

THE ONLY GOLD



Pippa Bennett

The Only Gold
by Pippa Bennett

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Dedication

To Sharon:

Thanks for the inspiration!

* * * *



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any

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resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One

*St. Patrick's Day is an enchanted time—a day to begin transforming winter's dreams into summer's magic.—
Adrienne Cook*

"Hey, Riordan, you're Irish, ain't ya?" Blond and buff, Christoffer Magnuson waved his gigantic hand in front of Eithne Riordan's face as she stooped over the water cooler to get a drink. "How come you aren't wearing green?"

Eithne hated this sort of thing. Every damned year she went through it. "Chris, I'm a citizen of the United States. Yes, my family was Irish. Yes, my name is Irish. No, I don't believe in "the little people." No, I don't believe in pots of gold at the end of rainbows. And I don't wear green on St. Patrick's Day."

"Aw, come on, Eithne," Chris still pronounced her name eth-NEE, despite the hundreds of times she'd told him it was et-NA, "Come with me to O'Fallon's after work and have a Guinness or a green beer. I'll even buy."

"The answer is no. And if you put a hand out to pinch me, Chris, I'll sue you for sexual harassment. I swear to God, I will."

"Jeez, woman. Take the stick out of your a.... "Chris' comment trailed off as Harvey Henry, their boss, walked up. Harvey was short, fat and red of face. He wheezed from a lifetime of living with a wife who loved long-haired cats.

"Are we working today, people? Or are you practicing for the big sundown parade?" Harvey mouthed the stump of a

cigar. The higher-ups had made him stop smoking them in the office after Eithne complained.

Chris vanished like the proverbial leprechaun. How a man that massive could move so swiftly and silently always freaked Eithne out. It figured he'd leave her to face Harvey alone.

Damn you, Chris, she thought. *Oh well, who counted on you, anyway....*

"The Far Side Blue account is done, but the Rider, Roper and Hickok ledger is seventeen cents off. I should have it found in the next hour. If you don't want it to come up off again, give it to me first, instead of Chris." Eithne stared into Harvey's blurry brown eyes.

Harvey chewed his cigar, his expression thoughtful. "You know, I could like you, Riordan. You always look nice, dress nice, even if it is a little on the plain side. And you do good accounting work. Very thorough. But, I gotta say so, kid; you got an attitude that would do a wolverine proud."

"I'm not here to win popularity contests, Harve. I'm here to earn my daily bread."

"Ain't we all. But, mark my words, someday that snippy belligerence you cultivate is going to come back and bite you on the buns. Say, it's St. Patrick's Day. Why aren't you wearing green?"

"Oh, mother of God," she muttered. Eithne stalked toward her desk. "I don't believe in good luck. I believe in hard work. And I don't celebrate St. Patrick's Day."

The rest of the day passed without further event. Eithne left the offices of Jefferson, Whiteside and Funke at precisely

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ten minutes after five o'clock. It was tax time, so she'd come in at three A.M. just to be sure she could be clear of downtown before the blasted sundown parade began.

She paused on the sidewalk to take a deep breath of the crisp spring air. Jonquils glowed golden in the setting sun, and pink and blue hyacinths gave off their heady perfume. Chris came up beside her.

"Sure you won't take me up on that beer?"

"After you abandoned me to Harvey's tender mercies? You couldn't persuade me to go out with you now, Chris, if you kissed the Blarney Stone. Especially on St. Patrick's Day."

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Chapter Two

Eithne strode to the parking lot, leaving him to stand alone. She got in her neat little Ford Taurus, plugged in a CD of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and drove to the YMCA. There she worked twenty minutes on the ellipticals, then got on the treadmill. She wore a disc player and headphones, this time choosing Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and she opened a biography of Condoleezza Rice. She began reading and walking at a brisk pace.

Half an hour later, she got off the machine, pausing to wipe her face with a towel. Glancing toward the mirror, she frowned in critical scrutiny. With her black hair pulled back, her features looked plain. Her nose was too large, her mouth too wide, her chin too narrow and her cheeks too plump. Her eyes were her best facial feature, being a clear deep blue. Her fair skin completed the "Black Irish" coloring. The gym lights and the mirror washed her out and emphasized the purple circles under her eyes.

