

THE KING OF ELFLAND

BY CHRISTINE POPE

ILLUSTRATIONS: JANE BURSON

There was something under the house.

Taylor had heard the sound for the past couple of nights—a stealthy shuffling noise. At first she thought it might be rats, and then maybe a raccoon. She almost said something to her mother and then decided that would be pointless—her mom would be certain to tell her she was imagining things or that she was making up stories because she'd never wanted to move out here to Lake Forest in the first place.

Well, that much was true. Everything had been much better in the city. She had friends. She had a life. Here? Not so much.

Anyway, tonight maybe she'd have a chance to go down into the basement and take a look, since her mother was going out on a date. Taylor thought this was a spectacularly bad idea, as her parents' divorce had only been final for a few months, but of course no one was going to ask for her opinion.

Even now her mother paused in front of the mirror above the side table in the living room and fluffed at her newly streaked hair. Taylor hated the streaks; they were way too light and made her mother look as if she was going gray. But the shrink, that annoying Dr. Carmody, had already counseled Taylor about her supposed negativity. A snotty remark right now about how crappy her mother looked wasn't going to help her cause any.

"I shouldn't be too late," her mother said. Her purse sat on the table, and she stopped her primping long enough to pull out her cell phone and check the charge. "Don't bother checking the computer; I've already locked it down." She

turned away from the mirror and extended a hand. "Your phone."

Taylor didn't even try to muster a sigh. She'd already learned that tactic didn't work. She dug her phone out of the pocket of her hoodie and handed it to her mother. "Like it makes a difference."

"We've been through this."

"Uh-huh." Taylor stalked over to the sofa and picked up the remote from the coffee table. One good thing about this move—her mother had finally popped for a big LED television and Blu-Ray player. It didn't quite make up for the loss of the internet, but it was better than nothing.

At that moment the doorbell rang, and her mother hurried out of the room and down the hallway to the entry. A male voice echoed off polished travertine, followed by her mother's higher tones, and then two sets of footsteps came closer. Taylor scowled. Great. So her mother was going to introduce her to the jerk.

Because she knew she'd get a ration of crap if she didn't, Taylor hit the mute button on the remote and then stood up. Her mother entered the living room, followed by man wearing a sport coat and khakis. He was tallish and had sandy hair and wasn't totally repulsive, but Taylor still disliked him on sight.

"Taylor, this is Brent Sanford," her mother said.

Brent. Ugh. What a fake, yuppie name. "Hi," Taylor said. She didn't bother to put any enthusiasm in her tone.

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“Hi,” he said. He looked a little confused, as if he couldn’t quite figure out why he deserved such a listless greeting.

Because you’re not my father, jerk-off.

Her mother said quickly, “We’re having dinner in town, so if anything comes up—”

“I’ll be fine,” Taylor cut in. She didn’t know if that was the truth or not, but she did know that she hated it when her mother started hovering. Best to get her and her “date” out of the house as quickly as possible.

“That’s my girl,” her mother said, in the tone Taylor hated. It was way too hearty and rah-rah. Besides, Taylor knew there were days when her mother wished she wasn’t her daughter at all.

Luckily she didn’t seem inclined to linger, but just picked up her purse and led Brent back down the hall to the front door. Probably she wanted to get away as quickly as possible, off to a restaurant where she could drink a glass or two of chardonnay and pretend she was still young and sexy and didn’t have a daughter who seemed determined to thwart her at every turn.

Taylor made a face in the direction of the hallway where they’d disappeared, then went back to the couch so she could retrieve the television remote. She’d just picked it up and pointed it at the TV when she heard the noise again. A soft scrabbling somewhere below the floorboards, followed by silence.

It had to be a raccoon. It sounded too big for rats, and somehow a raccoon seemed a little less scary. Stupid house anyway, with its raised foundation and huge, shadowy basement. Her mother had made noises about turning the basement into a rumpus room, but her plans hadn’t gotten very far. Besides, who exactly did she expect Taylor to “rumpus” with? They’d been here almost two months, and so far Taylor was batting zero when it came to making new friends. Not that she wanted to, anyway; the friends she’d left behind in Chicago were the

only ones she ever wanted. And her mother was full of crap for saying that they were “a bad influence.”

