

A close-up portrait of a man with a beard and blue eyes, wearing a white shirt and a dark tie. He is looking slightly to the right. The background is a deep blue with faint, light blue snowflake patterns. The text 'ANNA SUGDEN' is written in white, serif font in the lower right quadrant. Below it, the title 'A PERFECT STORM' is written in a larger, gold, serif font. A solid gold horizontal bar is at the bottom of the image.

ANNA  
SUGDEN

A PERFECT  
STORM

**Anna Sugden**

# **A Perfect Storm**



A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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Sugden

## A Perfect Storm

“Damn storm. I can’t believe they’ve freaking closed the road.”

Vladimir ‘Vlad’ Ralinkov smacked his hand on the steering wheel and glared at the blinking warning sign.

“There’s barely two feet of snow,” Chance Rivera, Vlad’s Ice Cat team-mate said, disgusted. “Back home, we’d call this a dusting.”

The two hockey players were driving back from the arena, where they’d lost a tight, hard-fought game against the visiting Arizona Coyotes. Vlad had hoped the highway would be reasonably clear of the heavy snowfall, brought on by the unexpected weather front that had begun to sweep through the tri-state area early in the third period. From the mounds of snow and the narrowing of the road to one lane, it looked like the ploughs had fought a losing battle, then given up.

The flakes were falling thick and fast; the wipers could barely keep the windshield clear. Ahead, smoke from the exhausts of cars that had pulled over to the shoulder, created an eerie, other-worldly feel to the night.

Vlad’s disappointment wasn’t only because they’d be stuck on this miserable stretch of road until the storm

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moved on and the crews could clear the mess -- tomorrow morning at the earliest -- but he'd miss tonight's visit to the Pot Luck Diner. Win or lose, he and Chance stopped there on their way home, after most games.

For sure, he'd miss seeing the diner's beautiful owner, Poppy. He'd fallen for her the first time he'd seen her.

"How much further can you go?" Chance peered through the windows, as if the road would magically clear.

"Probably as far as the next exit."

"Go for it. The diner's barely a half-mile from there. Better to be stranded there, than in the freaking car all night."

Pleased his friend was on the same wavelength, Vlad nodded. "I'll get as close as I can."

"Great. You should take advantage of this and ask Poppy out. I can't believe you haven't made a move yet."

Vlad shrugged. "Her divorce has only been final a couple of months. The last thing she needs is another man in her life."

"Come on, man. She's hot for you."

"Yeah, right." Hope made his pulse skip. She had seemed pleased to see him lately -- lingering at their booth to talk to him, smiling at him, touching him.

Chance snorted. "For a guy who's fearless on the ice, you're a wuss when it comes to relationships. What

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have you got to lose? The worst that can happen is she says no.”

Not true. The worst would be if his request upset her and she ignored him every time he went in. He'd have to stop going to the diner.

“I'll see,” Vlad hedged.

By the time they reached the exit ramp, it was impossible to progress, even in four-wheel drive. Parking his M-Class on the shoulder, Vlad then switched off the engine. Before he'd unclipped his seatbelt, the windshield was a white-out.

The two friends bundled up in their down-filled parkas, with hats, scarves and gloves. After Vlad locked his car, they began to trudge through the thick snow.

It took almost an hour to travel the short distance to the aluminium-fronted building. The twinkling, multi-coloured Christmas lights in the diner's windows were a beacon, guiding them through the blizzard, with the promise of warmth, shelter and sustenance.

They were relieved to reach the parking lot, where they stomped caked snow from their boots. Chance pointed to the sign advertising the day's Pot Luck Special, which gave the diner its name.

“I hope the pot's still full because I'm having a couple of bowls of stew when we get inside. I deliberately held back at the post-game meal.”

“You and me both.” The hearty, stick-to-your-ribs stew reminded Vlad of his mom's.

But it was anticipation of Poppy's welcoming

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smile and the sparkle in her brown eyes that made his heart squeeze, as he brushed the snow off his jacket, then pushed open the door and stepped inside.

\* \* \*

She wasn't waiting for him.

Just because Poppy Lambert's pulse jumped whenever the diner door opened, didn't mean she expected Vladimir Ralinkov to enter. Her stomach twisted each time because it was a slow night, thanks to the damn storm, not because she was disappointed it wasn't him. Common sense said he'd be a fool to try to come here tonight, yet her breath hitched whenever a car pulled into the parking lot.

