



ANNA
SUGDEN

A PERFECT
GIFT

Anna Sugden

A Perfect Gift



A New Jersey Ice Cats short story

A Perfect Gift

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A Perfect Gift

“Tell me again why we’re freezing our nuts off in a freaking, open-air flea market, in December, in New York, when we could be in nice, warm Saks or Bloomingdale’s?”

Tom Adamson rolled his eyes at his whining, New Jersey Ice Cats’ team-mate, Rafe Fischer. “You’re such a wuss. I can tell you learned your hockey in sunny California, bro. This is spring-like compared to most of the days I played outside, growing up, on make-shift rinks in my friends’ backyards.”

“Your jealousy is showing,” his friend punched his shoulder, as they passed through the entry gate in the chain-link fence surrounding the popular downtown market. “Admit it, you’d prefer gorgeous beaches and bikini-clad babes to the great, frozen north.”

“We don’t have snow and ice all year round. Nova Scotia has beautiful beaches and gals too.” Tom led the way to the canopied stalls selling vintage goods, which lined one side of the crowded lot.

“Maybe, but you can’t beat leaving the cold behind, after a day of skating, to go to a nice, warm beach and surf in the nice, warm ocean.” Rafe blew on his hands and made a show of rubbing them up and down the arms of his heavy down jacket, then stomped

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his feet.

“I promise we’ll go for lunch in a *nice, warm* deli as soon as I’ve found a Christmas gift for my Nanna. It’s only a couple of weeks until Christmas and I’ll need to mail her present, as I won’t have time to go up to see her over the festive break.” The Cats, like all NHL teams, didn’t play from the 24th to the 26th.

“Hello -- did you hear me mention Saks and Bloomingdale’s?”

Tom shook his head, as he stopped in front of a large table, with a festive red-and-white-striped awning and twinkling Christmas lights, that was crammed full of housewares and china. “She wouldn’t know what to do with expensive, designer stuff.”

“She’d rather have someone else’s junk?” Rafe frowned, looking at the goods on offer. He picked up a blue, plastic cup and saucer, which looked child-sized in his hand. “I remember my mom throwing out a set like this. She couldn’t wait to get proper china, even if it was in the Sears’ sale.” His eyes widened, when he saw the handwritten price sticker. “How much? Are they kidding?”

“That’s not a bad price for all four, plus the milk jug and sugar bowl, in near-mint condition. I’ve seen them go for double that at fancy antique fairs.”

Rafe swore under his breath. “Bet Mom wishes she’d kept hers now. So, how does a skinny boy from Halifax know about antique fairs?”

“My dad died when I was young. Mom had to

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work two jobs to keep a roof over our heads, as well as me in hockey gear. Summer vacations, she'd send me to stay with Nanna and Grandad in Antigonish. One of the things they loved to do was search out stuff at yard sales, antiques' malls and flea markets." Tom grimaced. "Back then, I was bored out of my skull. But my reward was for them to take me to the beach."

"Ah, hot babes in bikinis in the Maritimes."

"For sure." Tom grinned, as he moved to the next stall, which featured everything 40's, 50's and 60's. "Now, it's a relaxing way to spend a few hours on an off-day, during the season. I enjoy finding things for my grandparents, my mom and even for myself. A lot of the stuff in my apartment -- including the vintage table-hockey game you like so much -- is bargain finds from places like this."

"No kidding. I thought the only place for that was internet auction sites."

"Stick with me, man. You'll learn something."

"I guess we all have to have our strengths," Rafe laughed. "Enjoy yours, while I continue to lead the team in scoring and beat you in face-off wins."

"This week. But who's ahead of you in assists and points?" A cheery sign on a nearby stall caught Tom's attention. "Now that might be interesting."

"Everything under ten bucks? That's a bit cheap."

"You never know what treasures you can find in those boxes. One man's trash ..." He waved a hand to encompass the eager crowd.

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“Yeah, yeah. Are you sure your grandmother wouldn’t like a more expensive gift? It’s not like you can’t afford it, with your latest contract.”

“She appreciates the thought that goes into a present, not the cost. Besides, I paid for a Golden Wedding anniversary cruise to the Caribbean last year, so my grandparents aren’t being short-changed.”

His fingers itched to trawl through the half dozen weathered, wooden crates. Nanna had taught him that the best items were always buried at the bottom of seemingly junk-filled boxes. Most people simply didn’t know what they had or were getting rid of.