Anyway, back in their condo in Chicago, Taylor hadn’t had to worry about basements or things moving around in them. Their subdivision here in Lake Forest lived up to the name. You could barely see the neighbors for all the trees that crowded around each house. The suburban forest made Taylor feel claustrophobic in a way the city never had, but her mother had dismissed her complaints, just like she ignored everything else that Taylor thought was important.

Well, fine. There was something under the house, and she was going to find out what it was. She didn’t think a raccoon would attack her, and if it turned out to be rats after all, they’d probably scatter when she turned the lights on anyway. At least there *were* lights down in the basement, although she made a detour into the kitchen to get a flashlight out of the bottom catch-all drawer before she made her descent.

The steps down into the basement were located at the back of the house, inside the service porch. There wasn’t a door, just an opening in the wall next to the washer and dryer. Taylor had never liked the setup, since it seemed as if anything could come up out of the basement whenever it felt like it, but that was silly. There was a door at the foot of the stairs, although it didn’t have a lock.

She flipped the light switch next to the stairs and headed down. Every other step she paused and listened intently, but she didn’t hear anything. Maybe her mind had just been playing tricks on her. Maybe there wasn’t anything down there after all, and she really was going crazy. She was sure Dr. Carmody would love to find out that she’d been hearing things. He’d probably pump her full of Paxil or lithium or whatever it was shrinks gave people to make them calm and biddable. Screw that.

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Once she reached the bottom of the stairs, she tightened her grip on the flashlight and then reached for the doorknob. It felt cool and ordinary beneath her fingertips, and turned easily enough. The door swung inward.

Immediately she hit the switch. A pair of ugly faux-Tiffany hanging lamps cast a yellowish light into the basement, and Taylor gave the room a quick once-over. She didn't see anything out of the ordinary, although she did wrinkle her nose as a damp smell hit her nostrils.

What a dump. The previous owners hadn't done much to finish the place except put up some drywall and rusty-colored indoor/outdoor carpet that matched the Tiffany lamps for hideousness. Her mother was going to have to spend a ton to turn the basement into the rumpus/media room she'd been talking about. Well, she could probably afford it, what with the alimony and child support. Taylor knew that money didn't go to improve her own lifestyle, that was for sure. She had to beg for days just to get a new pair of jeans.

Although the lamps overhead cast out most of the shadows, they didn't illuminate all the corners. The room was roughly L-shaped, with odd little cubbyholes at its far end. And from one of those far corners came that same rustling noise, although much louder. It almost sounded like a shoe scraping against the wall.

Suddenly this didn't seem like such a great idea. Taylor swallowed against the lump in her throat and raised the flashlight, then pointed its beam into the shadows at the far end of the room.

She saw a glint of gold, and then a pale face turned toward her. His features, even in the unsteady illumination of her flashlight, looked almost too perfect. Then he spoke.

"A rescue at last."

Taylor knew she should run, should just go back up the stairs and use the land line in the

kitchen to call the police. You weren't supposed to take strange men in your basement in stride. If he could be called a man. He only looked a couple of years older than she was, a senior or maybe a college freshman at most. His cheeks were smooth, unshadowed by the stubble that some of her fellow classmen had begun to produce. He wore a dark-green long-sleeved shirt, and slim brown pants covered his legs. His feet were bare.

"What are you doing in my basement?" she asked, and hefted the flashlight in her hand. It was one of those heavy aluminum jobs. It would work pretty well as a club.

"That is the question, is it not?" He writhed a bit, and for the first time Taylor noticed his ankles were tied together with heavy cords that gleamed weirdly beneath the light from the overhead lamps. If she didn't know better, she would have said those cords were made out of silver. "Usurpation and betrayal, my dear girl."