Vlad was all wrong for her. He was a player in every sense, even if he was super-nice to her and made her feel special and beautiful. She couldn't afford a walk on the wild side with the enigmatic Russian, even if his deep, sexy voice sent delicious tingles through her. And oh my, how he filled a pair of jeans! She'd done charming and ruggedly handsome, and her heart bore the scars.

Besides, he wouldn't be around much longer. From what she'd read on the internet, he only had a one year contract with the Ice Cats and if it wasn't renewed, he'd head back to Russia to finish his career.

Despite all her assertions to the contrary, happiness bubbled up inside her when the door opened

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and he blew in. Her cheeks warmed as his serious, steady gaze sought her out, behind the counter.

Poppy wiped her palms on her apron. "I wasn't expecting to see you guys." Was that her husky voice? "With the snow and everything."

"The road's closed," Chance said cheerily, taking off his parka, then slid into a booth. "So we hoofed it here. Better to be stuck in the warm, with your wonderful cooking -- and you -- than in his SUV."

Vlad removed his coat and sat opposite his friend, his gaze still on her. "Much better."

Poppy wondered if she was reading things into the emphasis of his words and the darkening of his royal blue eyes. Was she the reason he'd made the effort to get here?

"In that case, two servings of today's pot luck coming right up," she said briskly, ladling steaming stew into bowls. "Can I get you drinks?"

"Since we're not going anywhere for hours, I'll have a beer," Chance said.

"Make that two." Vlad loosened his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt. "How come you're running the place by yourself, Poppy?"

"I live in the apartment above the diner, so it's easy for me to stay open." She prepared a tray of fixings, which included small dishes of sour cream, grated cheese and salsa. "I sent my staff home early, because it wasn't fair to expect them to be stranded here too." She waved an arm to encompass the empty diner.

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“Especially as I’m not rushed off my feet.”

“Why don’t you join us?”

Vlad’s unexpected offer pleased her, almost as much as if he’d asked her out.

“I’ve eaten, but I’ll bring my hot chocolate and sit with you.” Poppy tried to sound nonchalant as she served up, then slipped in beside him, carefully leaving plenty of space between them.

The corner of Vlad’s mouth quirked, but he didn’t call her on it.

The conversation was light-hearted, as the two men devoured their stew, and an additional serving as well. They discussed the game, next week’s road trip, the diner’s schedule and plans for the upcoming holidays. Through it all, Poppy sensed Vlad gradually shifting his position to edge closer. She could have moved away. She didn’t.

By the time they’d finished, his hard thigh was pressed against hers. Her heart clenched at the subtle intimacy.

Once they were done, Poppy cleared the dishes. Vlad surprised her again by helping.

As she switched on the dishwasher, Chance yawned. “I’m beat. I’m going to camp out in the booth and catch some Z’s.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Vlad looked at her questioningly. “If it’s okay with you?”

Somehow it felt naughty to have him sleeping under her roof -- even if it was in the diner, not her bed,



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and with his friend right there. “You’re more than welcome. I don’t think there will be any more business tonight, so I’ll close. Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll pop up to my apartment and get some bedding.”

“That’d be great.” Chance crossed his arms and stretched his legs along the red, leather seat. “I need a Stetson to pull down over my eyes.”

Poppy tossed him a ‘Pot Luck Diner’ ball cap. “That’s the best I can do.”

Chance put it on and tugged the brim low over his forehead. “Thanks. Add it to my tab.”

“I’ll take payment in kind. A couple of pictures of you for my website.” She pulled out her cell.

He grinned. “Shoot away.”

Poppy snapped some photos, then gave Vlad a cap and got him to pose too.

As she locked the front door and flipped the sign to ‘Closed’, the power went out, plunging the diner into darkness. Swearing under her breath, she waited for the back-up generator to kick in, which it did moments later. She checked the refrigerators were operational, then switched off all the lights, except those over the counter.

She grabbed a flashlight from under the register. “I’ll be right back with that bedding.”

“I’ll come with you.” Vlad rose. “Give you a hand.”

“That’s ...” She started to say it wasn’t necessary, then stopped herself. Turn down a chance to be alone

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with him? Was she nuts? "... Kind of you."

"No problem."

