



ANNA
SUGDEN

A PERFECT
BOUQUET

Anna Sugden

A Perfect Bouquet



A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

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“Two dozen red roses.”

Kayla DeMarco rolled her eyes at her assistant, Judy, as she continued the phonecall with her customer, “We’ll deliver those for you on Valentine’s Day.”

She finished the transaction and hung up. “I tried to tell Mr. Karsten, but he wouldn’t listen. His wife doesn’t like red roses either.”

Judy, who was creating a display of lilies for a local business, shook her head. “You must be the only florist in the tri-state area, if not the whole of the US, who hates red roses.”

Kayla tore the order from the pad and clipped it to her works’ board, then went back to the arrangement she was constructing for a delivery later. “I don’t hate them. I just don’t find them romantic.”

How could she when her ex-husband had poisoned the romance right out of red roses? He’d used them as an apology. Over and over again. *I’m sorry I slept with the redhead in Chicago ... the brunette in Columbus ... the puck bunny in Seattle.*

The problem with romance, like an apology, was that it was meaningless if it wasn’t sincere. The only thing sincere about Jason was that he was sorry he’d been caught.

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Kayla bit back a sigh. Like last year, the run-up to Valentine's Day had brought back memories she'd rather stayed buried. Her marriage was long over -- thanks to her ex's trade from the local professional hockey team, the New Jersey Ice Cats, to a west coast team and the blonde, reality show starlet he'd shacked up with. Jason's chance to be a 'paparazzi wet dream' had finally led him to agree to the divorce she'd wanted since the first time he'd cheated on her.

Twenty months of freedom -- now *that* was something to be very happy about.

"Cliché or not, I love that everyone else's fixation on red roses will keep my business in the black for the first half of the year." Kayla stood back and eyed her completed arrangement critically.

The balance wasn't quite right, so she adjusted the placement of several blooms, then added three pink-centred narcissi and some statice stems for a pop of colour. Finally satisfied, she carried the vase to the cooler and put it with the other finished orders.

She was clipping the job slip to the stack of the day's completed work, when the bell above the shop's front door tinkled. Looking up, her breath caught.

"Two skinny lattes." Chaz 'Monty' Montgomery grinned, as he held up a tray with take-out cups and a paper bag. "I also brought banana-nut muffins."

Tall, broad-shouldered and rugged-jawed, Monty looked more like a model for a designer fragrance brand than the back-up goaltender for the Ice Cats. Hell, in

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those scuffed, leather boots, faded jeans and checked, flannel shirt, you could stick a Stetson on him and he'd be every romance reader's cowboy hero. Add in the coffee and baked goods, and he was almost irresistible.

Judy squealed and rushed forward to hug the windswept hockey player. "I know I always say this, but if I wasn't happily married, I'd run away with you."

"If your husband wasn't way bigger than me, and an NYPD officer with a nasty gun, I'd accept. I'd be much safer eloping with your boss." He turned his gaze to Kayla. "What do you say?"

Her heart stuttered at the silvery fire in his flint-grey eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was serious. A shimmer of pleasure danced through her before she stopped it. She did know better. Besides, even if he was serious, he was all wrong for her.

"Maybe after Valentine's Day," she said lightly. "With less than a week left, we're rushed off our feet and I'd hate to let all those romantic souls down."

For a moment, she thought she saw disappointment dim the fire in his eyes. But when he replied, his tone was as casual as hers, making her wonder if she'd imagined it.

"How about on Valentine's? Once you've finished work."

"A date?" The surprised words slipped out before she could stop them.

She knew it was the wrong sport, but his invitation had come from out of left field. Sure, he'd flirted with

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her, but it had been a game for both of them. Hadn't it?

"Nothing fancy, I promise. I know you'll be exhausted. Good food, nice wine and pretty decent company -- though I may be a tad biased on that last bit." His smile looked innocent, humble even, yet it did funny things to her insides. "And a chocolate dessert."

"You don't have a game?" she hedged.

"The Cats play on the 13th, then not again until the 16th, when we have a back-to-back, home-and-home with Philly."

"She'd love to go out with you." Judy arched an eyebrow at her.

If she refused now, she'd look churlish.

"Apparently, I've accepted your invitation. Thank you," she added quickly, so she didn't sound snippy.

"Good. You won't regret it." He handed her a take-out cup.