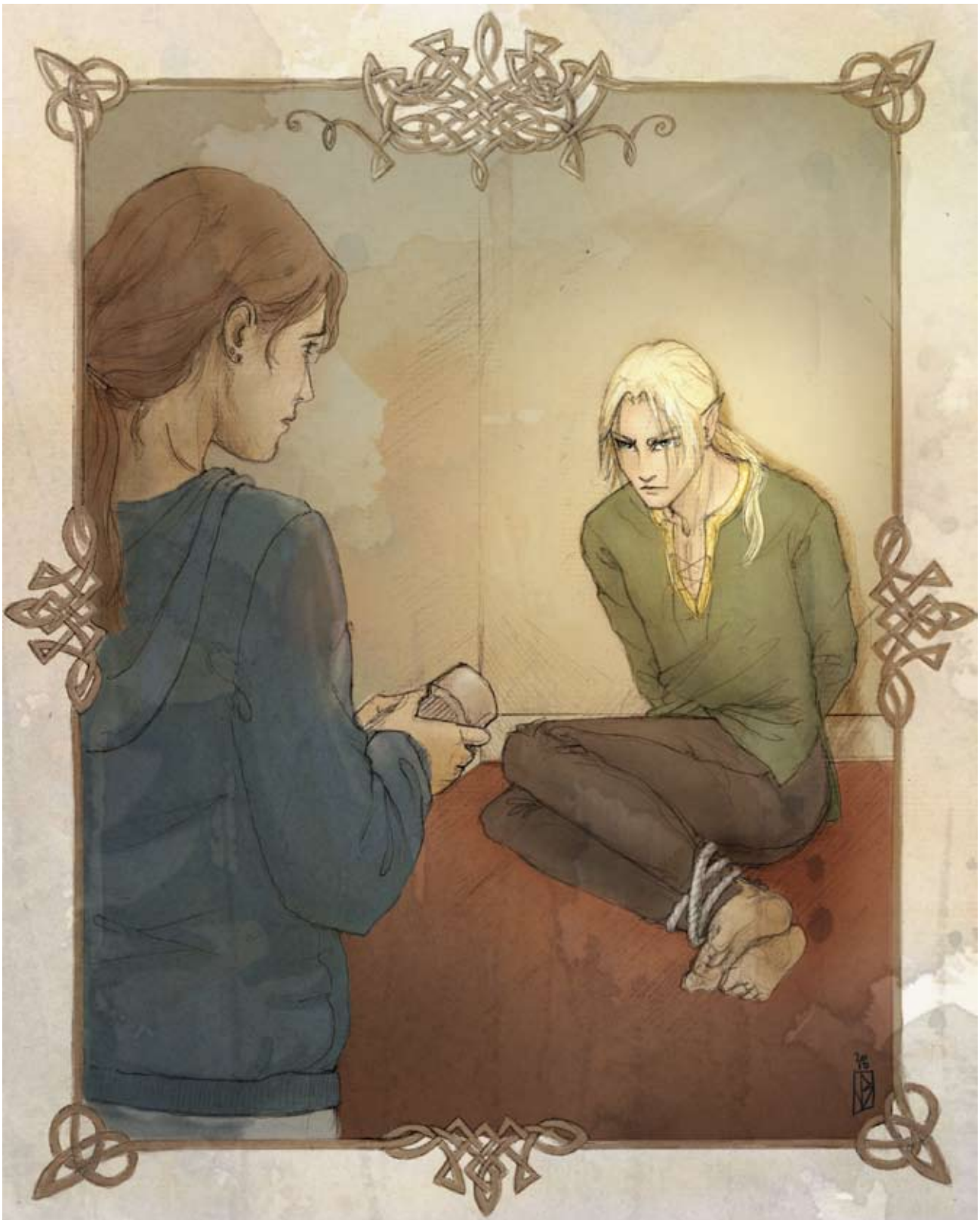
"Usur—betrayal by who? Who put you in my basement?"

"Someone I thought a friend." The stranger's writhing had brought him to a more or less kneeling position; his hands were hidden behind his back. Maybe they were tied up with more of that weird silver cord.

A grim thought had begun to form in Taylor's mind, and she crossed her arms and glared down at the stranger. "Very funny. So who put you up to this? I know you're not from the high school. Do you go to the Academy?" She thought that made sense; the intruder's formal diction sounded about like what she'd expect from one of the Lake Forest Academy's over-achievers. Her mother had tried to enroll her there first, but Taylor's grades hadn't been good enough.

"The Academy?" A frown marred the young man's perfect brow for a second or two, and then he laughed. "You think me a student? Those days are long behind me."

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“Oh, come *on*,” Taylor snapped. “I’m not that stupid. You can’t be more than a couple years older than I am.”

He tilted his head and smiled. “My dear child, I’m older than you could possibly imagine.”

“Oh, really?” She met his smile with one of her own, the sticky-sweet one she knew her mother hated because it was as patently false as the streaks in her hair. “How old are you?”

“My people don’t bother with years. Older than the city you come from. Older than the trees that surround this house. Old as the very rocks upon which it’s built.”

