to his charms.

Gertie was polite whenever they met, but in six months, they’d barely exchanged more than a couple of words. Although, she gave out mixed messages. Her cool words and curt nods said, ‘I’m not interested’. Yet, the way she’d checked out his body -- especially when he was doing yard work or washing his M Class in cut-offs and no shirt -- said she was.

His team-mates had tried to reassure him her stand-offishness wasn’t personal.

“Her ex is probably a pro-athlete or a sales guy,” Kenny Jelinek had suggested. “Didn’t you say he drove a BMW Z4?”

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“Flashy car. Definitely a slick jackass,” JB Larocque had added.

Which brought him to tonight. Drake hoped that with Mason beside him, he’d appear less ... whatever it was she had against him. He’d have the perfect opportunity to chat to her while his picky nephew decided which candy he wanted.

“You don’t wear make-up, do you?” Mason frowned.

“No way. But someone ... your mom, probably,” he added quickly, not wanting to explain about girlfriends who stayed over. “Left a red lipstick in the bathroom.”

“And you have that black stuff you put on your face when you play hockey.”

“See, we can make it work.” Drake fist-bumped his nephew. “A-plus for imagination.”

“Yeah.” Mason hitched a skinny shoulder. “Mrs. Smith says that too. But I need to remember when it’s okay to use my imagination and when it isn’t.”

“Huh.” Drake didn’t like the sound of a teacher who restricted kids; he’d had too many of those when he was a kid and his mind had been permanently fixed on sport.

“I wish I still had Mrs. Noakes.”

“She taught you last year?”

“Yeah. She was awesome.”

As his nephew raved about his teacher, Drake pulled off his Ice Cats sweater and tossed it on the sofa.

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He grabbed an old sports coat from the hall closet and handed it to his nephew. “Do your worst with that.”

Mason gleefully ripped the jacket, while Drake put on a ragged t-shirt and torn jeans. Then, Mason gave his uncle a scary zombie-face.

Finally, after leaving a couple of bowls of candy on his porch, under a sign for kids to help themselves, the pair set off down the luminaria-lined street.

Drake carefully orchestrated their path so they'd end up at Gertie's place last. At each house, he'd subtly glance across, trying to catch glimpses of her. Most of the time, all he saw was her pointed hat. Until, when they reached the house next door to hers, she came outside to cuddle someone's baby.

He gripped the porch rail to steady himself. Gertie's sexy, witch costume made his body harden instantly. Shimmery, black and purple fabric clung to her curves. The points of her dress flirted with her knees, showing glimpses of her shapely legs as far as mid-thigh, when she moved. Glittery black hose and pumps completed her enticing outfit.

Drake had the sudden urge to peel the whole ensemble off her.

Not good. Think cold. Think ice. Hoping the dark and his torn jacket would hide the bulge in his jeans, he followed Mason towards her house.

There weren't any other kids present as they climbed the red, brick steps to the front door of the pretty Victorian. Great.

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“Is something burning?” Mason wrinkled his nose.

Drake took one sniff of the acrid smell coming through the mesh screen door and knocked on the door-frame. “Everything okay in there?”

The reply wasn’t quite what he expected.

“Cra...nberries. Dam...sons. Shu...gar plums.”

* * *

The swear words Gertie muttered under her breath, when she heard Drake’s voice, weren’t the cleaned up ‘teacher’ versions she’d said aloud. This Halloween was turning into a disaster.

Wiping the back of her hand against her damp brow -- that darn witch’s hat was really too hot to be worn while baking -- she called out, “Fine.”

Hopefully, that would deter the too sexy, too ... everything ... hockey player from hanging around. The last thing she needed was for him to see what a mess she’d made of the fu...dgesicle cookies.

She tossed the third, burned batch into the trash and dumped her cookie sheets in the sink to soak. Why had she given in to her daughter’s classroom mother and agreed to produce two dozen cookies for the day-after-Halloween party tomorrow? Whilst Gertie tried to contribute to Betsy’s class as much as she could, she had her own class to cater to.

Her frustration wasn’t helped by Betsy’s absence. What Gertie had planned to be a fun mother--daughter project had been scuppered, when her ex-husband had demanded their daughter spend the evening with him.

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Naturally, it hadn't been due to paternal interest, but because Howie's work had organised a children's party for their employees' families and he hadn't wanted to miss the chance to schmooze his boss. Gertie wanted him to spend more time with Betsy; just not tonight.

She turned the extractor fan up to high ... again ... and checked her dwindling baking supplies. Did she have enough for a fourth batch?

"Hello? Gertie, is everything okay?"

For a moment, she closed her eyes and savoured Drake Spencer's deep voice, then shook her head to stop the foolishness. As gorgeous as her neighbour was, she'd made a vow to stay away from him. She knew his type and she sure as hell ...icopters did not need another man like Howie in her life. Good-looking, charming and unable to keep his pants zippered.

Still, Drake clearly wasn't going away.

Gertie ignored her fluttering pulse and walked to the front door.

"Trick or treat!" a child yelled.

