

Green is the Darkness, Green is the Light

Deep in the earth, the darkness might have been overwhelming. And so strange! With the underground pools and water dripping through ancient rock formations with bits of sunlight here and there, the shadows were a strange and eerie green.

Well, green . . . it was the color for St. Patrick's Day! Angela Hawkins reminded herself. And they'd come out here originally to take the day and add it in as a short getaway for the two of them! With co-workers and friends out here, it was perfect.

Had been perfect. Now . . .

*Now the life of a child was at stake.*

She was accustomed to heading to strange and unusual places but being deep in the earth was new to her. Of course, she wasn't completely in darkness. She had come with a powerful flashlight, and she was able to shine the glow upon the strange walls of rock and history she searched through. And Jackson would be behind her soon, but time was expedient right now, and so she had plowed down into the earth alone.

Strange, of course, because there were many incredible underground places here in New Mexico that were massive tourist attractions. Bandelier National Monument. While they hadn't managed to get there yet on their supposed mini vacation, she knew through Jackson that the place gave a visitor a deep and fascinating look at the dwellings and lifestyle of the ancestral Pueblo people. Then Carlsbad Caverns National Park was a wonder of geography with caves and rock formations and much more.

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But the terrorist who had stolen Luka, Robert and Vera Miller's little nine-year-old boy, had somehow known about this . . . this place. This massive hole in the earth that had yet to be discovered by the state's tourism board.

And it was fascinating. Except for . . .

A strange fluttering sound followed by an eerie screech gave her a heart-thumping pause—until she saw the bats, probably as frightened by her as she had been by them as they flew overhead.

Crazy! And tomorrow was St. Patrick's Day, and they'd had a great party planned with a few of the other agents who had been working in the area along with their families. But of course, in their line of work duty came before any celebration. And Jackson had been funny, offering to go on the hunt without her since she was probably more "Irish" than he was. But while his dad might have been Cheyenne, his mom was English and maybe a bit Irish, though it was true—her ancestry was "more" Irish.

And still, she had reminded him, everyone was Irish on St. Patrick's Day!

"Ah, St. Patrick, where are you now?" she murmured to herself. She needed help. It was coming but the clock was ticking. The kidnapper had promised to kill the boy by dusk if his father didn't deliver the security codes by five o'clock. Naturally, all that was usual in such circumstances had come with the threat. The boy would be dead if the police were involved and if every demand wasn't met.

But the kidnapper had made what might prove to be a clue along with the tail-end of his threat.

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“The boy will sleep in guano forevermore, forgotten in all the ancient realms of history.”

A picture of the terrified child had been sent to the Millers. And while it had been a close-up of the terrified, crying boy, Angela had worked on the image since learning so much tech manipulation through the years. She'd been able to tell them that Luca was being held underground. Because Robert Miller had known Jackson from a high-profile case Jackson had worked with him and the NSA well over a decade ago, pre-Krewe of Hunters. In fact, Robert and his family had been invited to their St. Paddy's party; and thus the man, terrified for the life of his son, had managed to “casually” find Jackson at the hotel bar where he and Angela were vacationing and desperately beg them for both silence and help. As parents themselves, they understood and also understood equally that Miller was a wreck. The codes the kidnapper wanted might have been enough to launch World War III. Therefor Robert couldn't give up the codes.

But neither could he let his son die. Nor did he dare let it be seen in any way, shape, or form that he'd gone to the authorities.

That worked out. Because the Krewe had developed all kinds “coding” of their own and could gain help if needed from the Krewe back in D.C. while being ridiculously careful. But as it had happened, a very old friend of Jackson's father lived in the area; and there was little chance that Jackson and Angela meeting with or speaking with him could send alarms in any direction.

Jackson had told Angela he had no idea how old the man was, but he was remarkable, still straight as an arrow, dignified, and totally lucid. She had met him high on

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his tribal mount while Jackson had found a place to leave the car, and they had barely exchanged hellos before her new friend had pointed out the almost invisible entrance into the untouched labyrinth of caverns.