Eithne continued her perusal. No matter how much she exercised, she couldn't lose the basic rounded contours of her breasts and hips. She wasn't fat.

Hell, she couldn't even qualify for pleasingly plump, but she was still round. It would take more than Miss Clairol and a diet to transform her into Lauren Hutton, her favorite model of all time. It would take a miracle and six more inches in height. She sighed. Well, at least she wasn't stupid enough to be working off the calories from a pint of Guinness Stout.

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A quick shower, a change into practical cotton underwear and sweats, and it was back to the car. This time the music was "The Song of the Volga Boatmen."

A rapid trip across the city on the freeway flyover, and Eithne pulled into the driveway of her home in an older section of town. Her house had been built in 1919, and it reflected the solidity of its time. Two-storied, it had way too much room for one person, but Eithne loved it with all the passion she had in her. Its restoration had been her pride and joy.

Parking her car in the garage, she got out and walked up the bricks she had spent three back-breaking days laying, toward her long front porch. A black cat bounded out of the shrubbery and walked toward her, tail held high in greeting.

"Beat it, you mooch," she told it. The cat ignored her, weaving in and out of her ankles in the timeless feline dance. Eithne stumbled and swore. "Blast it, Mephistopheles. You're gonna break my leg."

The cat belonged to her neighbors. Eithne had never forgiven him for appearing at her door in the middle of a thunderstorm, claiming to be starving. She had taken him in and even driven to the discount store in the middle of a rock-soaker to buy a litter box, litter and cat food. The next morning she had discovered he belonged to the people next door. The cat contraptions had gone into her trash cart post haste.

Not that any of her actions had slowed Meph down any. He still frequented her yard and porch, professing his undying affection and trying to weasel her out of tuna. Typical man.

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"Love me, baby, but don't rely on me." She shooed him away again and again as she made her way to her door.

As she reached the steps, her pace slowed. Fear pounded over her. Someone was sitting in the long swing on her porch. Her neighborhood was a good one, but in the city there was no such thing as "crime-free." She clutched her house keys tight, glad of her long habit of threading them through the spaces between her fingers. Damn, this was it! Tomorrow she was making arrangements to have motion detector lighting put in whether she could afford it or not.

The shadow stood, resolving itself into the tall lanky form of a man. Eithne's breath left her in a long relieved sigh. She'd know that figure anywhere. Her father. He stepped toward her, his huge hands held out in greeting.

"Ah, there's my sweet colleen," he said.

Eithne brushed past him, ignoring his outstretched hands. Placing her back against her storm door she regarded him with wary disdain. "What do you want, Daddy?"

James Riordan stuck his fists in his pockets and cocked his shoulder in an arrogant stance. At six feet, four inches there was a lot of James to cock. "I want to take my daughter out to dinner. Is that a crime now?"

"I'm sure you'd know a lot more about crime than me, Daddy."

"That's not fair, Eithne. I was acquitted."

"Only because Mother refused to testify against you."

"That's not true. There was no evidence. They didn't have a case. They didn't have a case because I didn't do it."

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The keys bit into the palm of her hand. She repeated her earlier question. "What do you want?"

"I told you. I want to take you to dinner. Holy Mary, Eithne! It's a beautiful day; a day of celebration. Can't we put our differences aside?"

"My mother cried for years over you. Years! I'd come home from school and find her crying on the couch. Every St. Patrick's Day, I'd find her, clutching some stupid foil shamrock and sobbing. She wore herself out working and crying."

James tossed his dark head. Chagrin and sorrow shone in his blue eyes. "It's true I have a lot to answer for. But how am I supposed to do it, if you won't listen to me?"

"Daddy, I'd think you'd know by now, I have no use for you and your stories. No use for faeries and goblins and 'the wee folk.' No use for St. Patrick's Day or anything else that's Irish. I spit on all things Irish! You, the leprechauns, the shamrocks, even the good saint himself!" She drew up her own shoulders and worked a gob of saliva into her mouth.

Eithne suited action to words and spat. "There! Is that 'auld Sod' enough for you, Daddy? Or do you need something else."

Hurt rode the craggy lines of his face. "For shame, Eithne Regan! Your quarrel is with me, not the Good People or the blessed Saint. No good will come of vilifying them."

"I'm going inside now, Daddy. You have five minutes to get off the porch before I call the police."