Relieved -- and maybe a little disappointed -- that Drake wasn't alone, she forced a cheery smile and picked up two bowls from the hall table.

She was surprised to find a zombified, but still incredibly sexy, Drake accompanied by one of her former pupils. After a brief, appreciative glance at the rippling six-pack showing through her neighbour's torn t-shirt, she focussed on Mason.

"Hey Mrs. Noakes. I didn't know you lived here."

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The boy shot an accusing glare over his shoulder, then gave her the bemused expression most children his age got when they saw their teacher out of context.

Drake gave her a charming grin. "I didn't know the best teacher in the world ... ever ... lived here."

Gertie rolled her eyes at his blatant flattery.

"Happy Halloween, Mason. And who ... or what is that with you?"

"That's my uncle. He's a zombie." The seven-year-old waved dismissively, then stuck out his Jack O' Lantern bucket. "Trick or Treat."

Gertie showed him the two dishes -- one with candy and one with small, non-edible treats. Mason frowned, pondering his choice gravely.

"Feel free to help yourself too," she said brightly to the tall man beside him, while trying not to admire the way his ragged jeans emphasised his strong legs.

The husky edge to her words made them sound like more was on offer than treat-size packs of candy. She reminded herself sternly that even though Drake had brought his nephew out, and even dressed up, he likely had as much depth as the ice he skated on.

Shu...gar puffs.

"So, is everything really okay?" Drake asked. "I can still smell burning."

Straightening, she looked him directly in the eye -- mistake, she could lose herself in those dark depths -- she said curtly, "Just a baking mishap."

"Oh?"

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His frown made Gertie grit her teeth. As if any of the beautiful women she'd seen him date would know one end of a mixing bowl from another.

She explained briefly about her promise to provide cookies for Betsy's class. "Unfortunately, I've been distracted by all the trick-or-treaters. The problem with baking is that if you get the timing wrong, even by a minute or two, poof -- instead of golden, they're burned to a crisp."

"Do you need any help?" Mason stopped studying the candy bowl and said earnestly, "I help Mom bake all the time."

"I'm in too. How hard could it be?" Drake smiled.

She narrowed her gaze. "Excuse me?"

He looked chagrined. "Sorry. I meant to say that I haven't baked since I was younger than Mason. I'm not sure how much help I'll be, but I'm game to try."

His apology caught her off guard. Howie had rarely accepted responsibility for a mistake and when he had, it hadn't been with Drake's self-deprecating good grace. Had she misjudged her neighbour?

She smiled at them. "That's sweet of you both, but I'm sure you have lots of trick-or-treating left to do."

"We're nearly done. Right?" Mason looked up at his uncle, his expression pleading.

"Yup." Drake checked his watch, then laid his hand on his nephew's shoulder. "But we'll have to get started right away, so I can get you home on time."

Two pairs of dark brown eyes turned back to her.

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The matching eagerness surprised her. Drake wasn't just saying it; he genuinely wanted to join in the baking.

"In that case, come on in." She set down the bowls of Halloween treats.

The crisp, clean scent of recently-showered male teased her nose as Drake walked into the house. No overwhelming cologne here. She took in a deep breath, then chided herself for acting like a mooning teenager and quickly led the two males towards her kitchen.

Gertie grimaced, as she rinsed the cookie sheets and put them in the drying rack. "I'm afraid it looks like a bomb exploded in here. I'm not a tidy baker."

"You should see the mess I make in my kitchen." Drake grabbed a dish-towel and began to dry the trays. "And that's only from reheating take-out."

Mason nodded. "Mom says he'd use every pan he owned just to boil an egg."

Drake held up his hands, palms out. "Harsh, but true."

They all laughed.

Gertie's gaze met Drake's and held. The shared humour turned into something hotter. Amber flecks glittered in his brown eyes.

She moistened her suddenly dry lips. His gaze dropped to her mouth.

Desire tugged deep in her belly.

"We're going to add to the mess, so there's no point cleaning up now." Mason's matter-of-fact words broke the seductive spell that had begun to weave

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around the two adults.

Drake turned back to the drying, while Gertie gathered up the necessary ingredients, arranging them on the counter, next to the mixer.

“I’m with him.” Drake’s voice was even deeper than before; the only sign he’d been as affected by the charged moment between them.

“Absolutely,” she agreed briskly. “We’ve got enough flour and sugar for one last attempt, so let’s get to it.”

“Great.” Mason climbed onto a stool and started to carefully read out instructions from the recipe book.

Drake moved closer, looking over his nephew’s shoulder.

Gertie tried to ignore the zing of heat that shot through her as Drake brushed against her. The space around her counter seemed much smaller with the tall, broad-shouldered hockey player beside her. In fact, the whole kitchen seemed to shrink dramatically.

Concentrate! He’s only here to make cookies, she reminded herself and got to work.

While Mason helped with the measuring and mixing, Drake handled the trick-or-treaters. Each time he came back into the kitchen, her pulse gave a ridiculous little skip.

The situation should have been uncomfortable, but instead it was fun. The kitchen was filled with laughter and banter. Somehow both males ended up with as much cookie dough on their faces, as in their bellies.

