

Hot Stuff

Chapter One

Cate Madigan had mentally stripped the guy across the table from her, and he'd come up short in every possible way. Cate hadn't actually wanted to see him naked. The image had just popped into her head. One of those awful moments of too much information! The guy's name was Patrick Pugg, and he was the Madigan family's pick of the week for a boyfriend for Cate.

Cate and Pugg were seated at the Madigan's chaotic dinner table, where the rule had always been every man for himself. Things had calmed down some since Cate's brothers Matt and Tom had moved out, but dinner here was still a harrowing experience... in a good Boston Irish kind of way.

There were eight people at the table tonight. Cate, Patrick Pugg, Cate's parents Margaret and Jim Madigan, Cate's older brother Danny, Danny's wife Amy, and their six-year old twin girls, Zoe and Zelda.

The Madigans were all stereotypical Irish. Milk-white skin sprinkled with freckles, red hair that curled with length, brown eyes, a stubborn streak, and a natural bent toward practical jokes. The men were chunky and fought flat-footed. The women were slim and preferred getting even to getting mad.

Amy was the single frosted cupcake in the box of jelly doughnuts. She didn't look at all like a Madigan. Amy was the all-American cheerleader with blond hair, blue eyes, and smiley personality. Amy grew up half a block away and, from what Cate knew, Amy and Danny had been together since they were two years old.

"You look all wrinkle-head," Zoe said to Cate. "What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about work," Cate said. "I need to go in early tonight."

This was a big fat lie, of course. Cate had been unconsciously grimacing at the thought of a naked Pugg. At five foot six inches he looked eye to eye at Cate. He wasn't bad looking, but he wasn't great looking either. Mostly he was... hairy. The hair crept from the cuffs of his shirt and spilled over his collar. He had long sideburns and a pompadour on the top of his head with a single curl pasted to his forehead. He was a carcrash cross between Elvis Presley and Squiggy from Laverne and Shirley. And he had a horrifying habit of referring to himself as Pugg.

"Pugg likes this pot roast," Pugg said to Cate's mother. "Pugg would like to find a woman to marry who could make a pot roast like this."

Cate's mother beamed at Cate. "Cate makes a wonderful pot roast," she said. "Don't you, Cate?"

Cate blew out a sigh and forked up some mashed potatoes. She'd gouge out her eye with a rusted spoon before she'd make a pot roast for Pugg.

"Green beans," Cate's father said at the head of the table, and an arm reached across Cate for the bean bowl.

Food was circulating at warp speed around the table: the gravy boat, the dinner rolls, the butter dish, the green beans, the meat platter, the monster bowl of mashed potatoes. This was normal behavior at the Madigan dinner table, and over the years Cate had perfected the technique of passing with her left hand and simultaneously eating with her right.

"I heard the Sox are trading five guys," Danny said.

Cate's dad shoveled pot roast onto his plate. "Bull crap."

"I got something brown on my dress," Zelda said. "It smells like dookey."

"It's gravy," Amy said. "Don't worry about it."

"I don't like it. Make it go away."

"Dookey dress, dookey dress, dookey dress," Zoe said.

"Patrick sells tires," Cate's mother said to Cate. "He's the top salesman at his dealership."

Patrick Pugg winked at Cate. "Pugg is good at selling. Pugg is good at lots of things, if you know what Pugg means."

"No," Cate said. "What do you mean?"

Danny was seated next to Cate. "You're baiting him," Danny said. "This is going to get ugly."

"Pugg's wounded," Pugg said. "Cate doubts Pugg's romantic virtuosity."

Danny stared openmouthed at Pugg for a beat. "Wounded? Romantic virtuosity? Who the heck are you? What are you?"

"I'm Pugg."

"Oh boy," Danny said. He slid an arm across the back of Cate's chair and leaned toward her. "Don't worry. I have a banker I want you to meet. I have it all set."

Patrick Pugg did a little finger wag at Danny. "Pugg wouldn't like that. Pugg is committed to making this relationship work."

Danny narrowed his eyes. "Did I miss something? I thought you just met Cate tonight."

"Yes, but Cate likes Pugg, right? And Cate wants to see more of Pugg."

Everyone stopped eating and looked at Cate.

For the past six years Cate had been tending bar and working her way through college, inching closer to her goal of teaching grade school. Cate had always thought teaching second graders would be easy after living with three volatile brothers and tending bar. It was her observation that her older brothers, men in bars, and very young children had many things in common... for instance, they all from time to time exhibited inappropriate behavior, and they were all easily distracted.

If Cate told Pugg she wanted nothing more to do with him, he'd sulk through the rest of the dinner. If she told Pugg she liked him, Danny would sulk through dinner. So Cate did the only sensible thing... she accidentally on purpose tipped her water glass and jumped out of her seat when the water splashed everywhere.

"Shoot," Cate said. "Just look at this mess. I'm so sorry."

And she ran to get a kitchen towel.

"Good move with the water," Danny whispered when she returned. "It's a classic."

"It's all your fault. You caused that confrontation."

"Did not."

"Did so."

"Did not. Anyway, wait until you see the banker. He's light-years away from this moron. You're gonna like the banker."

"No. No more fix ups. I hate fix ups."

"I wouldn't have to get you fixed up if you were better at getting dates."

"I don't have time for dates right now."

"You're not getting any younger," Danny said.

"I'm twenty-six!"

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"I worry about you," Danny said. "We all worry about you. We don't like you working in the bar, coming home at all hours, dealing with drunks all night long. You should be married to some nice boring guy who takes care of you and keeps you safe."

"I don't want to be married to a nice boring guy. I want to teach school, and I want to marry an exciting guy who rides in on a big black horse and sweeps me off my feet."

