

Irish Heat

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Lucy Saunders thought her bar days were long over. Yet, here she sat in a bar, scratch that, a *pub* somewhere in Dublin's city center. She had never dreamed at thirty-three, she would be a single mom. Despite all the crap Jeremy had put her through, Lucy honestly believed he would grow up and put a ring on it.

Ireland was never in the original plan, either. She was far from her home on the Oregon coast, eager to start a new life with her twelve-year-old daughter.

"I can't believe I let you drag me out here!" Lucy yelled toward her sister, Abbey, who sat on the stool beside her. "I'm tired. I'm jet-lagged. And I left Kaylee alone on our first night here."

Abbey rolled her eyes at her older sister. "It's not your first night here."

"Fine, second night, third night? I'm jet-lagged, remember? I should be unpacking and settling in. I'm not ready for this." Lucy circled her hand over her head.

"For what? We're just having drinks." Abbey pushed a shot glass toward her sister. "You deserve the break. It's okay to take a little time for yourself."

Lucy ignored the shot in front of her. "I need to pee." She had already tossed back three of whatever liquor Abbey kept putting in front of her.

"Toilets are in the back." Abbey motioned with her head.

Lucy slid off the stool. The room tilted in front of her, causing her knees to buckle.

Abbey grabbed her sister's arm. "You ok?"

"I'm fine." Lucy laughed, releasing herself from Abbey's grip. "I wasn't expecting that."

"You sure you're okay?"

Lucy waved Abbey off but cautiously stepped away from the bar. The room straightened again as she made her way toward the back of the pub. Overhead, she saw a large sign reading "Toilets."

"Well, that's putting it bluntly," she muttered under her breath.

As she pushed open the door marked *Ladies*, Lucy felt she had stepped back in time. A wave of claustrophobia swept over her. The room hardly had enough space for the toilet and sink crammed inside. More shocking was the toilet's tank clinging to the wall above her, its long pull cord dangling down one side.

"What on earth?" Lucy muttered, feeling uneasy about the tank's precarious attachment to the wall, half-convinced it would come crashing down at any moment.

Twisting around to the toilet, Lucy was annoyed that there were no toilet seat covers. With a deep sigh, she reluctantly hovered over the toilet, thankful to at least have toilet paper, even though it seemed extremely thin. When she finished, she cautiously pulled the cord, jumping back on the slight chance the entire thing would tumble down from the wall. Thankfully, everything held in place.

As if this experience couldn't get any stranger, Lucy was baffled by the sink; there were two separate faucets, neither marked hot nor cold. Had she fallen down a rabbit hole and ended up in Wonderland? She picked one faucet and yelped as water gushed out, burning her fingertips. Quickly, she turned on the second tap, which produced freezing water; this sink had no in-between. Drying her hands on a paper

towel, she gave her distorted reflection one final glance before heading back toward Abbey.

"There you are." Abbey appeared in front of her, grabbing her arm. "Come on; we have to get a table."

"What for?"

"The whole reason I brought you here," Abbey laughed. "Well, besides the excellent drinks, you need the full Irish experience. The Trad band is setting up; you're going to love this."

Lucy scrunched her nose. "Never heard of them."

Abbey ignored the comment, half-dragging Lucy toward a table occupied by two other people.

"Can we join?" Abbey asked them.

The couple nodded, and Abbey plopped down, pulling Lucy into the seat next to her.

"Shouldn't we find our own table?" Lucy whispered.

"Don't be silly," Abbey said. "It's about to get very crowded in here. Table sharing is necessary."

"Why? Who is Chad Band?"

Abbey laughed. "Trad. Traditional Irish music. Everyone loves this stuff. Flutes, guitars, banjos, tin whistles, feet stomping, *Oh Danny Boy*?"

Lucy shook her head as if Abbey were speaking a foreign language.

"You've never heard of Trad music?" Abbey looked shocked. "It's one of the main attractions here, along with the Guinness. Tourists come from all over just to hear the Irish play while drinking a pint."

Lucy gave her a look, still shaking her head. "Did you know about the music before you moved here?"

"Actually, yes," Abbey said. "Shortly after you flew the coop, I went deep into an Irish obsession. I used to listen to loads of Irish, Celtic, and even some Sea Shanty music online. It drove Mom crazy, but I think those Celtic ladies started growing on her."

Lucy stared at her sister, intrigued. "I never knew you had a thing for Ireland. I thought you only moved here because of Rob."