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She was a little envious for Betsy of the easy relationship between uncle and nephew. As both Gertie and Howie were only children, their daughter didn't have the same kind of relationship with another adult.

All too-soon, the cookies were in the oven.

Drake washed up, while Gertie cleaned off the counters. As the adults tidied the kitchen, Mason watched the timer intently.

It hadn't even reached the minimum recommended baking time before the smell of burning seeped into the kitchen.

Gertie rushed to the oven and pulled out the cookie sheets. "Aargh! Better than the previous batches, but still too burned to take to Betsy's class."

"The problem is definitely your oven," Drake said, disappointment colouring his tone. "Would you like to use mine?"

She slumped onto a stool. "Thanks, but I'm all out of flour."

"I'm afraid I don't have any, but I'd be happy to stop by the store when I drop Mason home."

Drake was a genuinely nice guy. "I appreciate the offer, but it's getting late. I'll figure something out."

Gertie hated letting her daughter down, but she didn't have the energy or the will to try again. Worse came to the worst, she'd life-hack the unopened, name-brand pack of chocolate chip cookies in her cupboard tomorrow morning. Some orange icing and chocolate piping might work.

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“If you change your mind or need anything, you know where I live.” Drake ruffled his nephew’s hair. “Come on, bud. Let’s get you home, before you turn into a pumpkin.”

Mason thanked her politely. “I had a great time.”

“Thank *you*. Since you did such a great job of helping me, why don’t you take the remaining candies in the bowl in the hall?”

“That’s kind,” Drake said, as his nephew whooped and charged out of the kitchen.

“Trust me -- it’s purely selfish. I’m too easily tempted.”

“Uh huh. Just for chocolate?” He arched an eyebrow.

Her heart thumped. Drake was flirting with her? It had been years since she’d flirted with anyone. How to respond? *Say something ... suggestive, but not too suggestive ... cute, but not too cute.* No pressure.

She smiled. “Well ...”

The sharp peal of the doorbell echoed through the kitchen, startling them both.

Mason must have answered the door, because she heard Howie’s strident voice. Gertie glanced at the clock. They were back early. Fatherly devotion had obviously worn off with the reality of dozens of over-excited children.

She sighed. “Excuse me. I’ll be right back.”

Drake followed her. “Mason and I have to leave anyway.”

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The reluctance in his voice sent a tiny bubble of pleasure through her.

As Howie handed over their daughter, Gertie couldn't help comparing the two men. Even made-up like a zombie, Drake looked more masculine and more ... real. Howie was too polished, too smooth, from his neat suit to his carefully blow-dried hair. Drake's behaviour with the children was more natural and genuine too.

Why had she thought the two men were similar? Even from this short time with Drake, she could see they were nothing alike.

After they'd all left and she'd put Betsy to bed, Gertie poured herself a glass of white wine. She was about to order a pizza, when the doorbell rang. Although it was a bit late for trick-or-treaters, she headed to the hall.

The shadow through the frosted glass didn't look like a child. It looked like a very grown-up, very sexy and totally surprising hockey player.

"No tricks." Drake held out a familiar decorated tin, when she opened the door. "But a treat for you."

"How did you get Sweet Treats' Halloween cookies?" The local company's products were much in demand. "I'd have thought they'd be sold out."

"They were." He tapped the side of his nose. "But I have connections. Long story short, Lizzie's sister is married to Tru Jelinek, a former Ice Cat, whose brothers still play for us. So, she's kind of family. I coaxed her

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to let me have a few dozen of her seconds. I figured Betsy's class wouldn't notice the imperfections."

His thoughtfulness touched her. Definitely not like Howie, who would never have gone the extra mile.

"That's so kind of you. And you've saved me. How can I repay you?"

"Have dinner with me, next weekend."

His request stunned her. Out of habit, she started to decline, then stopped. Why not give him a shot? She had a feeling Drake was a man worth taking a chance on. "All right. Thank you. But in the meantime, I was about to order a pizza. Why don't you come in and share that with me?"

This time, it was Drake who looked startled. He only hesitated briefly, before accepting. As he came inside, he grinned. "Who'd have thought that dressing up as a zombie and burning cookies would work to finally break the ice between us?"

Gertie's gaze narrowed. "You planned this?"

His expression turned sheepish. "Well, not the cookie-burning part. Do you mind?"

Pleased that he'd made such an effort, she reached up to hug him. "Definitely not."

His arms came around her and his head dipped until his lips almost touched hers. "Then it was a pretty good plan."

"A perfect plan," she corrected softly, before kissing 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:

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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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Who says zombies aren't romantic?

Ice Cats' forward, Drake Spencer, hopes his plan to take his nephew trick-or-treating will finally break the ice with his lovely neighbour. Unfortunately, Gertie Noakes is having a bad Halloween; she burned the cookies she promised to bake for her daughter's class. The last person she needs to find on her doorstep is the sexy, hockey player she's been trying to steer clear of. Can a quick change of plan help Drake win Gertie over?

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