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James stalked past her and headed down the steps. "Save your coppers. You won't be needing them. Not this time, at any rate."

He vanished into the night. Eithne's lower lip trembled. She sucked in a deep breath. She would not cry! She would not be like her mother!

James Riordan would never get any tears from her. She turned to the door, intending to put her key in the lock.

The form of the door blurred before her. Her head whirled, and her hands shook. It must be from the emotion and tiredness and a lack of food. She just needed to get inside to the kitchen, drink a glass of milk and fix the chicken, broccoli and ramen noodle dish she had planned for her supper.

The keys fell from her hand. Her gym bag followed them, suddenly too heavy to hold. Eithne swayed and stumbled. When in the hell did her porch become enclosed in fog? A stomach-wrenching sensation swept over her. Her skin crawled along her bones. The frame of her door loomed over her. She could see the light of the door bell, it rode high above her like a beckoning star, then it vanished into a sudden blackness.

For some reason the blackness smelled like a locker room. Thick formless stuff enclosed her. It felt like fabric to her struggling hands. She tugged and hauled it up by the handful, fighting the weight of the junk. Air, she had to have air, or she was going to lose her mind. At last the encapsulating stuff fell away, and Eithne could swallow air in great, gasping gulps.

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A chill breeze wafted around her. To her disbelief, she realized she was stark, staring naked. Not only was she naked, she was standing inside a gigantic sneaker. She put her hands against the leather curve of the shoe's entrance. It felt real enough.

Eithne pinched herself. It hurt real enough. Clambering over the side, she landed on the surface below the shoe. It spread before her, a wide, shiny gray. She turned in a circle. Behind her lay a mountain of fabric that her mind refused to resolve into the sweat suit she had been wearing.

She stood on her front porch, stripped to the spring evening and wondered if this experience was all some bizarre dream. That wonderment almost became her undoing. An enormous shadow prowled the night, slipping up on her on silent feet. The hot draft of its breath tickled her hair, warning her of its presence. Eithne spun around and looked up into a gargantuan muzzle.

"God Almighty!" she swore.

White whiskers stiff as broom straws stood out around it. Lambent yellow and black orbs shone like small moons on either side of a triangular velvet nose. Teeth almost as long as her forearm glistened against the pink of a bottomless maw and a curling barbed tongue. A yowl split the atmosphere with the force of a sonic boom, sending mindless terror crashing through her cataleptic brain.

Eithne screamed and ran. A paw studded with hard, horn scimitars thudded against the floor behind her. The slats of the wooden porch railing towered before her. She shinnied through two of them. Before her lay nothing but open space

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and the budding limbs of the forsythia hedge that ran the length of her front porch. Behind her the cat yowled once again. Without a second thought Eithne launched herself into the void.

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Chapter Three

Pain surrounded her as she tumbled downward, bouncing off the hard, brittle bush limbs. A gory vision of being impaled and helpless before the marauding Mephistopheles swept through her. She tried to draw her arms and legs into a ball, to make herself as small and round as possible. She tucked her head down in remembrance of some long-past gymnastics lesson.

Her landing wouldn't have earned her any points with Olympic judges. Awkward and rigid, it exploded through her with the force of a grenade. She lay against the rough bark mulch of the flowerbed, winded and hurting. She had only enough time to congratulate herself that she was still alive.

Undaunted by her feat, Meph had followed her off the porch. His feet hit the greening grass like the knell of doom. He prowled back and forth in front of the bushes, alert to her tiniest move.

Eithne sat frozen until a dark, knife-ended pad the size of a tree trunk slithered between the branches, fishing for prey. She stood and skittered along the bricks, making for the steps. She had the sense to know if she ran into the open her life would come to an end.

Eithne knew of a crack that ran between the cement of the steps and the bricks of the porch. She had always meant to seal it up. For the first time in her life Eithne thanked God for procrastination.

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She heard the cat keep pace alongside her. About four inches of uncovered space existed between the bushes and the crack. If she didn't cover it before Meph arrived, nothing else would matter. The edge of the forsythia hovered in her vision.

Ignoring the burning anguish and the paralyzing doubt, Eithne reached deep inside herself and called on everything she had. The abyss of the crack rose, Stygian and enticing.