He'd grinned when he'd explained to her that his name *really* was Thunder Wolf—Pueblo people often named their children after the elements, animals, and plants. Long ago when the white world had come upon his, the family name they went by had become Wolf due to the pet wolves his father kept. And he had been named Thunder because of the violent storm going on the day of his birth.

Angela loved Thunder Wolf from the first time he'd cracked a smile. He had amazing dignity and humor, a headful of silver-gray hair that fell down his back in a long braid, and the ability to mix dignity and humor along with charm and intelligence. His eyes were a light green, prompting Angela to think that Thunder Wolf, like Jackson, had a mixed heritage; somewhere in the history of his family, Native Americans had mixed with Northern Europeans, creating the wonderful mix of cultures that could exist so beautifully in the United States.

But they couldn't chat.

Looking back toward the car, Angela hadn't seen Jackson heading towards them.

And looking up at the sky . . .

She'd known they were running out of time.

And thus, she had started out alone. Thunder Wolf might be in remarkable shape for a man of his age, but the treacherous slants and twists here had not been modified—no steps had been added—for tourists as had those places so many visited.

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And she was fine. She had never been in caverns like these . . .

But Florida had offered some incredible wonders when it came to water and caves. Most of the caves she'd visited in the Sunshine State called for swimming, snorkeling, or diving; but she was happy with all three.

Here . . .

She didn't have to be, but she was alone. And the eerie green darkness seemed to hover around her like a living thing.

She had never travelled into any of the New Mexico caverns, but she assumed that this unknown hole had to be much like those which had become amazing geographical tourist destinations. She's read somewhere that about two-hundred and fifty million years ago, the known caverns had been a coastline for an inland sea which made them incredible to researchers who could find ancient remains within the rocks in all their various formations. She knew that limestone made up some of the amazing stalagmites she was seeing, and there might even be an inland pool . . .

There was one stretching before her!

It was just touched by the light from above, casting it into an eerie font of green shadowy light, beyond which were all manner of little pockets within the rock. She walked carefully toward the water, watching the ground as she moved. There was something on the ground near the edge of the green water, and she bent down to retrieve it.

A Poke-Man card!

Yes, Luka had been brought here! And he was smart! Of course, his father was a brilliant man, his mom just as excellent in her position as a high school teacher.

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He had purposely left a trail for someone to follow.

Walking around the shallow green pool, Angela saw that there were several formations before her, all leading around into darkness, into further trails, perhaps into dead ends . . .

A slight whisper of sound caused her to stop. She blinked against the darkness, lifting her lantern high.

There was something . . . someone . . . ahead of her!

Then gone!

Angela drew her Glock, ready for whatever she encountered. Whoever—whatever—it had been, it had slipped around a large standing rock that led on to darkness and a dead end or another trail. She approached carefully, light in one hand, gun in the other.

Then . . .

She heard it. A crying sound, a moaning . . .

As if someone lamented in deep pain.

Carefully, she looked around the corner. And she saw a woman.

She was small, maybe about five-five and perhaps somewhere between the ages of sixty and seventy. Her hair was a silvery-blue, popular decades ago, perhaps coming back; and it was styled in little ringlets around her face.

She was wearing a pretty green dress that was cinched at the waist and fell almost to her ankles, a style that might have been worn in the 1930s or 40s.

It took Angela a flash to realize that her clothing probably had been bought back then—the woman was dead.

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She lowered her head again, hands folded in prayer, and she began to moan again, an oddly melodic sound that still whispered of death.

“Please! Stop! I need help,” Angela said, setting her Glock back into the holster at her waist just beneath the fold of her jacket.

“What?” the woman stopped moaning and spoke the single word, staring at Angela as if she were the ghost.

“Please! I need help. I believe there’s a boy down here—”

“Yes! Aye, of course! I know he’s here! I got lost in the first maze of trails. But yes, he’s down here with that bloody thug who is brandishing his knife ‘neath the poor lad’s nose every other minute! There were two of them, but only the one remained; and I . . . I can’t, I believe they followed this route which is why . . . You see me, lass?” she demanded, breaking off with her surprise and confusion.