His pulse quickened with anticipation, then skipped, as he saw a pretty, dark-haired woman stop in front of the stall. Her long, red wool coat, a cream and red knitted scarf and matching hat, with a furry bobble on top, was a cheery beacon amidst the dark, sombre colours of the rest of the milling crowd.

Something about her expectant expression told him that she too knew what delights might be found in the crates. He hoped she wouldn’t beat him to it -- whatever ‘it’ might turn out to be. He should get over there and make sure.

As he watched her remove red mittens, decorated with cream snowflakes, he realised it wasn’t just his competitive spirit that drew him to her. The excitement shimmering in her brown eyes, like the twinkling Christmas lights on the stalls, sparked a similar feeling within him. The warmth in her cheeks, despite the

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chilly weather, was reflected in happy tilt of her pink lips, making his mouth curve in response.

“You know, the other benefit of *nice, warm* department stores,” Rafe grumbled, “is that the people who shop there are generally our age, not old folks. This isn’t the place to find women. Unlike the shoe department at Saks or the purses’ floor at Bloomies.”

Tom didn’t bother reminding him that they were here to find a gift, not a date. Besides, his friend clearly hadn’t spotted the lovely lady in red with the infectious smile. Yet.

Good. He’d make sure it stayed that way.

“Why don’t you have a look around some of the other stalls? You might find something that’ll tempt even you to get out your wallet.”

“I doubt it,” Rafe huffed, then held up his hands in surrender. “Okay. I’ll be over there ...” His voice trailed off and his resigned tone perked up. “Hey. Is that guy selling old, metal toy vehicles? I used to have a bunch of those growing up. Oh man, an oil truck. I always wanted one.”

Rafe made a fast break for the stall, as if chasing after a loose puck, and began discussing the vintage, toy gasoline tanker earnestly with the grizzled stall-owner.

“How easily they fall,” Tom murmured to himself, as he headed over to the bargain table.

Deliberately working the opposite end of the table from the woman sorting through a box of what seemed to be mismatched crockery and cutlery, he dived into

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the first wooden crate.

* * *

Karly Jacobs loved searching through the jumbled, bargain boxes of bric-a-brac at flea markets. She enjoyed giving a new, caring home to something that had been abandoned, lost or forgotten. They might be just useless objects to some, but she felt their sadness as if it were her own. Maybe because she too had been abandoned and forgotten.

That had a long time ago and she'd survived. She'd been one of the lucky ones who'd been rescued and loved by her adoptive parents, who'd treated her as their own. They'd taught her that money didn't buy the most important things in life and shown her how to find pleasure in simple things. Thanks to them, she'd learned to look beyond a battered and broken exterior, for the beauty inside.

Like her last prize find; the forlorn, old, fiddleback rocking chair someone had left at the kerb a few months ago, a couple of streets over from her house. Karly had snagged it and taken the poor thing home. Then she'd stripped, sanded, stained and varnished the beautiful wood beneath the horrid, shabby chic paint job and fixed the broken slats and loose spindles. Restored to its former glory and covered with another vintage find -- a hand-stitched, Amish quilt -- the rocking chair had pride of place in her home office.

A rustle at the far end of the table caught her attention. A tall, well-built, good-looking man was

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rummaging through the wooden boxes.

Good-looking? Major under-statement. The guy was movie-star-handsome. Perhaps he was famous. The city was full of celebrities. Goodness knows she'd dated several, briefly, when she'd first moved to northern New Jersey from downstate and had been seduced by the magic of Manhattan. Though, thankfully, not by the famous men.

This guy didn't look the type to hang out at a flea market. His designer parka alone could pay for everything on this stall, while those leather biker boots would pay all the stall-holders' fees. As for those dark jeans, which seemed moulded to his powerful legs ... Karly whipped her gaze back down to the box she was sifting through. She didn't want to get caught staring. Or drooling.

Yet, she was intrigued. A few moments later, she couldn't resist sneaking a peek at him.

Her pulse jumped. He was looking at her, a smile playing around his lips.

Unsure how to react, she gave him what she hoped was a pleasant, if brisk, nod.

He inclined his head, equally politely, then returned his attention to his own box.

It was then that she realised she'd misjudged him. This man wasn't idly sorting through junk. He was searching methodically, picking things out, assessing them. He, like she, knew there was something special to be found in these boxes.