She flung her body into it, landing on her knees and scrambling forward into its depths. She hit a wall. Darker against the darkness, the cat's paw shot in after her, making her skin dimple with the wind of its passing. Meph growled in annoyance at his miss.

Desperate, she felt with her hands, seeking a way out. Her fingers found an opening. She stood and almost screamed in disappointment. The way was narrow, maybe too narrow. Meph growled again, and Eithne crammed herself into the split. Her breasts and belly, back and buttocks shrieked in protest as the tender skin scraped against the rough edges. Flame rolled across her hip as Mephistopheles scored her with one razor claw. Shoving hard, Eithne won through, stumbling forward in the inky obscurity.

She heard the angry hissing and the slamming scrapes as the cat voiced his vexation. Trembling she inched forward, pausing to catch her breath when she was certain he could not reach her. Now what? She had no idea how far she could go before the way ended in the Grand Canyon of her basement. God alone knew what other everyday creatures

lurked in the lightlessness, transformed into monsters by the miniscule matter of size.

She shuddered at the thought of cockroaches the size of Great Danes and pill bugs big enough to use as soccer balls. Eithne bent forward, placing her hands on her knees and drawing even breaths. Her head cleared a little and she straightened. In the blackness before her a light flickered. At first she thought her eyes were playing tricks upon her, but, no, there it was dancing toward her, a ball of cold blue flame.

About the size of a hard ball, the fireball halted before her, hovering in the air at about the level of her chest. Eithne reached out to touch it, but it skipped away in an almost reproachful manner. It moved forward, coaxing her to follow it. Deciding that tagging along after a neon baseball was just one more piece of craziness in a crazy night, she moved after it.

As she paced behind the ball, she became certain she hallucinated. It explained everything. She had passed out on her front porch due to emotional stress, hunger and some unknown virus. She would awaken in a nice, safe hospital bed rescued by modern medicine and IV drips. Chris would come to see her, bringing flowers and chocolates which she would graciously accept....

The ball jogged hard to the right, and Eithne's foot rested on emptiness. As she swayed, the ball swung back and bounced hard against her chest in what she would have sworn was exasperation. It felt almost like a hand, and color flooded to Eithne's cheeks as it pushed her to safety.

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"Okay, okay," she told it. "I get the picture. Look where I'm going."

The ball bobbed up and down in a satisfied nod. The dreamy quality of her journey continued, and her eyes blurred as she followed the undulating ball through the pitch blackness. Eithne blinked as in the distance another kind of light grew. Not blue, but the flickering gold of firelight. It grew and grew until it became an arched doorway that called to her of warmth and shelter. Eithne stepped through the doorway into a room right out of her father's faery tales.

Its ceiling, if there was one, swam in the oblivion above the torches hanging in brackets fastened to stone walls. Living grass, soft and green, soothed her aching feet. Blood-red roses, heavy and pendulous, climbed the archway in tangled profusion. Their velvet petals caressed her shoulders as she passed. She marveled at the size of their thorns.

Tapestry pictures depicting hunts and feasts decked the walls. Axes and swords in silver, bronze and copper, as well as round leather shields whose rivets made fantastic patterns hung beside them. At the head of the room, a huge square chair carved of stone sat upon a raised dais. Behind it floated a sea green banner edged in black, its center decorated with a rearing white horse, a castle and white stylized waves.

Below it ran a long table draped in green brocade. Benches accompanied it. The laden table held all the requirements for a banquet: Meats, cheeses, fruits and cakes stretched out in aromatic perfusion. Eithne's mouth watered. Silver goblets and pitchers, chased in copper scrollwork lined the table in counterpart to the food.

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Far to the left of the room, a massive fireplace covered the wall. Each end of its mantle held a tall silver urn overflowing with corpse-white lilies. Above the center of the mantle the mounted head of a snarling, yellow-striped cat glared at the room with orange eyes. At the sight of it Eithne shivered. Close enough to the fireplace to take advantage of its light, a bench and a shoe lathe sat. The lathe held the soft leather upper of a shoe. A man sat there. In his hands he held a cobbler's hammer and bright golden nails. They flashed in the firelight every time his clever fingers placed them for the rise and fall of the hammer's blow.