“Indeed, I do. My name is Angela, Angela Hawkins Crow, and I’m with the federal government and—”

“No!” the woman cried. “I heard them, and I believe they mean what they say—if a copper arrives, if Robert doesn’t get the code thing that they want . . . they’ll kill him! They’ll murder that special boy!”

Angela wondered a few split seconds if she was seeing things, hearing them, in the strange green darkness. The woman spoke clearly and well, but she still had the remnants of an Irish accent in her choice of words and enunciation.

“Do you know these caves? Pardon me, but how—”

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“How can I be here? Aye, I know these caves. Me good man Jimmy McSorley had work with the park . . . until the great war. He served the United States as a new citizen, he did. But we came in 1917, not long after the Easter Rebellion in Ireland . . . it wasn’t safe, he a Protestant, me a Catholic . . . and us not caring. But well, wars are never really over religion. Religions teach us not to kill, but men will be men and use them for hatreds over land, power . . . I do go on now, and I can’t. So, aye, love, I’m an Irish ghost, an American banshee, if you will. Moira McSorley is my name. And . . . banshee be my game!” she assured Angela.

“An American banshee,” Angela murmured.

“What?” the banshee demanded, “you didn’t think that banshees might immigrate along with their families?”

Angela smiled. “I’m sorry! Of course.”

“Ah, lass! The Irish population is around six to seven million souls, but the world population with Irish ancestry is reckoned to be fifty to eighty million! And as the saying goes, dear lassie, everyone is—”

“Irish on St. Pat’s Day!” Angela finished. “Of course. But—”

“The lad!” Moira McSorley said passionately. “The lad . . . he’s my great, great—many greats! Grandson. I have watched his father weep; I have seen his tears—”

“And now, we must get back to your great-great-whatever great grandson and get him out of here before the sun falls completely!” Angela told her.



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“Shine the light this way and follow me!” Moira said. “Ye know, I’ve been praying to our good St. Patrick! And if ever he could intervene . . . well, he will bring my prayers to those who need to hear them! He will be with us!”

Angela prayed that she was right.

“Shine the light!” Moira repeated.

Angela nodded and lifted the light, showing them a rocky trail that stretched out before them.

“Ye’re armed!” Moira said.

“I am.”

“Ye’ll need to be ready!” Moira told her.

Angela drew her weapon again.

The ghost, just walking a bit ahead and to the right of Angela, smiled and turned her head to tell her, “That thing would not ha’ done ye’ much good agin’ me!”

“No . . . and I’m thinking. When we hear them, find them, you go again and give me the lay of what the kidnapper is doing. What I can’t figure is how he intends to communicate. Cell phones down here are worthless. Oh, well a cell phone—”

“Ye needn’t go on, lass! I’ve been haunting this land a long, long time!”

“Gotcha,” Angela murmured.

She stopped dead, certain that she heard something. It was ahead of them.

Stifled tears? A shuffling?

It was coming from behind another set of jagged rocks.

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She looked at Moira. Moira looked at her and nodded, ready to proceed on ahead while Angela found cover by edging behind the rocks.

But even as walked to make her way into the darkness of the continuing trail, a man emerged. Forties, a T-shirt, jeans, jacket . . . a phone in his hand.

He was cursing at the phone. Eloquently.

But he was also so furious over the phone that he didn't seem to be brandishing any kind of a weapon. And from what Moira had told her, he was alone down here with the boy. He had an accomplice, but apparently the accomplice was above ground.

Trying to retrieve the codes they wanted.

Moira nodded to Angela and hurried on, anxious to reach her descendent whether the boy could see her or not.

She took aim and stepped from her position just behind and to the side of the rock.

“Drop it!”

The man stared at her, stunned. Then he laughed. “Drop it? Is that what they teach you in cop school? Drop it? It's a phone!”

“That's right. Drop the phone. Put your hands behind your head—”

“Oh, hell no! Who do you think you are?” he demanded.