Of course he was lying, but something in his matter-of-fact tone sent an odd little chill down Taylor’s spine. He was impossible, really, this person who looked like something off a movie poster, all air-brushed and perfect. And if he’d been down in the basement for the past few days, how the hell could he still be so immaculate?

“I’m going to call the cops,” she said, and then hated herself a little bit because the words came out sort of shaky and wimpy, not at all cool and tough the way she’d intended.

“I would advise against that.”

“Of course you would.”

“Not in the way that you think. They would find nothing, and perhaps you would cause yourself some grief by calling them out here on what they would surely perceive to be a wild-goose chase.”

“Right.” She paused, and narrowed her eyes at the stranger. “What do you mean, they’d find nothing?”

“Only you can hear me. Only you can see me.” He smiled again; his teeth were as white and perfect as the rest of him...although, now that she peered at him more closely, she thought the canines looked just a bit sharper than they should be.

“Yeah, sure. And why is that?”

“Because I’m the King of Elfland.”

This time she laughed, because obviously the guy was crazy. Maybe she should refer him to Dr. Carmody. If anybody around here was in need of medication, it was Golden Boy.

“That’s a good one,” she replied. “If you were going to play a trick on me, you could at least have come up with something believable.”

“The very fact that it is so unbelievable should tell you that I am telling the truth. Otherwise, I would have told you something far more plausible.”

There had to be a flaw in that logic somewhere, but at the moment Taylor couldn’t find it. “So you’re the King of Elfland. Why are you in my basement?”

He sighed. “As I said, betrayal and usurpation. A king always has enemies, you know. As luck would have it, your home sits on a sink.”

“A what?”

“A dead place. My powers are at their lowest ebb here. I was bound with silver, and concealed in your basement. He could not kill me, of course, but he thought I would remain hidden. He did not count on a true seer dwelling in this home.”

“True seer?” Taylor said. Of course the whole thing was nuts, but she figured it couldn’t hurt to play along for a little bit. If nothing else, this sure beat watching a repeat of *Gossip Girl*.

“You. Even among mortals, there are those who can pierce the veil of illusion and see the truth of things. If your mother, for example, had come into the basement, she would have found nothing but shadows. But you—you, Taylor, are something else altogether.”

She’d never told him her name, of course. But if he’d been put here as part of some elaborate prank, she guessed the perpetrators would’ve told him her name. That scenario was beginning to seem less and less likely, though.

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Sure, she hadn't made any friends at Lake Forest High School, but she didn't think she'd made any enemies, either. She just drifted from class to class, not caring. In some ways, she was just as invisible to the other students as this King of Elfland claimed to be to other people.

"Yeah, I'm special, all right," she said. "So what now? I find something to cut those cords, and you go off and live happily ever after?"

"I would that it were so simple." He hesitated. "It is not something I can ask of you. I will think of something else."

"Why can't you ask it of me?"

He shook his head. "Enough, for now. If I may ask a boon, it is that you bring me some water and perhaps something light to eat. Bread, perhaps."

"My mother doesn't do carbs," Taylor replied. She didn't know what a boon was, but bread and water were easy enough to understand. "But I'll find something."

"I thank you for that." He rewarded her with another smile, and Taylor found herself smiling at him in return before she hurried from the basement to fix him a snack.

She didn't stop to think why she'd suddenly decided he was not an intruder at all, but a victim...just like her.

Her mother returned around eleven, and Taylor said nothing about the stranger in the basement. She'd given him crackers and yogurt and some bottled water. As she'd guessed, his hands were bound behind him, and so she'd had to feed him the crackers one by one and spoon the yogurt into his mouth. Once again she asked why she couldn't just go get the garden shears and see if she could cut the silver cords that held him fast, and he'd only shaken his head sadly and told her that wouldn't work. Not too long afterward she heard her mother's high heels clacking on the kitchen tiles, and

Taylor had to hurry upstairs before she got caught. As it was, her mom gave her a few sharp words about roaming around in the house after hours, since Taylor was supposed to be in bed by eleven.