"I probably fell for Rob *because* I was obsessed with everything Irish." Abbey smiled. "The minute he spoke with that Irish accent, I was smitten. But, I dreamt of living here long before I met Rob; he was the icing on the cake."

Lucy rolled her eyes. Abbey had always been a hopeless romantic. Lucy, unfortunately, knew better.

"You were only ever focused on leaving the house," Abbey continued. "I dreamt bigger. I wanted to leave the country."

Lucy stared down at her hands as memories washed over her. Abbey had her pegged. As soon as she met Jeremy, she became laser-focused on getting the hell out of that house. At eighteen, she packed her bags and left home without a single goodbye. Unbeknownst to her, Lucy was about to learn a lifetime's worth of lessons in a short period of time. She had naively believed anywhere was better than living under the same roof as her mother but would quickly learn how wrong she had been.

"Here they are." Abbey touched her arm, drawing Lucy back into the present.

Lucy stole a glance at Abbey, who sat upright, her hands clasped together in eager anticipation, excitement dancing in her eyes, and a cheesy grin etched across her face. It was clear Abbey loved this band.

Three men and two women navigated through the mass of tables and people, moving toward a cluster

of chairs arranged in a semi-circle in front of the crowd.

"Kenny, git us started!" One of the men shouted. He looked toward the crowd and, in his thick accent, yelled, "John in!"

Lucy leaned toward Abbey. "Whose John?"

Abbey gave her a strange look. "John? I don't know a John."

"He yelled for John to come in or something," Lucy said, brows furrowed.

Abbey chuckled. "Join. He said join in, not John."

Lucy felt her face flush. "How can you understand this accent?"

"You'll get used to it." Abby patted her hand. "Give it time. You'll be acclimated before you know it."

Lucy watched as the guy supposedly named Kenny put a flute to his lips and began to play.

"He's holding that wrong," Lucy said out of the side of her mouth. "Aren't you supposed to hold a flute to the side, not straight down?"

"Oh, Lucy, you are soooo American." Abbey couldn't help laughing. "You have much to learn, my little Grasshopper."

Lucy gave a bewildered stare.

Abbey sighed. "That's a tin whistle. It's kind of like those plastic recorders we learned to play in school, but much cooler."

The tin whistle player ran his fingers through dark, wavy hair, glancing at the other band members as he tapped his foot, setting a steady rhythm.

The older man tucked the fiddle under his chin and joined in the upbeat tune. The crowd cheered and began clapping along to the beat. One of the women picked up an accordion, seamlessly pulling it in and out as she swayed to the music. The second woman strummed on the banjo while the third man played the guitar.

Lucy was quickly captivated, clapping her hands as she became swept up in the excitement surrounding her.

Lucy felt drawn to the man with the tin whistle. Every inch of his body seemed connected to the rhythm, as if lost in his own musical world. His dark hair swayed ever so slightly, as if it, too, couldn't resist dancing along with the melody. She couldn't take her eyes off him. Was it how he connected with the music that fascinated her or something else? It had been a while since she'd been with a man. Jeremy had always been in and out of her life, spending most of the past year on the latter. Although she wasn't ready for anything serious, that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy a handsome face.

Their eyes met through the crowd; Lucy hadn't realized she was staring and quickly dropped her gaze. When she dared look back up, the man was still gazing in her direction, and he offered her a small smile. Lucy's heart skipped a few beats as a tiny thrill rushed through her veins. Instantly, she felt like a schoolgirl with a crush on some unattainable heartthrob. At least it made the night all the more interesting as she allowed herself to be caught up in the moment.

The song ended, and the band carried straight into another upbeat melody. The older man set his fiddle across his knee and began to sing. Around the room, people join in as if he sang a popular top 40s hit. Lucy could hardly understand the lyrics, but part of her wished she could sing along with the rest of the crowd.

When the music stopped, Lucy's disappointment surprised her. It had been nice allowing the music to

distract her from her thoughts and fears surrounding this massive change her life had recently taken.

"We'll be takin' a wee break," the older band member announced. "Git some more of da black stuff—and git me a round too."

The older man laughed heartily as his bandmates slapped him on the shoulder.

"Shall we get more drinks?" Abbey wiggled her eyebrows. "I need to visit the ladies' room first."

"Apparently, the band does, too." Lucy made a sour expression. "Seems a weird thing to announce."

Abbey glanced at Lucy, confused. "What are you on about?"

