

Lucky in Love

By Pam Ripling

“I told you, I’m a terrible bowler,” Bella muttered as she turned away from yet another gutter ball.

“Aw, you’ll get better. You just don’t bowl enough,” Stacey assured her. “You can’t expect to be ace when you only come down here once a year.”

“I only came because you begged me to sub.” Bella sat down and offered a weak smile.

Chad, her today-only bowling partner, squeezed her shoulder as he approached the lane. “We’re just happy you were able to come.” He proceeded to throw his third strike in a row.

Bella sighed. Chad’s usual partner, Sheila, was out of town; by most accounts, she was a top bowler with a nice shelf full of trophies. Bella would certainly damage the team’s league standing.

“Can I get you a beer? They’re green today, you know.”

Bella looked up at Chad. Handsome, all-American guy. Black hair that was probably due for a cut, striking blue eyes that could coax a kitten away from a bowl of milk. “No, thank you, though.”

“You sure? It’s tradition. I can’t say it will help your game, but…”

“But it couldn’t hurt my game, right?” Bella looked up and lifted her eyebrows.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Chad smiled and sighed. “Whatever.”

Bella watched as Chad walked away toward the bar, which was richly adorned with cardboard shamrocks, rainbows, and pots of gold. The tables were littered with gold foiled chocolate coins and shiny green confetti. She glanced down at her worn green t-shirt, then to the others in the league with their green wigs, overalls, tutus and knee-socks.

“I’m such a bore,” she muttered.

“Your turn, Bella!” Stacey hollered over the music, which was much too loud for Bella’s taste.

“Got it.” Bella approached the ball return and picked up her loaner ball. She stood at the throw line, held the ball steady in front of her. *Careful. Maybe this time I won’t sink it.*

“Aim slightly to the left. You tend to hook it right,” a voice beside her urged. The words were grizzled, like that of an old man. Bella looked over and saw no one, so went back to aligning her shot. “And you’re a dorn off from center.”

“A dorn? What the heck?” Bella again looked to the side and caught movement at the ball return. There, in the opening where her ball would soon appear, stood a little man in green. A gasp caught in her throat. She quickly looked around to see if anyone else was viewing what could only be called a leprechaun talking to her.

“You gonna throw that ball or what?” someone called from behind her.

She looked back to the leprechaun.

“To the left,” he repeated. Bella swallowed and swung the ball back, then forward, and released.

“No!” The leprechaun leaped down and started running as fast as his short legs could manage, chasing the ball down the alley until he caught up with it just a yard short of the head pin. He came alongside and gave it a nudge, correcting its course just enough to effect a perfect strike.

Bella’s jaw dropped and she slammed her hands over her gaping mouth. She spun around to see the shocked faces of her temporary teammates.

“Wow! Look at you!” Chad commented, offering her a high five.

“Did you see that?” Bella asked, incredulous at what had just happened. She turned to Stacey. “Did you?”

“I didn’t think it was going to hit! Way to go, girlfriend!”

“No, I didn’t mean the strike. I meant, you know, the little guy.”

“What little guy?”

“The little green guy. The leprechaun?”

Stacey laughed and passed by Bella to take her turn. “That’s malarkey,” she said over her shoulder. “

“Malarkey,” Bella whispered, and sat down. She looked around for her little green friend, but he was nowhere to be seen. Stacey picked up a spare, her partner David was robbed with a split, and Chad chalked up another strike. Bella stood and retrieved her ball. Once again, the small Irish gnome appeared.

“This time, try right. You threw left last time.”

Bella nodded slightly and lined up her aim. Swing, release. The ball took a slow journey down the middle before beginning a lean to the left. The leprechaun slapped his face with his palm and then began sprinting down the lane, again making a slight correction to the ball resulting in another strike.

And once again, no one had seen him but Bella.

“Huh,” Bella murmured. It *was* St. Patrick’s Day. She *was* Irish. Her grandmother *had* told her many stories about the little bearded fairies of the Aos Sí in Irish folklore.

When her turn came around again, she looked for the little man on the ball return, but he wasn’t there. With a nervous sigh, she lined up her shot. The leprechaun suddenly appeared, standing on her right arm. Strangely, he had no weight. But he was panting.

“Look. I canna do that every time! I’m naht as yooehng as I used to be! Here. Let’s try this.” He stretched out on her arm and wrapped his around her wrist, subtly turning it. “Now, let go when I say!”

Not surprisingly, Bella threw another perfect strike. And while the rest of her game was not perfect—two spares and one 9—Bella had the time of her life.

Chad caught up with her in the parking lot. “Wow, you really stepped up your game.”

“Just takes practice,” Bella lied. She glanced around for evidence of her small helper. “And a little beginner’s luck.”