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Chapter Four

As Eithne stumbled through the door, he set down his tools and rose to his feet, removing a long brown leather apron as he stood. The backlighting of the fireplace kept his features indistinct until he stepped forward.

"*Céad míle fáilte romhat!*" he said. "A hundred thousand welcomes to you!" Eithne's breath caught in her chest. Never in her life had she been in the presence of such sheer masculine beauty.

Thick red-gold hair swept back in a ponytail from the pale gold rectangle of his face. Bottle-green eyes regarded her with cool hauteur. A long patrician nose rested between two high, carved cheekbones. A wide mouth with a sensuous lower lip curved in hard disdain.

The column of his throat disappeared into a loose, cream-colored, silken shirt with flowing sleeves that brought to mind princes and pirates. Snug pants of brown leather clung to his narrow hips and long legs like a second skin. Knee-high black boots sported heavy buckles of what appeared to be gold at the ankles.

An other-worldly quality clung to him, evidencing itself in the wildness of expression in his eyes, the perfect arc of his cheek and the inhuman grace of the movement when he held out his hand.

"Welcome, pretty one." The dark music in his low, accentless voice enthralled her as no symphony ever had or could. Foreboding coursed through her, and she turned to run

back through the doorway. The roses writhed across the opening like the tendrils of some strange beast. Eithne cried out in frustration and swung back to the man.

"You'll not escape my hospitality that easily, *mo chroí*, my heart."

"You're not real." Eithne clutched at straws.

"Ah. You doubt your senses. Come, touch me, little mortal. Or perhaps it would be more telling if I touched you?"

The thought of him touching her sent fire racing through her veins. "Who are you?"

"Come now. You mean to say you don't know me? You knew our kind well enough to spit on our name earlier.'

"No, that's not possible."

He laughed, and the sound rang through Eithne's bones like a deep, tolling bell. "So determined." He held out his long-fingered hand. "Come, lady. We must find you something to wear. I confess I find your present state of attire far too tempting."

Blushing, Eithne approached him but avoided his hand. He laughed again, and she shivered. They crossed the room to a large wooden chest carved with intricate Celtic knot work that shone with gilt. From it he drew a flowing gown of vivid blue velvet, as light and soft as a spring cloud. He held it out to her, and Eithne took it, stroking it with reverent hands.

"How did you make this fabric? Velvet is usually heavy."

"If I said 'magic,' you wouldn't believe me."

"Don't be too sure of that idea."

"Dress yourself," he commanded. "I have been a stranger to passion too long and you are fine of body and fair of face. I

will not have it said that I acted out of hand in your case." The leprechaun gestured toward the table. "You hunger. Let us eat."

As she shrugged on the gown, her stomach growled. She followed him to the table and started to sit down. From the depths of her memory came her father's voice reading a story. *Brigit took the cup from the elf's hand and drank. And in that instant her fate was sealed. She would never leave the lands of the faery again.*

She stopped. "No, thank you."

His smile set her pulse pounding. "So you do remember the tales. They'll not help you. You can't escape."

"That's not true. You can't hold me here."

He shook his head. "We'd best get this over with. I'm famished, and a feast waits. I would not be denied too long."

As he strode toward the raised dais, he peeled the shirt over his head. The sculpted muscles of his back made Eithne's mouth go dry. She itched to run her palms over them.

He snapped his fingers, and a brocade tunic of green and gold fell from the air into his hands. He shrugged it on and followed it with a belt of beaten gold links. He removed the knot work fastener from his ponytail allowing the hair to fall to his shoulders in a rain of waves and curls.

Its red-gold gleamed like burnished metal in the torchlight. As he mounted the platform, he placed a thin gold diadem centered with an enormous emerald upon his head.

By the time he seated himself, the cobbler had vanished, replaced by a grave, unsmiling prince. A large brown field-

mouse emerged from the shadows and crouched at his feet like a dog. His hand fell to its head in an absent-minded caress. It glared at Eithne with dark, knowing eyes that held a sly, hostile contempt. With a toss of her head, Eithne returned its stare.

"You stand before me," the leprechaun said, "to answer for your wrongdoings."

Eithne went and faced them. "Who are you to judge me?"