"They said they were taking a pee break," Lucy reminded her.

Abby chuckled. "I see where you went there. A *wee* break. That isn't what they mean; wee as in small, not pee."

Lucy rubbed a hand up and down her face, attempting to wipe away the flush growing across her cheeks. "Everything is different here. I thought this would be an easy transition. I mean, we speak the same language, but at the same time, we don't."

"It will get easier, I promise." Abbey placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "To be fair, I had Rob and his Irish dialect for several years before we moved here. When I first met him, he was like you, completely thrown off by the way Americans spoke and how we did things. Being with him, I learned the Irish way of saying things; I suppose I knew what to expect when we moved here."

Lucy shrugged. "I hope it's just temporary. The last thing I want is to stick out like a sore thumb."

Abbey raised her brows. "Too late for that," she laughed again. "You get the drinks and I'll go to the toilets. I'll take a Guinness."

Lucy stood awkwardly at the crowded bar, contemplating how best to catch the bartender's attention. Finally, he made his way down to where she stood.

"You okay?" he asked hurriedly.

Lucy was unsure why he was making small talk at this busy time, but she had heard the Irish were a friendly bunch. "I'm okay, and you?"

The bartender furrowed his brows, looking her up and down before moving on to the next customer.

Lucy opened her mouth to protest, but he had already turned his back to her.

"He was askin' for yar order," a deep voice informed her.

"Oh, I misunderstood." Lucy hung her head. "I thought he wanted to know how I was doing?"

The man chuckled as he squeezed into the spot next to her. "Hiya, Colin," he called toward the bartender.

Lucy glanced up at the man next to her. It was the tin whistle man from the band. She blushed as she took in his features. He was even more handsome closeup. She noticed his cheeks dimpled when he smiled, and his blue eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief.

Leaning over the counter, he looked toward her. "What're ya havin'?"

Lucy couldn't speak; she was captivated by those eyes, the bluest she had ever seen.

The bartender cleared his throat, thrumming impatiently on the counter.

Lucy quickly turned to face the bartender, somehow managing to find her voice. "One Guinness and a Jack and Coke."

The man next to her made a pfft sound. "No, no, Colin, this blow-in needs a right Irish drink."

"Excuse me?" Lucy wasn't sure whether to be offended or not.

"Ya visit Ireland; ya need the full experience," he said with a wink.

"I got Guinness," Lucy pointed out.

"That's for yer woman," the man said. "You ordered a 'Jack and Coke.'"

He said 'Jack and Coke' with a nasally American accent.

"First of all, she's my sister, not my woman," Lucy said defensively. "Second, what's wrong with a Jack and Coke?"

He laughed, a smirk playing on his lips. "Come 'ere, if it's a whiskey ya want, ya need the good stuff. Irish whiskey, forget that American shite," he turned back to the bartender. "We'll go easy on 'er. Give'er an Old Fashion, with the good stuff, Connemara whiskey."

"I don't—"

"I'll buy. Ya don't like it, I'll drink it fer ya." He smiled, and Lucy felt her knees go weak. Ignoring any further protest, he turned back to the bartender. "Can I git a round for the band?"

"Yer bringing in the customers," the bartender said.

Tin whistle guy winked before heading down the bar to chat with another group of people. Lucy couldn't take her eyes off him. No matter how tempted she may be, there was no way she would be hitting on him or any other guy this evening. That wasn't what tonight was about. She was here with her sister, acclimating to a new country and, hopefully, a new life.

A high-pitched giggle came from down the bar. Lucy felt an unexpected tinge of jealousy coursed through her as she caught Kenny, if that was his name, chatting with a group of women. She couldn't help but notice the unmistakable desire flickering in their eyes as he leaned in a little too close. Not that it should matter much; it wasn't as if she had a shot with him, even if her brain was telling her to go for it.

"Got the drinks?" Abbey appeared beside her.

Lucy jumped, quickly focusing on her sister. "Yeah. He's working on them."

"He's pretty hot," Abbey commented.

"The bartender?" Lucy asked.

Abbey tilted her head and glared at her sister. "Tin whistle guy. I saw you ogling him from a mile away. "

The bartender set the drinks on the counter.

"He bought our drinks," Lucy said, shrugging and picking up her glass. "I was being the typical foreigner, unable to communicate in my native English, and he helped me. I'm not even sure what's in this."

Lucy took a tentative sip.

Abbey watched her. "And?"