“We’re the lucky ones.” Chad smiled. “Thanks for filling in for Sheila. See you some time.”

“Yeah. Right.” But not really.

Bella did not see her wee friend again that day, or the next. On Friday afternoon, Stacey called. “We’re having the team party tomorrow night. We’d like you to come.”

“I’m not on the team.”

“So? You saved our butts the other night. You are a part of our big win. We got the championship. So come, please?”

“I really don’t think—”

“You don’t think. But we think. Please. Come.” There was a pause, then Stacey added, “Chad’s hoping to see you.”

“Chad? Don’t exaggerate just to get me there.”

“No exaggeration.”

Bella hung up after agreeing to consider joining the party. She stared into the bathroom mirror and ran a hand through her dark auburn hair, noticing how dry and lifeless it looked. She hadn't had it “done” in months. Not since her breakup with Jesse. It didn't seem to matter; if he didn't want her, why would anyone else want “Jessie's girl?”

She went to her closet and perused her clothes. Everything was old, outdated, ill-fitting or just plain ugly. As she pushed hangers left and right, a garment fell to the floor. A sapphire blue blouse shot through with tiny silver threads. The kind of top that would look good with black palazzo pants or holey blue jeans. She picked it up and couldn't remember buying it. Holding it up against her body, she checked out its look in the mirror. Not bad. She then looked for, and located, her newest jeans and tossed them onto the bed.

Maybe. Maybe she would go. She had a decent pair of brown leather boots, and she would switch purses. She retrieved her black handbag from the doorknob and dumped it out on the bed, then found her brown bag in the closet and began filling it. Wallet, hairbrush, keys, lip balm, hand sanitizer. A few miscellaneous receipts. An appointment card for a teeth cleaning. Gum, breath mints, eyeliner, mascara. From the bottom of the bag she picked out a few stray pennies and a business card.

Bella frowned. She didn't recognize the green and white card from “Rosie O'Braidy's” hair salon. “Cute name,” she said aloud. She turned the card over and saw words written on the back. “Saturday, 11:00 AM, with Molly.”

“What?” This couldn't be right. She'd never even heard of the salon, much less made an appointment with them. Yet the address was only a block from the office where she worked. Why hadn't she seen it before? No matter, she'd just call them and cancel. And then she noticed; there was no phone number on the card. She could just ignore the card, or she could stop by and cancel the appointment in person.

Bella decided on the latter. Saturday morning, she pulled her hair into a ponytail and attempted to curl it with a curling iron. She went grocery shopping, hit the post office and then drove to the address on the card. She'd already decided to blow off the team party anyway.

The sign on the building reflected a triad of shamrocks on one end, a little pot of gold on the other. Of course. She went in.

“You must be Bella,” a woman said with a smile. “You’re a bit early, but I can take you now. And what lovely red hair! I can’t wait to get started. I’m Molly, by the way. Pleased to meet you!”

“Uh, yeah, Bella, but I was just stopping in to—”

“Cancel. Yes, I know. But you musn’t. Lucky insisted I make you stay. Would you like some coffee with Irish Cream?”

Bella’s lips parted in surprise. “Lucky?”

“Our mutual friend. Surely you remember him? A little on the short side, gruff demeanor but a heart of gold. Oh, and a pot of gold, besides! Ha!”

“You’ve seen him? The leprechaun?”

“Seen him? He’s family. He’s taken a real liking to you, Bella. Now…” As she spoke, Molly casually walked Bella to a chair. “Let’s get this figured out.”

“A liking to me?”

“Think of him as your fairy godfather.”

Bella nodded vaguely and allowed Molly to tie a cape around her. “Okay,” she murmured. “Too weird, but okay.”

Molly was a miracle worker. When Bella left the shop, her hair was trimmed and full of shiny, sexy curls. Of course, the bill had been “prepaid.” Bella began to wonder about this supposed pot of gold.

She drove home in a fog of wonder, glancing occasionally into the rearview mirror at her “look.”

“Yes. You look beautiful.” The leprechaun was sitting beside her headrest. “But you were already a looker.”

Startled, Bella, quickly glanced to the side. “You scared me! Don’t do that!” Fortunately, the light was red.

“What you lack is confidence.”

“I don’t know how you think you know me, little man. I have plenty of confidence.”

“Yes ‘n your bein’ alone and miserable proves that?”

Bella felt her anger rise. But what was she doing? Talking to an imaginary character? Letting this fairy tale being get under her skin? She decided not to engage him or perpetuate the fantasy. Real or not, he was downright annoying.

At home, Bella turned in front of her mirror. “Maybe I *will* go to that party.” She slipped on the blouse and changed her jeans, then pulled on the boots. A few extra minutes on her makeup, and she was off.