Kayla gave a half-smile, before sipping the coffee. She couldn't date Monty. It would be wrong. So why did her pulse trip at the thought of an evening in his company?

She'd told herself all the reasons why she shouldn't be attracted to Monty numerous times -- starting with his job. She was done with hockey players, no matter how gorgeous, charming and sexy. Actually, *especially* if they were gorgeous, charming and sexy.

Then there was the fact that Monty was Jason's former room-mate. The two had bunked together on road trips. Not that they'd chosen that arrangement;

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room-mates were assigned by the team. Then again, Monty hadn't approved of Jason's behaviour and had challenged him about it. Had it been coincidence that a few months later, Jason had been sent to LA?

But the biggest factor in why Monty wasn't right for her was that he dated a lot, seeing no woman for more than a few weeks. A couple of months, at best. Kayla knew exactly how long each relationship lasted, because she made up all the floral gifts for his lady-friends.

"What can we do for you, today?" Hopefully, her brisk tone would put their conversation onto a more professional footing.

"Delilah and I have agreed to go our separate ways."

Though he didn't sound broken up about it, she said, "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Could you make me up a pretty, orange arrangement?"

"Of course." Kayla paused from writing the job slip. "Are you sure? It's not what you usually ask for."

He looked startled, then confused. "It isn't?"

She smiled indulgently. "I can tell which stage your current relationship is at by what you buy."

Monty ran his fingers through his short, blond hair. "I'm that predictable?"

"New dates get colourful, seasonal bouquets. Once you've got to know them better, we make up bouquets in their favourite colour. Goodbye usually

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means pink roses.” Suddenly embarrassed that he might think she had stalker tendencies, Kayla said, “But you’re the customer, so we’ll do whatever you want.”

“I shouldn’t mess up the system. Pink roses it is.” His tone lacked its previous warmth.

Cursing herself, she quickly made up the bouquet. She noticed that he didn’t linger and chat like he usually did. Still, before he left, he confirmed what time he’d pick her up on Valentine’s Day.

“Anyone would think you were deliberately trying to sabotage your chances,” Judy said, once he’d gone. “The good news is that you’re finally going out with Monty. Hallelujah.”

“But ...”

Judy held up a hand. “Monty is not Jason. He shouldn’t be tarred with the same brush, just because he straps on skates for his living. He deserves a chance.”

Not for the first time, Kayla wished she was brave enough to give him that chance.

“Do I really want to be another notch on his bedpost?” She hated that her words held a hint of wistfulness. “How long would I last before I got the pink roses?”

“Come on. You don’t really believe he actually dates all those women?” Judy’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. You do.”

“Why wouldn’t I? He wouldn’t make all that up.”

Judy laughed. “Sure he would. If he wanted to mask the real reason he buys flowers every week.”

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Kayla frowned. After her divorce, Monty had encouraged her to follow her dream of owning a flower shop. He'd been there when she'd opened her doors on that first day and had been her best customer ever since. She'd occasionally wondered if it was Monty's way of making up for Jason. His guilt over not being able to stop his friend from cheating. Grateful for his support, whatever his reason, she'd let it ride.

It was a heck of a stretch to think he'd made up the women he'd been seeing. An even bigger stretch to think he'd done it because ... he liked her?

"You're imagining things." Kayla began gathering white blooms for a funeral spray.

"No. I'm observant. I'm not saying he didn't date any of the women, but the vast majority didn't exist."

"How do you know?" Curious, Kayla gave up all pretence of working and sat on her workbench stool.

"Well, I started to wonder when he messed up the name of one of his supposed dates. It was out of character not to get her name right. So I asked around. I couldn't find anything about him with a woman of either name in the media. Each time he started up with someone new, I'd check. If it was genuine, there'd be a mention somewhere. If it wasn't, nada."

"He went to all that trouble for me?"

"Sweetie, I knew he adored you from the first time I saw him looking at you like a kid gazing at the prettiest girl in class."

"Why didn't he ask me out before?"

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“Because you’d have turned him down flat. This way you got to know him as a man in his own right, not Jason’s room-mate.”

“It was better to make me think he was a playboy than a nice guy?”

“Male logic works in mysterious ways.” Judy gave her a wry look. “I was giving him a couple more days to ask you out or I was going to call him on it. Luckily, he wised up. The question is will you?”