"I have been given the right, as an Elven Knight, to punish certain wrongs. You are a hard, cold woman. Angry and proud. You wound the hearts of others to soothe the ache in your own." He waved his hand, and Chris appeared, standing to the left of the dais. "This man bore you no ill-will. He only wished to see your smile, hear your laugh. Yet you answered him with malice. Spurned him and your heritage, as well. Do you contest it?"

Eithne looked into Chris' blue eyes, and for the first time she noticed the hurt there. "No," she whispered.

Chris vanished with another wave of the leprechaun's hand, to be replaced by the image of her father. James regarded her with longing and love, tempered with no little pain.

"This man gave you life. True, he wronged the woman who bore you. He came asking your forgiveness. You denied it to him, and you again abjured your heritage. Is that not so?"

"Yes." Eithne hid her face in her hands.

"Look at me, woman!" She did so. His eyes burned with green fire. "And last, you called upon all the rancor in your heart and spat upon the lineage you bear, the magic folk of

the land of your forebears, and a man so good and true his God granted him the canon of sainthood, though none of them had injured you in any way. Do I speak the truth?"

"Yes." She spoke in a monotone, her voice flat and tired.

"Then I say to you, Eithne Regan Riordan, that I know your true nature and I hold your true name. By my power as a Prince of the Folk of the Air, I say that you will remain in the lands of the Faery bound in my service for a hundred years and a day in payment for your proud manner and hard-hearted crimes."

"You can't be serious! I didn't understand. I didn't know!"

"You cannot claim ignorance. Your mother taught you kindness and love. Your father taught you imagination and magic. You know full well what you have done is wrong."

"I do know. I won't do it again."

"So say all who break the laws and are caught. I do not believe you."

"What can I do to make you change your mind?"

"Do you sue for mercy? You, who showed none?"

"Yes."

He cocked his head and steeped his hands beneath his chin. "I am moved. More by your youth and beauty, than by any sincerity on your part. I will limit your servitude to this night, but only if you will consent to strike a bargain."

"What bargain?" Eithne tried to keep her head clear and her voice even, to not appear too eager.

"It is long since I have had feminine companionship. I will allow you to leave my domain with the rising of the sun, if you will give me either the pleasure of your body to use as I

desire, or the solace of your soul to assuage my loneliness once you depart."

"You've got to be kidding."

He frowned. "I assure you, I am in no way delivering baby goats."

"Joking."

"Ah. I do not jest. I will make a pact with you, if you will give me what I ask."

"You won't keep your end of the deal. You people never do."

He laughed. "So you remember your father's lessons, do you?" He sobered. "I will swear to you upon Manannán mac Lir, Lord of the Faery, and Lugh the Lightbringer, his foster son, that you may leave here after only one night, if you will freely give to me your body or your soul."

"What's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"The trouble, the problem. What will I lose?"

"The Fey are superb lovers. If you give me your body, you may find that no mortal lover can ever satisfy you."

"And my soul?"

"Your life will be forever barren. You will never achieve your heart's desire. On your death, the doors of the Afterlife will be closed to you, and you will wander the Earth as a lost soul."

"Damn, damn, damn, damn," she swore. "You people really know how to put the screws to somebody don't you." Eithne blushed at her choice of words.

He grinned. "We give good handsel," he said.

"Yeah, I bet you do."

He yawned, a huge, jaw-cracking yawn. "I grow weary. And hungry." He purred the last word. "My patience approaches an end."

"What's your hurry? You've only got until the end of time."

"The bargain dwindles, Eithne."

"Okay. No way do I want to be here a hundred years. And no way do I want to be a ghost. Sex is no big deal. People do it all the time. 'Earth girls are easy,' right?"

"I wouldn't know. Mortal women held no sport for me."

"Oh yeah. Then why take one now?"

"A thirst for adventure brought me to this land long ago. I came over hidden in the pocket of an Irish refugee. The ocean crossing was a terrible thing. It nearly killed me. The Folk of this new land are few and far scattered. I've had no woman for some time now, as I told you. So I choose not to examine a gift horse too closely."

He stood and stepped down from his throne to loom before her. Eithne looked up into his handsome face and her heart stopped. It resumed beating, a wild and desperate throb that left her trembling.

"So, you give to me your body this night, and I return you to your world in the morning?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"Good. Let us seal the bargain, then." He spit into his hand and held it out to her. Closing her eyes, Eithne did the same, and when their hands clasped, a wild and wayward power ran over her, leaving her weak and yearning. The leprechaun released her.

