



ANNA
SUGDEN

A PERFECT
PARTY

Anna Sugden

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A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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Another holiday party. Another night of pretending Lizzie Martin was just a good friend.

Taylor ‘Mad Dog’ Madden drained his beer, then loaded up his plate. He’d hang out at the buffet table until he could leave without seeming rude. Taylor had considered not showing at all, but since the Christmas party was hosted by his friend and New Jersey Ice Cats’ team-mate, Jake ‘Bad Boy’ Badoletti, that would’ve raised more questions than he wanted to answer.

Taylor deliberately avoided looking through the hatch into the kitchen. Lizzie was in there, piping guests’ names onto the Christmas-themed cookies that would be passed out as party favors. Amazing to think that he and Lizzie had only cooked up the idea for Lizzie’s Sweet Treats at a Thanksgiving party two years ago and now her personalized cookie business was so successful that clients booked her months in advance.

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She'd already repaid his seed money, but had insisted he remain her silent partner, claiming he was good luck.

Friend. Business partner. Good luck charm. Every-damn-thing but what he wanted to be.

Unable to fight it any longer, his gaze was drawn to Lizzie.

She looked lovely, as always. Her blond hair was swept back in a fancy braid and she wore a candy-cane-striped apron with Sweet Treats embroidered across the chest over a red, sweater dress that clung to her generous curves. Sugar dusted her lips, making him yearn to taste her sweetness.

Realising he'd licked his own lips, Taylor groaned silently. Why the hell did he torture himself like this? Why didn't he just tell Lizzie how he felt?

Because he was scared he'd ruin their friendship and lose her altogether.

He and Lizzie had been pals since they'd clashed over the last spoonful of potato salad at a Memorial Day party his first year in the NHL. They'd hung out together ever since, which

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had done them both a favor. Taylor hadn't been interested in dating after his childhood sweetheart had dumped him and Lizzie'd had big plans for the future, so was happy being single.

Things had been great, until this year's July 4th party. They'd been watching the fireworks, when Lizzie had fed Taylor one of her 'Stars and Stripes' cookies. The moment her fingers had brushed his lips, the exploding rockets had moved from the sky above to inside his head. That's when Taylor had realised friendship was no longer enough. The good news was that she hadn't noticed his body's reaction to her. The bad news -- she didn't seem affected by him at all.

Every time they'd got together after that, Taylor had struggled to hide his deepening feelings.

Lizzie's laughter interrupted his thoughts. Damn it. What was his buddy Jean-Baptiste Larocque doing in the kitchen, flirting with Lizzie? Taylor ground his teeth, as JB wrapped an arm around Lizzie's waist, then swiped a cookie. The stud forward could get any woman he wanted -- did he have to horn

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in on Taylor's woman too?

Except, technically, she wasn't Taylor's woman.

Time he did something about that. For sure, he couldn't stand this limbo anymore. Taylor set his plate aside and walked into the kitchen.

"Leave the cookies alone, Larocque" he growled.

JB released Lizzie immediately, but the look he shot Taylor was a challenge, daring him to act. "Only taking what's mine, Mad Dog." His friend held up the cookie to show his iced name. "I don't poach. Though if yours is unclaimed much longer, it's fair game."

Despite his cocky words, the understanding in JB's dark eyes as he sauntered out of the kitchen said he knew how Taylor felt about Lizzie. Crap. Was it that obvious?

Apparently not to Lizzie. She smiled brightly, as she came across to hug him.

Taylor closed his eyes briefly, inhaling her sweet scent, mingled with vanilla and sugar. He'd bet she tasted as delicious as she smelled.

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This was not the time for those thoughts. He forced himself to step back and grin at her.

“What happened to you?” Lizzie ran her fingers gently over his split lip and bruised cheek. “That black eye looks sore.”

His pulse kicked at her touch. “I got checked into a stanchion during last night’s game and cracked my jaw on the boards. Looks worse than it is.”

“Poor baby.” She kissed her fingertips and pressed them to his mouth. “A kiss will make it better.”

She’d given him the perfect opening, yet Taylor hesitated. If he kissed her, he’d cross a line; they could never go back to being just friends.

The hell with it. He had to know -- one way or the other. “My injuries deserve a proper kiss, don’t you think?”

“In your dreams.” Lizzie’s laugh faltered as she met his steady gaze. “You’re serious? I ... uh ...” Her voice trailed off and her blue eyes widened, as he drew her towards him. Colour filled her cheeks, but she didn’t protest.

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He lowered his head slowly, giving her plenty of time to stop him.

She didn't.

Taylor was wrong -- Lizzie was more delicious than her scent. She tasted way better than any cookie. Than any other woman.

As their lips met, then lingered, desire rippled through his body. It felt so good. Better than good. It felt right.

He pulled her closer, until she was plastered full-length against him, and deepened the kiss. Lizzie wound her arms around his neck, moaning deep in her throat.

Lost in the kiss for minutes, maybe even hours, Taylor wondered why he'd worried about making his move. It was going to work out perfectly.

Lizzie ended the kiss, then pulled away. "That was unexpected. And not very sensible."

He smiled, enjoying the taste of her on his lips and the pleasure tingling inside him. "Being sensible is overrated."

"Maybe, but this can't happen again."

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A chill washed over him, like he'd been sprayed with ice.

“What?”

“Anyone could have walked in.” She strode out of the kitchen.

What the hell had just happened? One minute she was kissing him like she was enjoying it, the next she was out of there faster than Larocque on a shorthanded rush.

He was still trying to figure it out, when Lizzie returned and tossed his jacket at him. She wanted him to leave? Man, how had he screwed this up so badly? Taylor shrugged into his jacket and turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Lizzie asked.

“Home.”

“Why?”

He looked at her, confused. “Isn't that what you want?”

“No. I thought we could continue what we were doing outside.” She opened the back door. “In private.”

Then Taylor realised that Lizzie wore her coat. His heart hitched with hope, as he followed her into the wintry night.

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Still, he wanted to be sure. “But you said ...”

She smiled, interrupting him. “I didn’t want us to be disturbed.”

“I thought I’d made a huge mistake.”

“You did.” Lizzie walked into his arms, tilting up her head so her mouth was just beneath his. “You wasted five months.”

Happiness filled him. “Then, I’d better make up for lost time.” And he kissed her.

It was a perfect party, after all.

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Just Good Friends?

Ice Cats defenseman, Taylor 'Mad Dog' Madden wants more than friendship from Lizzie Martin. Much more. So when a Christmas party provides the chance to kick their relationship up a gear, should he take it or will he lose her completely?

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