They both ignored Chance's snort, as Poppy led the way through the kitchen to the back of the diner and upstairs to her apartment.

Standing close on the tiny landing, she became aware of Vlad's size; big, tall and broad. His scent teased her nose; a heady combination of clean male and spicy aftershave. Her fingers fumbled with the key in the lock. She sighed with relief when she finally opened it.

Inside her dark, silent apartment, she and Vlad seemed cocooned against the outside world. The earlier feeling of intimacy intensified, making her nervous. Not in a bad way, more ... anticipation.

"My Gran collected handmade Amish quilts, so I have several for you and Chance. And loads of pillows. Isn't it funny how you collect pillows?" She rolled her eyes. Why was she wittering about linens, for crying out loud?

"My Bahboo sent me here with enough quilts, blankets and pillows to stock a hotel." The fondness in his voice as he spoke about his grandmother warmed Poppy. "She wasn't sure they'd have such things in New Jersey."

Poppy stopped in front of the linen closet, once again aware of his closeness. Her heart pounded slowly, heavily.

This was the perfect opportunity for him to make a

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move. Would he?

She opened the closet door, hardly daring to breathe, awaiting his touch.

It didn't come. Poppy pulled two quilts off the shelf and turned.

Vlad's arms were outstretched, ready to take her load. Had he given her the slightest invitation, she would have dropped the quilts and walked into his embrace. Instead she thrust them into his arms, then stretched up to get pillows from the top shelf.

"Let me." Vlad laid the quilts on a chair, then stepped closer, reaching over her head.

Poppy turned back towards him at the same time, which brought her face up against his broad chest. She swallowed hard and tried to take a step back. The back of her legs hit the closet shelves.

She lifted her head slowly, from the pulse throbbing steadily in the hollow at the base of his neck, past the rugged edge of his jaw, dark with stubble, and the scar across his cheek, until her gaze met his.

The heat in his eyes sent fizzes of desire skipping through her veins. She moistened her suddenly dry lips, as his gaze dropped to follow the motion of her tongue.

Time seemed to stop.

She didn't know which of them moved first, but their mouths came together in a kiss that could have lit up the whole block, let alone her diner.

When they finally broke apart, he said, "I've wanted to do that for a long time."

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His raspy words thrilled her.

“I’ve wanted you to do it for a long time,” she replied huskily.

He ran his thumb over her cheek. “I thought it might be too soon. After your divorce.”

His consideration warmed her. Perhaps she’d misjudged him. “My marriage was over long before the paperwork made it official.”

“So you’re willing to see where this goes?” His smile was like a caress.

“Definitely.”

“It won’t be easy. Hockey players don’t have nine-to-five jobs and weekends off.”

“Nothing worth having ever is. I run a diner that’s open from very early to very late, seven days a week.”

His thumb stroked her bottom lip. “So we’ll both have to compromise.”

Her teeth captured his thumb, then her tongue flicked over it. “I’m willing to give it a shot if you are.”

“Oh yeah.” He lowered his head, replacing his thumb with his mouth.

She wouldn’t have believed their second kiss could be better than their first, but it was. Better, deeper, hotter.

But as it threatened to burn out of control, Vlad broke the kiss reluctantly, swept her into his arms and carried her to the sofa. Before she could react, he said, “Don’t move. I’ll be right back.” He then grabbed a pillow and a quilt and headed out the door.

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Realising he'd gone to give the bedding to Chance, Poppy smiled. She picked up the other quilt and laid it over herself before settling more comfortably against the cushions to wait for him.

When Vlad returned a few minutes later, she lifted up the edge of the quilt in invitation.

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

He didn't ask again, but slipped under the quilt and cradled her against his chest.

As his mouth covered hers once more, she sent a silent thank you skywards. The storm she'd cursed earlier had turned out to be perfect after all.

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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 Plan

# **A Perfect Storm**

Short Stories:

[A Perfect Party](#)

A Perfect Lucky Charm

A Perfect Disguise

A Perfect Reunion

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# A PERFECT STORM

*Snowbound!*

When Ice Cats' forward, Vladimir 'Vlad' Ralinkov, gets caught in a snowstorm on his way back from a game, he seeks refuge in his favourite diner. Could this be the opportunity he's been waiting for to heat things up with lovely diner owner, Poppy Lambert, or will she leave him out in the cold?

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