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Which made her determined to find it first.

That something special wasn't in the first box, nor in the second. He didn't seem to have much more luck, as he finished his second box.

They were standing a lot closer now; only a few crates separated them.

He looked up. Their gazes met. Clashed. Held.

She couldn't look away. She didn't want to. What was it about this man that seemed to mesmerise her?

The sexy tilt to his mouth deepened, as if he knew the effect he had on her.

He probably did. Doubtless, he used his good looks and charm all the time to get what he wanted. That thought immediately broke the spell.

Strangely, it also disappointed her.

Mentally, she rolled her eyes at herself. She was making a lot of assumptions about a guy she hadn't even exchanged one word with.

Ignore him. Focus on finding that hidden gem first.

Something of her internal dialogue must have shown in her expression, because a good-natured challenge lit up his brown eyes.

Karly straightened. Okay. She arched an eyebrow, to make sure she was reading him correctly. He inclined his head.

Game on.

* * *

Neither Tom, nor the woman moved for a couple

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of seconds.

Like that suspended moment when the referee was about to drop the puck for the opening face-off. Then, like two battling centres, they dropped their gazes and started to work their way through the remaining boxes with renewed gusto.

So far, there had been several items that seemed interesting, but nothing that really warranted more than a brief, second look.

Apart from the lovely woman in the red coat.

He might tell himself he was keeping an eye on her to make sure she didn't find the prize first, but in truth, he couldn't resist checking her out. Subtly, of course. Which was weird, given all the women he came across on a daily basis -- from professionals to fans to puck bunnies. Why was she so appealing? What made a woman he'd exchanged nothing more than a couple of looks with, so fascinating?

Especially, since she didn't seem to have the same interest in him.

Although, every now and again, he thought he spotted her looking at him. Probably just to make sure he hadn't found anything interesting.

They both moved on from their respective third crates empty-handed, inching closer to the centre and the final wooden box. A spray of what had appeared to be hand-painted flowers, on a small, china jug, turned out to be a transfer on closer inspection. A vintage-looking lamp was actually a modern replica.

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His lovely opponent also picked up, studied, then discarded several items.

Only one box separated them now. He thought he could smell her fresh, floral scent in the crisp, cold air. He was certainly more aware than ever of her actions. Of wanting to stand ever closer. How would they tackle that single, final, wooden crate?

He wasn't sure who spotted it first. All he knew was that they both realised what they were seeing and recognised it as the prize.

In the middle of that final crate, beneath some old NFL pennants, lay a heart. An old, sawdust heart or sweetheart pin cushion, as his Nanna called them.

Its once-ivory, silk covering was now grey with dirt, as was the delicate lace, tattered in places, which surrounded the heart. Little flowers, with pearls pinned to their centres -- some missing -- decorated the body of the heart. On one side, was a beautifully embroidered, letter T, entwined with vines of leaves which connected it to a K.

His grandparents' initials.

That was it. The perfect gift.

The heart needed careful cleaning and restoration, but Tom knew already that his Nanna would love it. He reached into the box.

* * *

Karly reached into the box to pick up the forlorn heart, but encountered warm, male fingers instead. It was like the opening scene from one of her favourite,

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romantic films, Serendipity, when John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale clutched the same pair of gloves.

Heat shot through her. She was tempted to pull her hand away, to break the contact. But that meant letting him get the heart.

She didn't know why, but it was important to rescue and restore the heart. To take care of it. To ensure that the love with which it had been sewn and pinned and decorated wasn't lost. Honouring the past, perhaps because she had so little of her own.

Karly gave the heart a gentle, but firm tug. Mister tall, dark and delicious held on for a moment, then gracefully let go.

She resisted the urge to snatch it close, out of reach. "Thank you."

"Oh, I still want the heart. I just didn't want to damage something so precious in a tug-of-war." His rich, deep voice caressed her, making her skin tingle as if those fingers had stroked her arm.

Another way he got what he wanted?

Yet, how could a man who appreciated an antique sweetheart pincushion, especially one in such a sorry state, be calculating and cynical?

Realising she hadn't responded, she smiled brightly. "I'm sorry. I plan to buy it."

The disappointment in his expression seemed genuine. "I don't suppose I could convince you to change your mind? This would make the perfect Christmas gift for my grandmother. It's even got the

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right initials on it. K and T for Kate and Thomas.”