"It's good. Smooth," Lucy said, surprised. "It's an Old Fashioned? I've heard of it but never had one."

"Rob likes those," Abbey commented, then glanced down the bar. "That guy just picked it at random for you?"

Lucy put up her hand. "Don't read too much into it. I ordered a Jack and Coke; he made my drink more *Irish*. As you always say, the Irish are friendly."

"Not *buy you a drink* friendly." Abbey bumped her elbow playfully against Lucy's arm.

They walked back to their table and sat down. Lucy sipped on her drink and watched as tin whistle man rejoined the band, striking up a conversation with the pretty banjo player. He seemed like a real

ladies' man, the way he was flirting with the women by the bar and now intimately touching the arm of the banjo player, laughing at something she said. Lucy couldn't tear her eyes away, even knowing she had no shot with him, not when he could have any woman in this pub. Not that it mattered; she wasn't looking for anything like that right now anyway.

"You like him," Abbey whispered, leaning into Lucy. "You should go for it."

Lucy stared into the drink in her hand. "Go for what? I'm intrigued, that's it. Besides, he clearly has a thing for his bandmate."

Abbey shrugged, taking a sip of her Guinness. "Maybe, but I didn't see him buy her a drink."

"He bought a round for the whole band." Lucy frowned.

"I'm pretty sure they get rounds for free," Abbey told her. "Their payment for bringing in customers."

Lucy hated how her stomach flip-flopped at the idea he had singled her out. Had he bought those other ladies' drinks as well?

As much as she tried, she found it impossible to stop stealing glances his way. Something about him drew her in like a moth to a flame. A server weaved through the crowd, balancing a tray of glasses filled with dark liquid as she moved toward the band. Kenny smiled, saying a few words to the woman as he took the tray from her and set it on the table. The server beamed at him before returning to the bar.

The band members each grabbed a glass.

"To Kenny, our fearless leader."

Apparently, she had heard right; his name was Kenny. It was strange how the name didn't seem to fit the man.

Kenny raised his glass with the other band members; their pints clinked together in a cheer.

Kenny looked over at Lucy, his glass still raised in the air. He gestured to her, a pretend clanking of their glasses together.

Lucy quickly looked away, attempting to hide the blush creeping across her face.

"For you." Another server appeared next to Lucy, setting down a full glass. "From yer man over there."

"I don't have a man," Lucy snapped, swiveling her head back toward the band only to lock eyes with Kenny. He still held his glass raised as if proposing a second toast to only her.

When she made no reaction, Kenny nodded toward her drink. Despite her trembling hands, she somehow steeled her nerves, lifting the glass in a 'cheer' toward him, and took a sip with faux confidence. He nodded his approval before turning back to his bandmates.

"Looks like you do have a chance," Abbey whispered. "Take yer man home with you."

"He's not my man," Lucy protested again, her cheeks burning. "Why does everyone keep saying that? Earlier, he called *you* my woman; maybe he thinks we're together?"

Abbey laughed. "Yer man, yer woman; all typical Irish slang. It's what you say when you don't know someone's name or can't be bothered to remember a name. That guy, that girl, but they say, yer man or yer woman. You'll hear it a lot."

"Interesting," Lucy sighed. "I think his name is Kenny? Am I hearing that right?"

"Who cares, as long as he goes home with you." Abbey waggled her eyebrows.

"To your place?" Lucy teased. "Shall we do it right there on the couch? Or maybe in the room I share with my daughter? I know; I'll just bang that headboard all night, toss Kaylee some headphones, and ask

her to please keep her eyes closed.”

Abbey rolled her eyes. “You could go to his place. A little action may do you good.”

“I’m not going home with a stranger,” Lucy said, taken aback, acting as if she had never done something so reckless in her life. Little did Abbey know, Lucy was no stranger to one-night stands, having had many in her days. “What about Kaylee? I can’t just leave her alone.”

“First of all, you know his name, and he bought you two drinks; you’re friends.” Abbey smiled. “I’ve got Kaylee; she’ll be fine. She won’t even notice you’re gone.”

The band started up again. Kenny had exchanged his tin whistle for the banjo; the woman playing it now held a tambourine. He counted off, tapping his foot in time with the beat. As Lucy looked up, their eyes locked, and Kenny sent her a playful wink. Butterflies crashed in her stomach; maybe she did have a change after all. She tried to push away those thoughts, but everything seemed to fade into the background, leaving only Kenny playing his song just for her.