“I said I’d go out with him, didn’t I?” Despite her flippant response, Kayla’s heart felt lighter than it had in a long time. And she was really looking forward to the 14th now. “The key will be which flowers he gives me on our date.” She hoped it wouldn’t be red roses.

* * *

“Twenty bucks says you didn’t ask her.”

Flipping the bird at his friend and team-mate, Rick ‘Ice Man’ Kasanski, Chaz Montgomery sat in the adjacent plane seat, then held out his hand. “Pay up.”

“Seriously? You finally did it?”

Chaz grinned. “What’s more, she said yes.”

Ice Man didn’t need to know that technically Judy had accepted for her or that Kayla had looked like she’d rather go for a root canal than on a date with him.

“About freaking time.” Kasanski slapped a crinkled note into Chaz’s palm. “I swear that has to be the longest pre-date foreplay in history.”

“I didn’t want to rush her, after Jason.”

Not because he hadn’t wanted to. He had.

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Desperately. Chaz had fallen for Kayla the first time he met her, even though she'd been out of reach because she'd been married. That Jason had been a philandering bastard had really burned Chaz's butt. He'd been relieved -- okay, and thrilled -- when 'better opportunities' had sent Jason to California.

Chaz had forced himself to bide his time until he'd sensed she was ready to date again.

"Sure, but buying flowers from her every week for almost two years. Worse, pretending that you were dating all those women." Kasanski shook his head.

Chaz shrugged. "I had to do something. She'd have refused anything that hinted of charity. And it couldn't look like I was hitting on her."

"So instead you made her believe you're as much of a player as Jason?"

"I never cheated on anybody." Even being mentioned in the same breath as his former room-mate bugged the hell out of him. "Besides that way, she got to know me as a person, with no other agenda."

Ice Man arched an eyebrow. "Except there was one freaking almighty, hidden agenda."

Chaz couldn't deny that. "I'll admit that when we have dinner."

"Well, something must have worked since she's going out with you. All credit to you. I wouldn't have stuck at it for so long. No woman's worth that angst."

"Yeah, yeah. You just haven't met the right woman yet." As soon as he said the words, Chaz

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wanted to snatch them back.

Ice Man had only been divorced for just over a year. Being ditched by his childhood sweetheart was still a raw subject. “Crap. I’m sorry, man.”

Rick waved off his concern, then said mildly, “I thought I had. Obviously she didn’t feel the same.”

“Her loss, bro.”

“For sure.” The cockiness in his friend’s voice didn’t match the despair in his eyes. “All the delays before we got married should have given me a clue, but hey ... live and learn. Next time, I’m heading to Vegas and an Elvis-themed wedding chapel. Nah, next time, there won’t be any wedding.”

Thankfully, Chaz didn’t have to respond, because the captain asked everyone to strap in. The Ice Cats were heading to Toronto for a game the following day.

As the plane taxied for take-off, Chaz’s mind went back to his plan to win Kayla over. He’d never had to be so patient -- which was saying something, given he was back-up to Ike Jelinek, one of the best goaltenders in the league, and spent weeks waiting for his turn between the pipes. At least now, he could drop the whole charade. Keeping track of who he was meant to be dating had become tricky. Which was how he’d nearly messed up and given the game away.

All because Kayla had looked like she’d rather nibble on him than the muffin he’d brought her. Lust had shot through him with such intensity that he’d been lucky to remember his own name, let alone that of his

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supposed date. Embarrassed, he'd got out of there before he'd screwed up further.

"Since you're the ultimate planner, what have you got in mind for Valentine's night?" Kasanski asked, once they were in the air.

"Dinner at that little Italian place J.B. Larocque always says is so romantic. Given it's one of Kayla's busiest days at work, she won't have to worry about getting fancied up. If all goes well, dessert will be at her place or mine. Lizzie's Sweet Treats are making a dozen of their chocolate and strawberry cupcakes."

"Not bad. What about flowers?"

"I could have asked Judy to make up something on the quiet, but I decided to go a different way."

He told Ice Man what he'd organised.

His friend grinned. "Not bad, net boy. That'll hit the sweet spot."

Chaz hoped Rick was right. This was probably his one and only chance with Kayla and he didn't want to blow it.