His reply surprised her again. She'd expected him to offer money, lay on the charm. Not demonstrate thoughtfulness. “But it's in woeful condition.”

“I'll make sure it's taken care of properly and repaired respectfully to its former glory.” His eagerness suggested he thought he'd convinced her.

Not so fast. He'd said all the right things, but she wanted to make sure he wasn't playing with her. Somehow, she knew he liked to win. “You couldn't possibly get that done properly in time for Christmas.”

“I know. I'd give Nanna the heart along with the promise of having it restored in the new year. I'm sure she'll have her own ideas about who she'd trust to do the job.”

The fondness with which he spoke about his grandparents couldn't be faked. She'd have to trust he was as sincere as he sounded.

“I see. Well,” she said, a little reluctantly, “As long as the heart will be going to a good home, where it will be loved, that's all that matters.” She offered him the heart, half-hoping he'd refuse.

He didn't. But he did look a little uncomfortable. “Thank you. But I don't want to take this from you if you have an important reason for wanting it too.”

Touched, she shook her head, confident now she'd made the right decision. “Only to make sure it didn't get thrown away. Such a beautiful piece, with so much history and love in its making, doesn't deserve to be

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treated like a stale loaf of bread.”

Expecting him to laugh at her whimsy, he surprised her once more with an earnest promise, “Oh, it definitely won’t.” He pulled out his wallet and motioned to the stall-holder. “Thank you again.”

“You’re welcome. I hope it brings your grandparents much happiness.”

While he paid for the heart, Karly returned to her task. Somehow, though, she didn’t have the same enthusiasm. Perhaps because she knew that there wouldn’t be anything to match the heart in the other boxes. After all, *he* had already looked through them.

With a silent, slightly sad sigh, she moved onto another stall.

* * *

Once Tom had tucked the purchased heart into the inside-pocket of his jacket, he turned to speak to the woman who’d given the keepsake up to him, even though she’d seemed to want it as much as he did.

But she’d gone.

Disappointed -- he wanted to get to know her better -- Tom started to make his way to Rafe -- who was still chatting animatedly with the tin toy vendor.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a flash of red. His breath caught.

It was her. In the next row of stalls, at another bargain box.

About to walk over to her, Tom noticed a stall selling hot chocolate. That would give him an ideal way

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to break the ice with the lady in red.

Armed with two steaming hot chocolates, he strode towards her. “Hello again.”

When she looked up warily, he offered her a cup. “This was the least I could do to repay your generosity. I got you extra cream and sprinkles.”

“How can I resist?” Her smile, as she accepted the drink, warmed him in ways that a hot drink could never do. “Thank you.”

“I’m Tom.”

“Karly. Nice to meet you.” She sipped her hot chocolate, leaving some cream on her top lip. “So, do you come here often?”

“Isn’t that supposed to be my line?” he teased huskily, trying to hide the fact that he wanted to lick that smear of cream off.

Karly laughed. “I can’t see you dropping clichés.”

“I try not to.” He drank some of his hot chocolate, trying to look relaxed, and not like a teenager experiencing his first crush. Which was definitely how he felt. “But to answer your question, I stop by whenever I get a chance. I like hunting for that special something.”

“Me too. This place is the best, now that the market that used to be run in the parking garage stopped.”

“I used to go there too. Got some great finds, especially downstairs. I was bummed when it closed down.” Sensing the conversation was winding down

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and unwilling to let it end, he said quickly, “Why don’t we look around the rest of the stalls together? See if I can help you find something as good as the heart.”

Before she could answer, Rafe appeared by his side. “I got the oil tanker. And a truck.”

“Told you there was something for everyone here.” Tom answered, without looking away from Karly.

Cursing his friend’s timing, he willed her not to leave, but knew she would. Problem was, he couldn’t think of a way to stop her.

“Can we go somewhere nice and warm now?” Rafe stopped, noticing Karly for the first time. “Hi.”

Tom introduced them, trying not to grit his teeth. His friend knew how to pour on the charm and women fell for it every time.

Except for Karly, who smiled politely. “Nice to meet you.”

Rafe’s boyish grin went full throttle. “You’re welcome to come with us.”

“Thanks, but I have other plans. Merry Christmas to you both.”

This time, she left the market. Tom watched her go, with a sinking feeling.