“The federal agent who is going to take you in for kidnapping and attempted murder—and treason,” Angela assured him.

“You? Just you?” the man demanded.

She shrugged. “I have a partner down here somewhere. But as of now, yeah, me, just me. Do what I ask you. Don't make me shoot you.”

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“It’s not over and it’s too late!” the man told her.

Angela sighed deeply. “Do it!” she commanded. “As I said, please, don’t make me shoot you. The paperwork is ungodly!”

For a moment, he looked desperate. Angela knew that it had all been a bluff—except that he was deciding he was far stronger than her; and when she came around to cuff him, he’d get her.

There would be a bit of awkwardness there. She set down the flashlight, keeping her grip firm on her Glock, her eyes hard on him.

“Come on, girlie, come on, come on!” he taunted.

She smiled and used her now free left hand to pull cuffs from her pocket.

“Fingers laced behind your head,” she told him.

“What the hell is that? Are you taking me with . . . plastic? What do I look like, salami on rye?” the man demanded.

“Trust me, these work,” Angela told him.

“Zip-tie restraints! Go figure. I like it. Easy to break!” he said.

“Not so easy. Trust me. Get them on and then you can see if they’re easy or not,” Angela advised.

“Confusing!” he told her.

“Ah, come on, I really don’t want to have to shoot you!” Angela told him.

But as she spoke, the ghost of Moira McSorley came hurrying around from the large outcropping of rock.

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“No, no, no!” the ghost cried. “The other is back! He’s back there, back there with Luca, and he’s in a temper, he’s going to come out and . . .”

Two.

She was going to need to do something and do it quickly. If the second man in this duo of kidnapping terrorists had returned, she was left with little choice.

“Sorry!” she told the man facing her.

She took carefully aim and caught him directly in the left kneecap.

The man screamed in horrendous pain, forgetting that he had been enjoying all the taunting of her that he had been doing.

But of course, that immediately drew out his co-conspirator, a man with his gun aimed at Angela already.

*But while she was facing his weapon, she was grateful for one thing—the boy wasn’t with him. The sound of her shot had so surprised him that he had walked right out.*

“Get me help!” the man now sobbing on the floor, clutching his broken and bloodied leg screamed. “Get me help! She shot me! I need—”

“Shut up! Shut up!” the second man, evidently the alpha in their duo, screamed in reply. He was older, late forties, early fifties, but like the first man, very average looking. About five-eleven or so, medium build, jean and long-sleeved pullover. Sneakers—like anyone might wear while crawling around the terrain here.

“I do shoot,” Angela said.

“But can you shoot faster than I can shoot?” he demanded.

“I’m ready to find out,” she assured him with a shrug.

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“No, no, no,” Moira McSorley murmured. “Help, there’s help, I’ll lead the way!”

Angela felt a little chill as the ghost whisked on by her.

“First, who the hell are you? What do you know?”

“I know that you two are sick bastards to threaten the life of a child,” Angela told him.

“So, he did it. The fool did it. He told people his kid had been taken,” the man said.

She shrugged. “I’m just a friend.”

“Not a cop—just a friend with plastic cuffs and a Glock?”

“I am a friend.”

“Too bad. Because when you’re dead, I am going to kill the kid. The idiot couldn’t just give me the codes—”

“So, you could cause World War III?” Angela demanded. “I hate to tell you this, but our lives—all of our lives—are nothing compared with the millions of people you could kill with those codes,” Angela told him. “Regretful as that is! I rather like living. But what you’ve done . . . wait! How did you even find out what Robert Miller did for a living? No one knows except those who work with him and those who are with the NSA.”

“You don’t know anything!” he countered.

“Well, I do now. You are a traitor. The worst kind. You swore an allegiance to our country and . . . you’re going to kill a kid as warning to someone else you intend to pressure into giving up important information on our satellites, weaponry, and military. You are the worst!”

The man on the floor screamed in pain.

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“Help me, I need help!” he cried.