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"To the food at last. Pádraic, tell the others the banquet begins. Come, Eithne. Come, Aindréas." He took her hand and motioned to the mouse. It gave her a dirty look and charged to his side, knocking her away. He clipped it between the eyes with his fist. "Here, now, Aindréas! Mind your manners, or you'll get more than the back of my hand."

He led her to the table and seated her on the bench next to him. The mouse skulked after them.

"What is he?" She gestured toward the animal.

"Aindréas? He is a man. Or he was until he offended me. Unfortunately for him, mortal men held no charms for me. He's served me for more than fifty years now."

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Chapter Five

A gust of air ghosted over her. Eithne watched invisible hands lift a pitcher and fill her goblet. The leprechaun gestured to the empty air. "For Pádraic, here, it was much the same. He has only five years to go."

For the first time in many years, empathy for a man swept through her. "Why don't you let them go? Surely, they've paid enough."

"No, Eithne. They made their mistakes. It's for me to decide when they've had enough. I'll hear no more on it."

Eithne returned to her plate. The food was fine and flavorful, but she had no taste for it, nor for the golden wine dancing in her goblet. She sipped at it without relish. "So, what's your name?"

He chuckled. "You'll not catch me that way. I'll not give you power over me."

"Well, what can I call you? Hey you, your highness, your lordship, what?"

"Call me Roe."

Roe. Irish for "red." "It figures."

Roe grinned, his mocking, impudent grin. "Here, *mo chroí*, try this. I think you'll like it." He offered her a tidbit, and he was right, she did like it. Roe continued to coax her to eat and drink, even getting her to enjoy it. No mean feat, considering the guests that drifted in to join them at the table.

A ground squirrel and a shrew, a gigantic toad and a pencil slim garter snake made up the animal contingent. The biggest

black and white Japanese beetle Eithne had ever seen took the bench beside her with a flick and a buzz.

None of them distressed her as much as the figure that was half Plains Indian warrior and half maggot-ridden corpse. Eithne shook with terror, until Roe's rich voice murmured to her, "Pay him no mind. You are under my hand. None here may harm you. Look only at me."

Drawn in by the spell of his words, she obeyed, and the revelers troubled her no more. Roe held her hand, stroked her fingers, brought them to his mouth and lightly kissed them.

He touched her in no other manner, wooing her instead with whispered endearments and flavorful bites, delivered into her mouth with skillful fingers. The wine flowed, and Eithne's head began to swim. When she looked into Roe's eyes, passion rose within her, and Eithne longed for the meal to come to an end.

At last Roe lifted his goblet and bade Eithne lift hers. "To the night," he rumbled.

They drank, and Eithne countered, "To the morning after." They drank again.

Roe flung his goblet to the floor and stood. He held out his hand to her. "It is time."

The simple phrase thrilled her as no flowery speech could have. Eithne got to her feet, wrapped her fingers in his and willingly followed him into the night.

They walked down obscure corridors, lit only by the ball of blue flame Roe conjured and cast into the air before them. They moved in a dream until they reached a wooden door

carved with roses stained in red and inscribed with a sigil of glowing silver.

Of its own accord, the door opened before them. Roe swept Eithne into his arms and carried her through it. A sultry spring breeze, ripe with a whiff of raw earth and verdant growing things, enveloped them. A bed, its canopy and four posts twined with the crimson roses and hung with delicate spiderwebs, rose before them. Brushing the cobwebs aside, Roe placed her upon petal-soft covers. He stretched out beside her. The sooty scent of rose perfumed the air, and in the darkness whispered words and gentle touches burned.

He called her *a chuisle mo chroí*, the pulse of his heart. When her hymen broke and she cried out, he soothed her with ardent kisses and named her his soulmate, his *anamchara*. Eithne had no discourse to describe the things she felt, no language to fall back on. She expressed her need with her lips and tongue and with tremulous, doting hands. She denied him nothing he asked for and accepted everything he offered.

A thunderstorm rose in the wee hours. Eithne lay tangled in Roe's arms and legs, watching the lightning ignite the sky as drops of water beaded the fine lines of the spiderweb curtain. The clean fragrance of rain washed over them. Eithne wept then, not for anything she had lost or might lose, but for everything she had gained. Roe said nothing, only drank her tears and built the fire within her again.