She looked back once, briefly. He wasn’t sure if it was at him. As she disappeared from sight, he realised he didn’t get her phone number, or even her last name.

Damn it!

* * *

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Another bitterly cold Sunday in New York.
Another visit to the vintage flea market.

So far, it was stacking up to be another disappointment.

“I really thought my luck might change today.”
Tom shoved his hands deeper in his jacket pockets, fingering the small, paper-wrapped parcel tucked safely inside the left one. “That she’d be here.”

Over the past two months, he’d done his best to find Karly again. He hadn’t been able to get her out of his head. The longer it went on, the more he was convinced that the true prize had been meeting her. And that his biggest mistake had been not finding out more than her first name.

He’d been back to the market every free Sunday he’d had -- although that hadn’t been as often as he’d have liked, thanks to a long road trip to the west coast after Christmas. Not once had he spotted anyone in a red coat.

Last time, Tom had asked the stall holder with the bargain crates, if he knew her name.

The man had shaken his head. “I know who you mean -- pretty gal -- but she always pays cash. No need for names.”

Tom had also gone to several of the other flea markets, with no better results.

Somehow, he’d been sure that today, being so close to Valentine’s Day, she’d be here.

“She still might come.” Rafe waved his hand to

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encompass the bustling market, now decked out in hearts and flowers. “This is as big a crowd as we’ve seen.”

Rafe had taken to coming with Tom, ostensibly to support him in his quest to find Karly. But also because he was eager to pick up yet more of the old tin vehicles for his growing collection. Despite his scoffing, his friend had become addicted and had even repurposed an old display cabinet he’d found at a vintage furniture fair for his finds.

“Besides,” his friend continued, “I have a good feeling. There’s something in the air.”

“That’s the snow they’re forecasting,” Tom said wryly, as they continued their way towards the stall with the bargain boxes.

Turning the corner, he stopped suddenly.

His heart thumped hard against his ribs. His mouth went dry.

There she was.

Looking through the same crate, as when he’d spotted her last time. Her hat and scarf were cream and black, but she wore the same, red, wool coat. He willed her to look up at him. Then, almost immediately, hoped she didn’t.

Had she thought about him, since that day? Did he really want to know? What if she hadn’t? What if the connection between them had all been in his head?

Jeez, he was acting like a rookie from the minors about to take his first skate in the show.

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Man up! Stop dillydallying and get over there.

His feet felt weighted down, as he took his first step towards her. Halfway there, confidence began to seep back into him and his stride lengthened. He could do this.

Then, as if she sensed his presence, she lifted her head.

Their gazes met. The moment of truth.

* * *

He's here!

Karly tried unsuccessfully to control her skipping pulse. She smiled, hoping it didn't look as nervous as she felt.

His answering smile started as a tentative curve of his lips, but broadened as he drew closer. That was a good sign, right?

He stopped beside her.

"Hi." *Real smooth, Karly. Is that the best you can do?*

"How's it going?" His slightly awkward response made her feel better.

"Not so bad," she replied brightly. "I think they've got some new stock in especially for this weekend. It's been pretty bare since Christmas."

"Have you been coming here regularly?"

Unsure how to respond -- she didn't want him to know that she'd been haunting the market hoping to bump into him again -- she hedged, "Off and on. It's been kind of hectic since Christmas."

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“Yeah, for me too.”

She knew that, because she'd Googled him after they met, to see if he really was famous. She'd been shocked to discover he was a hockey star. He wasn't at all what she'd imagined a player in such a physical sport would look like. Intrigued, Karly had watched an Ice Cats' game and been surprised by how fast and fun it had been. Seeing Tom score had given her a little thrill.

The online game schedule had explained why she hadn't seen him. She'd figured there was a good chance he'd be here today as the Ice Cats didn't play until tomorrow evening.

“It's good to see you,” Tom said.

Warmth rushed through her. She'd hoped she hadn't imagined the connection between them, but finding out he was a famous athlete had made her uncertain. “You too. So did your Nanna like her present?”

“She did. But, I didn't give her the heart. I found something else - a cute, little Stuart Crystal perfume bottle, in her favourite fuschia pattern.” He pulled out his phone to show her.

“That's lovely.” So, what had he done with the heart?

“I ... um ... have something for you. I hope it's okay.” He pulled a small parcel out of his jacket pocket and thrust it toward her.