“I can get you help as soon as your friend puts down his weapon,” Angela assured him. “And, hey, it’s almost St. Patrick’s Day! You can survive this—”

“If you don’t both shut the hell up, I’ll just shoot him, too!” the alpha man assured them both.

“Hm, you’re in trouble! Shoot him and I’ll shoot you,” Angela said.

“How about I get the kid and shoot him first, right in front of you?”

“You’ll never get that far,” Angela promised him.

“Help me, now!” the man on the floor screamed.

“Shut up!” the alpha roared.

“I’m in agony and bleeding, and I don’t give a damn about anything if I’m going to die from this!” the man on the floor cried, his voice filled with his sobs of pain.

He had plenty of time for help, Angela knew. She’d shot to wound, not to kill.

But his sobbing was distracting the alpha, so that was good. Except . . .

The alpha had had it. He turned with his weapon in a flash, aiming at his co-conspirator. Angela had no choice; she managed to fire first.

The alpha went down, Angela’s bullet in his shoulder.

But he still had his weapon. And it was aimed at her.

But before she could get a shot off, another resounded loudly in the cave and the man’s gun went flying . . . flying far from his grasp.

Angela spun around.

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She smiled, relief filling her. Jackson had found their position in the labyrinth of rocks and caves.

He'd found her in a very timely manner.

He strode to her with fast, long strides then held her tightly for a brief second, and then assessed their situation.

"Thunder Wolf has a team coming right behind me; EMTs. Figured someone was going to need help down here. The kid . . . Angela, the kid, where's the kid? Is he all right?" Jackson asked.

Angela smiled and nodded, indicating the rock behind them and the men on the ground. She was a good agent, good at what she did, helped along by that bit of impossible DNA that allowed her to see the dead. But Jackson . . . tall, always in incredible shape, a strong leader while still a man capable of the deepest empathy . . .

Jackson was now and always, in her mind, the best partner.

In all things.

"What?" he murmured.

"Just thinking about you, how good you are."

"Nice," he said.

"With your timing! With your timing!" she assured him, grinning. "I haven't seen Luca Miller yet, but he's all right. Moira was with him and . . ."

The ghost was rushing by her.

She grinned at Jackson. "I take it Moira found you and led the way and she's headed back to the boy now."

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There was a shuffle of sound and then a cacophony of it as one of their federal counterparts, along with a group of EMTs, made their way toward them.

“You get all this going; I’ll check on Luca,” Angela said. She turned and hurried behind the rocks. She found the little boy seated against the hard wall of the cavern, filthy, face stained with tears. Moira McSorley’s ghost was next to him, whispering words of comfort, not caring if the lad could hear her or not.

But when she hurried toward him, he looked up with hope and helped himself to rise, using the wall of the cavern with his hands to push up. He started toward her and then hesitated, and she quickly told him, “Luca, it’s all right. I’m a friend of your dad’s. Friends are all here now. You’re going to be okay.”

He rushed into her arms, sobbing again, but tears of relief and joy. Angela held him, trying to reassure him.

“It’s okay! We’re going to get you to your parents—”

“His parents are here!”

She turned to see that Luca’s parents had, indeed, made it to their position in the caverns. She released Luca quickly so that his mother and father could fall to their knees, both slipping their arms around their son, holding him tightly.

Robert Miller looked at her with incredible gratitude in his eyes.

“We can’t begin to—”

“I have kids, too!” Angela assured him. “Please, um, get Luca past all the . . . commotion and back up to the daylight. Or the moonlight, whichever it is now!” she told them.



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They nodded.

Vera Miller paused, sobbing, giving Angela a fierce hug.

“It’s okay! It’s really okay,” Angela assured her.

“Come on, son, we’re going to get you home!” Vera said to Luca.

They started out.

But Luca turned around and gave Angela a hug again. “I could hear you . . . You’re really cool,” he told her.

She grinned. “Thank you, Luca. Thank you!”

They left. While Angela stood still for a minute, she was sure that they rushed him by the men on the floor.

The ghost of Moira McSorley came to her, smiling. “Ah, lass! Seriously, their must be some Irish in ye ,and I’ll be thanking the good St. Patrick that he sent you along!”