"I'd feel better if he could ride in on a white horse," Danny said. "Why don't you at least get a better job? Something that doesn't dump you out at midnight."

"The bar is perfect. It pays well. It allows me to go to school during the day. And I'm good with the drinks and the customers. All those years of listening to everyone talk at once at the table are finally paying off."

Not to mention Cate was getting cheap rent because she was subletting a room from Marty Longfellow. Marty was a South End drag queen who sang at the bar and singlehandedly pulled it out of economic disaster. Not only was Marty a fascinating oddity . . . she was also good. She had a voice like velvet and, after an hour and a half of shaving, two hours of makeup, a half hour to strap herself down and squirm into her dress, she was every woman's envy and every man's dream (at least on the surface). Marty sang at the bar two nights a week and traveled the other five, mostly doing private parties. Sometimes she would leave on an extended tour and be gone for a week or two. This was why Cate got the cheap rent. Cate guarded

the castle. Cate watered Marty's plants, retrieved the mail, answered the phone, and made sure things were spiffy for Marty's return.

The perfect living arrangement, Cate thought. It allowed her to go through school without education loans. It got her out from under her parents' overprotective wings. And she had a big strong roommate who wasn't interested in women.

Cate mixed two mojitos. It was late summer and that meant exotic-drink season. Lots of margaritas and piña coladas and mojitos. A man at the end of the bar caught Cate's eye and lifted his empty glass. She handed the mojitos off to a waiter and sailed a Sam Adams draft down the polished mahogany bar. ESPN played on the television hanging over Cate's head. Conversation rose and fell in the dark room. Eyes occasionally flicked to the small, empty stage. Marty was expected to start another set in just a few minutes. Sunday night at Evian's Bar and Grill. Packed with regulars, plus one new guy at the end of the bar, staring at Cate.

"Okay?" Cate mouthed to him.

He nodded and moved his hand in the hold sign over his draft.

Marty took the stage and there was a lot of hooting and clapping and yelling.

"Aren't you the shit?" Marty said to the crowd.

That led to more hooting and clapping.

Marty was six foot in heels. She was wearing a red sequined dress and a matching feather boa. She had a bunch of wigs, and tonight she'd chosen to have short black hair. Her red glossy lipstick matched her red glossy nails. Her eyelashes were long and fluttery and exaggerated for effect.

Gina Makin sidled up to Cate. Gina worked nights when Marty performed and extra help was needed. She had a husband and a one-year-old at home, and she was a primo bartender.

"She's wearing the Judy Garland wig tonight," Gina said. "I'll bet you five bucks she opens with 'Over the Rainbow.' "

Marty's keyboard wrangler, Slow Joe Flagler, banged out "The Wicked Witch is Dead" and Marty gave him the finger. Slow Joe grinned and went into "Over the Rainbow."

"The hot guy nursing the beer at the end of the bar is staring at you," Gina said to Cate. "Do you know him?"

"No. He's new."

"You should go flirt with him. He looks like fun."

"Think I'll pass on that. I've had about all the fun I can handle for one night," Cate said. "My mom invited another Mr. Right to dinner. He tried to kiss me when I left for work, I instinctively kned him in the groin, and he said he liked a feisty woman."

"Obviously you didn't knee him hard enough."

"Seemed pretty hard to me. He went down to the floor and rolled around some before he said I was feisty."

Gina's attention was fixed on the hot guy. "Did he look like him?"

"Not even a little," Cate said.

The guy at the end of the bar was fine. Black hair, styled short, but long enough from its last cut to wave a little over his ears and fall onto his forehead. Nice mouth, dark eyes, broad shoulders. He had his buttondown shirtsleeves rolled to his forearms. Clearly he had some muscle. He caught her looking and his face creased into a full-on smile showing big-bad-wolf-perfect white teeth.

Cute, Kellen McBride thought, readjusting his former opinion of Cate Madigan. She looked like she should be tucked away in an old Celtic castle, wearing a flowing dress of emerald green, waiting for a knight in shining armor. He'd been watching her refill glasses and mingle with the regulars and had reached the conclusion that she was confident, spirited, and in control. This dragged a mental sigh out of Kellen. Cate Madigan was not the type who would ever need rescuing. She would make the dragon into a pet, defeat the villain, and use the moat of fire to bake cookies. Cate was, in a single word, enchanting. And the second word that came to mind might be intimidating. Not that any of this mattered. Kellen had a plan, and he was sticking to it until something better came along. He was going to finesse himself into Cate Madigan's life.

Kellen did a little come here crook with his finger, aimed at Cate.

"Me?" Cate mouthed.

"Lucky you," Gina said. "He's delicious."

Cate added to the tab for one of her regulars and ambled down to the hot guy.

"What can I do for you?" Cate asked.

"Another draft? Bar menu?"

"It's what I can do for you," he said. "Tai mina fhear chun tusa a thogail on gnathsaol."

This got a bark of laughter from Cate. "Okay, I'm impressed. This is the first time I've had a guy try to pick me up in Gaelic."

"Seemed appropriate. Do a lot of men try to pick you up?"

"No. I look like everyone's little sister. Mostly people try to get Marty's attention. And I know the translation to your Gaelic pickup line. You said I'm the man to take you away from everyday life. I appreciated the sentiment, but I actually like my everyday life... and sorry, I don't date customers."

Plus her mother's words echoed in her ears. If a man is too easy on the eyes, he's likely to be hard on the heart. This had always presented Cate with a dilemma. Was she supposed to actually look for an ugly man?

"I have very good references," Mr. Hot Guy told her. "And my name is Kellen McBride. Your Irish father would love me."

"You aren't the banker, are you?"

"If I said yes what would it get me?"

Cate did an eye roll and moved to the other end of the bar to refill a wine glass.