“For me?” Confused, she didn't take the package

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for a moment. “Why?”

“Open it and see.” He took her hand gently and placed the package in it.

As soon as she held it, she knew what it was. She looked up and met his gaze. “Why?” she asked again.

“I want you to have it.”

Her fingers trembled as she undid the brown paper wrapping and then the snow-white tissue paper. Inside, lay the heart. Whoever had done the restoration work had done a fabulous job. The heart had been cleaned carefully and some of the missing pins and beads replaced. Yet, it didn’t look pristine and new. It looked as it should, a loved antique.

“It’s perfect.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“Are you sure you don’t want you grandmother to have it?”

“Positive. I think it belongs with you.”

Touched, she stumbled over her words, “Thank you so much.”

She rewrapped the heart and tucked it safely into her purse. “Can I at least give you something in return? You’ve taken so much trouble over this.”

“You could go out to dinner with me, on Wednesday night.”

“A Valentine’s date?” His unexpected request startled her. And delighted her too.

“It doesn’t have to be anywhere fancy,” he continued. “Just somewhere we can talk. I’d just like to

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get to know you better.”

“I’d like that too. On one condition -- that it’s my treat. You can pick where you’d like to go.” When it looked like he might argue, she held up the heart.

He tilted his head. “Okay. But I’ll provide the transport.”

“Deal.”

They shared a smile.

“Before we do anything else, please may I have your phone no?” He took out his cell and handed it to her.

Her name was already in the contacts. The place for a profile picture, had a photo of the restored heart.

She hadn’t imagined it -- he felt something special between them too.

As she typed in her number, she noticed something about the heart. T and K. “Those could be our initials.”

“I thought that too,” he said softly.

Their gazes met. And held.

“It really is the perfect gift.”

“How about we look around the rest of the market together?” Tom asked.

Karly pretended to think about it. “Hmm. Is that because you want to make sure I don’t find that special something before you?” she teased.

“Nope. This time, I know I found the prize first.” He tucked her arm into his. “You.”

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Acknowledgement:

Many thanks to Mich Leahair, whose comment about finding a sawdust heart in a junk box at a fete, which she then rescued, inspired this story.

Author's Note:

Sweetheart pincushions or sawdust hearts generally date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but there are some that go back as far as the Crimean War. They were used as an occupational therapy tool to help soldiers deal with the traumas of wars like the Boer War and the First World War. They were also used to occupy troops during the long days and nights of war, by giving them something to send back to their sweethearts.

In 2018, I took part in a wonderful commemorative project, Sawdust Hearts, whose aim was to decorate 1568 hearts - one for each day of World War I. You can find out more about this project at

www.wwlhearts.co.uk

You can see a picture of the humble heart I decorated for this project on my website.

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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](#)

[A Perfect Strategy](#)

[A Perfect Selection](#) (Anthology of short stories)

[A Perfect Selection 2](#) (Anthology of short stories)

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A Perfect Storm

A Perfect Bouquet

A Perfect Plan

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A Perfect Selection

Can you read just one?

A mouthwatering selection of six holiday-themed, bite-sized romances featuring players from the New Jersey Ice Cats.

- Contains: [A Perfect Party](#)
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 A Perfect Disguise
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A Perfect Selection 2

Can you read just one?

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- Contains: A Perfect Contest
 A Perfect Plan
 A Perfect Picnic
 A Perfect Date
 A Perfect Chance

A Perfect Gift

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.

A Perfect Gift

A Perfect Strategy

Is there really life after hockey?

If there's one thing Scotty Matthews knows, it's hockey. Unfortunately, the former New Jersey Ice Cats captain isn't proving successful at life after hockey. His wife's left him and he's lost his post-ice job as a media commentator. All he's got now is a big empty show house.

If there's one thing Sapphire Houlihan knows, it's that she never wants to be tied down to anyone or anything ever again. Unfortunately for her, a wonderful one-weekend distraction with Scotty turns into something much more complicated... Because he's a guy who wants way more than one weekend.



A PERFECT GIFT

Found: A heart in need of love

When Ice Cats' forward, Tom Adamson, finds a forlorn, vintage sweetheart pin cushion at a Manhattan flea market, he doesn't expect to have to battle lovely antiques' collector, Karly Jacobs, for it. The decorated sawdust heart will make the perfect present for his grandmother.

But could a change of plan make it a perfect Valentine's gift instead?

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