“Biologically or through heredity, yes, I’ve some major Irish in me,” Angela assured the ghost. “But as to all the DNA testing . . . I’ve never done it. I know my folks, where they came from, and my grandparents . . . and if anything went on before that, maybe I don’t want to know about it! I’ll be thanking St. Patrick, too!”

Moira McSorley laughed softly. “Good St. Pat! Well, we’ve all got both black sheep and those who are just about saints in our make-up somewhere,” she said. “I have been blessed to watch my family for years now; and I couldn’t be prouder than I am of Robert and the work he does for his country, just as my beloved husband did. And I’ve been back to Ireland! Beautiful now, and so much better! You should go—”

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“Oh, I’ve been! And I love Ireland. In fact, I met my first banshee there while helping out a cousin!” Angela told her.

“How wonderful!” Moira said. “Well, I can’t thank you and your incredible husband enough. And oh! You must thank that wonderful Thunder Wolf who helped you find this place. You have saved us from such terrible torment!”

“We’re always so grateful when we have a good outcome,” Angela assured her. “And trust me, I will thank him.” She smiled. “And since his special day is tomorrow, once again, thanks to our good St. Patrick, of course!”

“Born in Briton, taken as a slave . . . returning to Ireland as a free man to bring love and giving to all! Aye, he must have been with us today!” Moira said.

Angela nodded, stepping around the great boulder that had led to the dead-end enclosure where the men had been holding Luca.

She looked across the rocky terrain. Jackson was still busy with the paramedics, working with them to get the man with the blown kneecap on a stretcher, helping lift it and set it with the EMTs in a way that they could maneuver over the rocky terrain.

“I’d not be rude, not after all, but . . .”

“Go! Go and see your family!” Angela told her. “Go!”

They headed out; and Angela stood for a minute, waiting until a local agent and the EMTs had gotten both downed men on stretchers and started out.

Angela looked at Jackson, shaking her head. “I never knew their names!”

“And we’ll probably never know the real intent. What I did learn before losing communication in my search for you is that their names were Carl Pierson and James

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Grant—Grant was the man I shot. He'd been fired about six months ago but he'd been in a position to know that Robert Miller was the highest in security in the NSA that a man could go. He also knew Robert was a family man. He studied the family until he knew that Luca Miller had soccer on Thursdays, and he could slip in with the crowd of parents and get the kid away, telling him that his folks were in the parking lot, then throwing him into the back of the van. Thanks to you discovering the rock formations in the picture—”

“And Thunder Wolf knowing where to search!”

He nodded. “But you were supposed to wait for me!”

“I couldn't. It was getting dark. And you know—”

“That you're not a fragile female and you don't need saving. But you've had my back plenty of times.”

She grinned at that. “We need to get ourselves out of here. And finish the paperwork tonight! Tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day—and thanks to Luca being well and with his family and the local brains figuring out just what happened by who and why, we can still have our party!”

Jackson smiled and agreed. Since several agencies had been involved, the paperwork took them into the wee hours.

They were finally able to shower, and Jackson reminded her that they were supposedly on a bit of a vacation and the shower lasted very, very long—and very, very . . . fun . . . and then they were finally able to sleep, and sleep late since Mary Tiger had come along. She'd see to it that their children got their breakfast.

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The day dawned beautifully; the weather was strangely perfect where they were, a pleasant day in the seventies.

They took the kids to a play put on by a local Irish association and it was great. And when it came to early dinner time, the party they'd arranged for a conference room at their hotel began.

“Happy St. Paddy’s!” went around again and again.

Thunder Wolf was there, thanking them for ordering non-alcoholic Guinness for him since he'd given up drinking years ago.

They thanked him, and he lifted his beer to them.

“Happy St. Pat’s! Maybe the good saint was around yesterday, who knows? Anyway, I’m grateful and I’m celebrating and . . . seriously! Happy St. Pat’s! Because, as you know, everyone is Irish on St. Patrick’s Day!”