He followed her back into the car. Before shifting into drive, she turned to him—he was now sitting in the passenger seat, ridiculously strapped in with the gargantuan seatbelt across his tiny chest—and warned: “You keep quiet.”

“You like conversation when you drive. At least you do plenty of talking on your own.”

Bella grimaced, but said nothing. It would be pointless to argue. Especially because he was right.

She stole looks at him while she drove. He seemed very busy, making notes in a tiny journal with a stub of a pencil. “Are you really called Lucky?” she finally asked.

“Aye, and I’d call you lucky as well for coming to the top of my list.”

“What list?”

“Not yer business.”

“Are you always this crabby?”

“I have a difficult job.”

Bella couldn’t help a smile. “I feel sorry for you.”

Lucky ignored her, continuing with his note-making. Bella found the pizza restaurant and turned in to the parking lot. “You going in with me?”

“Of course,” Lucky answered, tucking his notebook inside his jacket. “And I’d advise you to behave.”

“*Me?*” Bella responded, closing and locking her car door. Lucky was now ensconced in her purse, his small head peeking out.

“Yes, you. You’d be wise to do as I tell you.”

“And what are you going to be telling me?” Bella slung the purse over her shoulder, smushing the leprechaun down into the bag. His response was muffled.

“... smile, flirt... laugh... asking you... next weekend...”

“What?” But Bella had swung open the restaurant door and the noise level prevented her from hearing Lucky’s response. She looked around, then caught a wave from Stacey in the doorway to a private dining room in the back. Bella forged forward.

“Hi everyone,” she greeted, following Stacey to the back of the room. She put her purse down and casually peeked inside it, but Lucky had again disappeared. Stacey introduced her to Sheila, the bowler she’d subbed for.

“So, *you’re* the one who saved our bacon!” Sheila announced, and Bella was quite sure those still in the parking lot could hear her. “They said it was a miracle, the way you went from gutter-ball queen to head-pin hottie!”

Bella couldn’t help but color, but she smiled before turning back to Stacey with a pleading look. Stacey got the message. “Let’s look over the salad bar,” she offered, and Bella gladly followed her. “Sorry about Sheila,” Stacey said, picking up a pair on tongs. “She’s just... loud. But she’s got a big heart.”

“Well, if it’s as big as her mouth—” Bella began, but stopped short as she felt a sharp jab to the side of her neck. She turned her head to the side and was chin-to-face with Lucky, who’d just kicked her.

“Now, now, Isabel Little. You’d best be workin’ on yer manners.”

“Get off,” Bella demanded, trying to brush the little man from her shoulder.

“Get off, what?” Stacey frowned, then moved past her toward the croutons. “Were you talking to me?”

“No, no, just... never mind. This looks good.” Bella tried to focus on the many selections of greens but looked cautiously around for her green friend.

“It is. We’ve come here before.” Stacey perused her plate. “Well, I’m all set.”

“You go ahead. I need to get dressing and uh, you know, toppings.”

“I’ll save you a seat. And don’t let Sheila bother you.”

Bella took her time building her salad, throwing quick glances back toward the table where the twenty or so people laughed and drank and nibbled. Three were unloading small plastic trophies from a box, examining each one and commenting to each other. Another woman was unboxing a quarter-sheet cake. Bella walked around to the backside of the salad bar and drizzled ranch dressing and a few sunflower seeds on top of her plateful of romaine.

“Ah, c’mon. Be adventurous. Maybe some peppers? Mushrooms? Olives?”

Bella turned around and almost collided with Chad. “I’m... kind of a... minimalist when it comes to salad.”

“Well, then. Good thing there’s pizza coming. You, you do eat pizza, right?”

“Yes. But no onions, or pepperoni, or anchovies.”

Chad licked his upper lip. “I see. Cheese pizza, all the way.”

Bella looked down and smiled. “Yeah. I guess so.” She wasn’t used to seeing Chad in this setting. He looked even more gorgeous tonight than in the bowling alley. He didn’t seem to know what else to say; he turned back to the salad bar and began heaping on beets. “You, uh, you aren’t shy with the toppings,” she offered, feeling lame.

“I do like to graze a good salad bar. And I have to admit, my pizza of choice is ‘the works.’ But don’t judge.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of—”

“I was just kidding.” He looked down at her anemic plate. “You got all you want?”

“Yes.”

“Great. I saved you a seat.”

“Oh, but Stacey already...” she paused, feeling a sharp tug on her earring. With an inward groan, she tried to look to her shoulder, but Chad had gently cupped her elbow and was leading her to a booth. As they walked, Bella looked to Stacey and discovered that Sheila had taken the seat reserved for Bella.