He second-guessed himself a million times over the next few days. Even as he drove to Kayla's shop to pick her up on Valentine's Day, Chaz wondered if he should have had a fall-back plan. Just in case.

Too late for that now, numb-nuts.

Though he was ten minutes early, Kayla was already pulling down the shutters on her shop. His heart thumped heavily, as he parked up. Could that mean she was as keen to go out with him as he was to take her

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out?

When she turned, he saw that she'd changed out of her usual work uniform of jeans and a store-logo shirt. Beneath the hem of her coat, a floaty, red skirt brushed her booted ankles. Instead of a ponytail, her dark hair swung loose about her shoulders. She even wore lipstick to match her skirt.

Monty's hopes soared. He hadn't expected her to make an effort, which was why he was taking her somewhere casual for dinner. That she had, was promising.

As was the way her face lit up when she saw him. A warm tingle started in his chest and radiated through his body at the thought that she was looking forward to this evening as much as he was. Her husky greeting, as she got into his car, sent a fire-bolt straight to his groin.

"I'm early. I hope that's okay," he said quickly, hoping she didn't look at his lap, where his black jeans had tightened almost painfully making his reaction pretty damn obvious.

"Your timing's perfect."

Her smile didn't help the jeans' situation. *Focus on driving!*

"So how was your day?" Monty pulled out of the parking space and headed for the restaurant.

"Madness. A lot of people left their Valentine's flower purchases until the last minute. One of the reasons I closed up early was that I'd sold out of red roses and other flowers by five, despite doubling last

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year's order. The last guy was so desperate, he asked if I'd spray the daffodils red. I managed to convince him that fuschia pink carnations were fine and it was the thought that counted. ”

For the rest of their journey to the restaurant, she regaled him with funny stories about her customers. Monty's nerves returned when they were shown to their table. Should he give her his gift now or wait? If she didn't like it, the evening would be soured before it had got started. On the other hand, if she liked it ...

Her eye roll at the table's centrepiece, a red rose, gave him the courage to go for it. He waited for their server to pour their champagne and take their order, then pulled the thin, gold-embossed box out of the inside pocket of his sports coat.

“Happy Valentine's Day.”

“Oh, I wasn't expecting ... You didn't have to ... I didn't get you ...” she stammered.

Monty interrupted gently, “I wasn't planning to get you anything, but I saw this and it seemed like the ideal gift. Especially since I couldn't buy you flowers.”

“I figured out what you've been doing, you know. I appreciate your support -- you helped me get through the tight, initial days of my business -- but you don't have to continue with the fake, flower orders.” Kayla frowned. “What did you do with the bouquets?”

Pleased and relieved that she'd taken his subterfuge well, he admitted, “I donated them to a local seniors' home, for ladies who didn't get visitors. Their

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happiness was worth it.”

“I’m happy they went to a great cause.” She nodded approvingly, then grinned. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve got me.”

“I hope you like it.”

His chest tightened, as he watched her open the box. The seconds before she reacted seemed to stretch out interminably. Then, she gasped.

* * *

Kayla couldn’t believe what he’d given her.

Carefully, she lifted out the gold necklace with red, enamelled daisies interspersed along its length. Touched by his thoughtfulness, she could barely speak. “It’s lovely.”

“Would you like me to help you put it on?”

“Yes, please.” She bent her head forwards and lifted her hair out of the way.

As Monty fastened the chain, his fingers brushed her neck, sending a fizz of pleasure through her.

Her cheeks warmed. “How does it look?”

“Beautiful. The necklace isn’t bad either.”

“Thank you.”

“So now that my secret is out, do I get to spend more time with the flower lady herself?”

What more proof did she need that Monty was a man worth taking a chance on?

She smiled. “How could I resist the man who gave me the perfect bouquet?”

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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

Short Stories:

[A Perfect Party](#)

A Perfect Lucky Charm

A Perfect Disguise

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A Perfect Storm

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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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Anything, but red roses!

Ice Cats' back-up goaltender, Chaz 'Monty' Montgomery, fell in love with florist Kayla DeMarco the first time he met her. Unfortunately, then she was married to one of his former team-mates. Since Kayla's divorce, Monty has waited patiently, hoping that one day she'll notice that he's more than just a great customer. Can he convince her with a special bouquet that Valentine's Day is the perfect time to take a chance on a different hockey player?

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