Treacherous time passed. All too soon, the tentative chirrups of sleepy birds broke the stillness and heralded the

coming of morning. Eithne stirred. Roe sighed and ran a soft caress over her hair.

"Soon, *mo chroí*, soon," he said.

"How can I leave you?" she protested. "How can I go, knowing what I now know?"

"*Wisht*, a bargain is a bargain, Eithne. You have paid, and now I must keep my end. Back you must go."

"I'll never see you again."

"Ah, but you'll take away something of mine with you. A secret of the leprechaun almost none ever learn."

"What is that?"

"It's what the great poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Englishman though he was, said. 'Love is the only gold.'"

"Is it?"

"Yes. Sleep, now, Eithne." Roe pressed a kiss just above her left breast. He whispered, "And when you wake, wake knowing *gráim thú, mo chroí*. I love you, my heart."

Powerless, Eithne closed her eyes.

She woke in her own bed, certain she had just experienced the strangest dream she had ever had. It wasn't until she dragged her aching body and fuzzy head into the shower that she discovered Roe had left a lover's token: A small red stain in the shape of heart bloomed on her skin where he had pressed his lips to her breast.

She remembered its meaning in the weeks that followed. Its message carried her through as she made her amends. She smiled on her co-workers and treated them with respect. She accepted several dates with Chris, and even let him kiss her a couple of times, though her heart wasn't in it.

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Eithne feared what Roe predicted was true. He had loved her, and now no other man could move her. As if he sensed this feeling, Chris stopped asking her out, but he continued to smile and tease her, and his eyes had lost the hurt and puzzled look they used to hold whenever she was around him.

Eithne called her father and went to dinner with him. She and James still hadn't quite forgiven one another; the wound ran too deep between them. But they were working on it, and Eithne discovered she enjoyed hearing of the early days of his marriage to her mother. Perhaps one day they would recover the closeness that had been between them.

While sorrow was no stranger to her, Eithne held fast to Roe's statement she had carried off the only true gold a leprechaun had to offer and to the promise of his whispered words.

Surely being loved by a prince of magical cobblers couldn't be a bad thing, even if right now her heart felt as if it were being torn apart. She took a week off work early in the summer and went to the mountains. Their vast solidity reassured her, and she returned to Jefferson, Whiteside and Funke more at peace with herself and the world around her.

To her chagrin, the first thing that happened was she tripped in the new, kicky Manolo Blahnik heels she had bought on her vacation. Eithne landed on her butt right in front of the water cooler. A sickening crack told her the Blahniks would never be the same.

"Oh, mother of God," she swore. A low, amused sound answered her, sending a thrill right down to her bones. As she stared at a black leather man's shoe with a gold buckle, its

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wearer bent his knees and hunkered down to pick up and offer her the broken pieces of her right high heel. Eithne kept her eyes on his long fingers, afraid to look into his face.

"You must be Eithne, the other Irish I keep hearing about. That's something we have in common." When she didn't reply he continued. "I'm new here. My name is Kane. Ronan Kane. Everybody calls me Roe."

Eithne gazed up, her heart hammering.

Laughing green eyes framed in shaggy red hair met hers. "I like a woman who isn't brought down by a fall. I can fix the heel, but I'm here to tell you I know where you can get a better pair of shoes."

The End

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A little bit about the author:

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I've been writing since grade school when I did a crossover fan story between The Beatles cartoon and The Man from U.N.C.L.E. TV show. My first original novella, Stephanie's Fantasy, involved an ordinary girl and a guy who was a half-elf.

As a young adult I wrote a lot of fan stories about Star Wars: A New Hope and about several different TV shows. More years ago than I of them care to remember, I joined WARA where I learned to write romances, specializing in those with a fantasy, futuristic and paranormal bent. In 2007 I made my first professional sale: A short story titled "A Time to Die" to The Magazine of Unbelievable Stories.

I continue to work on stories and novels about "the weird stuff" and on adult-oriented romances. My love of writing fan stories lives on, and I still post "fanfics".

I live in Wichita, Kansas with my husband, daughter, son and a menagerie of critters in a too small apartment crammed with books, movies and video games.

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