“Tst tst!” a small, raspy voice whispered.

“It’s a little bit quieter over here,” Chad said. “Sheila’s a great partner but I swear sometimes I can hear her in my sleep.”

Bella slipped into the booth and put down her plate. “Really?”

“I guess you’ve noticed.” He rubbed at his ear and then cleared his throat. “But on another note, do you think you’d be interested in joining the team?”

“I, uh, I’m not really a bowler.”

“Like hell you’re not.”

“I mean, it was just a fluke. I don’t think I could do that again in a million years.”

Chad smiled, his eyes soft and focused on hers. “You know, it doesn’t really matter. It’s all for fun.”

“I’m not sure there are any openings.”

“I would make room.”

Bella felt her face grow warm. The conversation had turned decidedly personal, and she felt like fleeing. Instead, she picked up her fork and stabbed at her lettuce. Chad leaned back in

the booth and let the moment pass. “Well, it’s Friday nights, and some Sunday afternoons. The alley gives us a good discount on balls & shoes, if you decide to do it. Not gonna push.”

“Tell him yes. Tell-him-YES!” Lucky’s small but stern voice echoed in her head.

“No!” she whispered.

“Excuse me?” Chad paused, a forkful of salad midway to his mouth.

“Sorry, I was just muttering to myself. Bad habit.” She gave him a weak smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“Take all the time you want.” Chad reached back and smoothed his hair. “I just need to know by a week from Monday.”

“Oh. That soon?”

“Well, yeah, I have to let the league know.”

Bella nodded. She had no intention of joining, so decided it would be better to tell him outright. But before she could explain, Chad grimaced and grasped the back of his neck with a groan.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Just have this little pain in my neck.”

“Maybe you injured it while bowling?”

“Not sure. It’s okay. Um, I was wondering... you want to get together next weekend? They’re having that street fair in downtown Newhall, you know, it’s a block party, with booths, a band, dancing, bar. I’ve been wanting to hit that up.”

Bella’s lips parted and she stared across the table at Chad, who was now subtly rubbing his hands on his thighs. Bowling was one thing; she’d proven a value to the team. But a date? A real, honest-to-goodness date? How could that be?

This time, it was the opposite earring that pulled. “There’tis. The ask. Now, you answer. Go on, tell’im you’d love to go.”

Bella reached up and fingered her earring. “What?” she murmured.

“What?” Chad asked. “Did you say something?”

“No, I mean, yes, I asked what... what is the theme at the block party?”

“Oh! I believe it’s a St. Pat’s theme. A little late but it’s still March, after all.”

Bella nodded, then gasped as Lucky suddenly appeared on the table in front of her. She looked quickly at Chad, who seemed to be staring right at the little leprechaun but obviously couldn't see him.

“Last chance, Missy. Do you not understand how hard ‘twas for the lad to get up the courage to ask ye?”

Bella looked from Lucky to Chad, who was giving her that sweet, sincere smile again. “I’d really love it if you’d come.”

“Um, sure. Yeah. It sounds like fun.”

Poof! Lucky was gone and Chad laughed in apparent relief.

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After the pizza, after the cake, after the awards for the best-of and worst-of, after the inebriated toast by Sheila and the heartfelt speech by the team captain, after saying goodbye to Stacey and a reminder to think about joining... Chad walked Bella to her car.

“I’m so glad you made it tonight. I admit, I was hoping you’d be here.”

“I almost didn’t come.”

“What or who changed your mind?”

Bella shrugged and leaned back against her car door. It was dark now, and the neon pizza sign flashed overhead, lighting up the shine on Bella’s curls. Chad sighed.

“I must be out of my mind, but I have a powerful need to kiss you right now.” The pain in his neck had gone away. He watched her closely for concession. She covered her eyes with her hand briefly and giggled.

“I guess you’d better, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

He didn’t understand what she meant, but it didn’t matter. He leaned down and kissed her, gently at first, then fully absorbing the soft willingness of her lips. Bella’s arms slowly slipped around his neck, and she perpetuated the moment.

At last, he pulled his mouth away but tightened his embrace. Just holding her in his arms completed his moment, his world.

“So, I’ll see you Saturday night,” he finally managed.

“Yes. You will.”

“Okay then.”

Chad sat in his car until Bella's had exited the parking lot. He started the ignition and pulled on his seatbelt. "Whew." He blew out a breath and then grinned.

Beside him, Lucky fastened his oversized seatbelt as well. "I told you she was worth it, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. But did you have to stab me in the neck with your pencil? I probably got lead poisoning!"

Lucky ignored him and pulled out his notebook, drawing a line just below the last entry.

THE END