She deflected the reprimands with the ease of long practice and went upstairs to wash her face and brush her teeth. These ordinary activities only drove home to her the complete weirdness of the evening. Was it really possible that some supernatural stranger was being held captive in her basement? She wanted to think it was a trick, but after being close enough to feed him, her certainty had begun to desert her. That poreless skin wasn't a trick of the lighting; it was just as perfect a few inches away as it had been across the room. And the glint of gold in his hair wasn't something she'd ever seen in a regular human being. The best dyes in the world couldn't produce that kind of metallic gleam.

So, okay, maybe he was the King of Elfland. She wondered why taking off those silver cords was so impossible—or at least, something he didn't seem inclined to discuss with her. Well, they'd have to do something about it at some point. He couldn't stay in the basement forever, could he? It was obvious that he needed or at least wanted to eat. But what about his other needs? Did elves not have to go to the bathroom?

Taylor wasn't sure she really wanted to think about that. The evidence seemed to suggest that they didn't, or the King would have been lying in a pool of his own filth. Nice trick. And his skin looked clean and his breath didn't smell, so apparently elves didn't have to take showers or brush their teeth, either. No wonder humans were always trying to get into fairy kingdoms in the stories her mother used to read to her, years ago when they were still a real family.

How she was supposed to get the King out of her basement, she didn't know—but if

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she somehow managed to pull that off, maybe she could ask if he'd take her with him. At the moment, Elfland seemed like a much better place to be than Lake Forest, Illinois.

Luckily, she had about an hour of freedom between the time when she got home from school and when her mother came home from work. Taylor dumped her backpack on the kitchen floor and hurried down the stairs to the basement, where she found the King still huddled in the corner, his head resting against one of the low shelves there. Last night there hadn't been time for her to go get him a pillow or some blankets, and her mother had been annoyingly omnipresent that morning before they left for school and work.

"Sorry I couldn't get these for you sooner," she said, and knelt on the thin carpet next to the King. She spread the blanket over his legs, making sure it covered his bare feet, and sort of awkwardly squashed the pillow between his back and the shelf.

"You are very kind," he told her, and smiled. His eyes were as green as the emerald in the ring her mother always wore.

"Oh, I don't know." She hesitated, then asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Not very. What you gave me last night was enough to sustain me for some time."

Well, that would explain why he hadn't seemed too concerned when all she'd been able to scare up for him was yogurt and some crackers. At least she wouldn't have to worry about her mother noticing a steady stream of food disappearing out of the pantry. However, even if the King was invisible to normal mortal eyes, Taylor certainly wasn't. She knew that her mother would notice if her daughter suddenly kept disappearing into the basement for no good reason. Tomorrow was Saturday, which meant basically zero privacy for two whole days

except for the half-hour or so when her mom went to the store. For trips of greater duration than that, she usually dragged Taylor along.

"We're going to have to get you out of here eventually," she said. "Really, those cords don't look all that thick. Maybe I could get some bigger shears at the hardware store or something." How she'd explain that to her mother, she had no idea, but she also knew this situation couldn't continue indefinitely.

The King shook his head. "Your offer comes from a generous heart, but that will not help. Powerful magic bound me here; only magic will release me."

"What kind of magic?"

He closed his eyes and looked away. "A kind I don't wish to speak of. Better that I should stay bound here forever." Still with his eyes shut, he added, "I understand your concerns, and I am trying to think of an alternative. You have done too much for me already."

Taylor opened her mouth to say that she hadn't done much of anything, but somehow he must have realized she was about to protest, because he lifted a hand.

"Fair Taylor, not one young woman in a thousand would have even seen me, let alone succored me as you have. I cannot ask any more of you. Let me think."

With most people, she would have tried to argue further. But somehow she knew he was used to having his wishes obeyed, and for some reason she felt no need to press the point. She just nodded and got to her feet.

"I'll try to check on you later if I can."

Another smile, one that made the dingy room seem much brighter, if only for a second or two. "I look forward to it."

Then she hurried upstairs. Her mother would be home soon, and Taylor knew she couldn't risk getting caught down in the basement. It was all well and good for the King to

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claim that no one else could see him, but she wasn't prepared to take that risk. She wanted to make sure she kept him all to herself.

The weekend turned out just as problematic as Taylor had feared, but at least her mother had a follow-up date on Saturday night, thus giving Taylor a nice block of time to be alone with the King. After feeding him some cut-up apple and cheese, she asked him to tell her about Elfland.

"Your language doesn't have the words to adequately describe it," he told her. "But it is a fair place, free of ugliness, of death and disease. Only when we pass into the shadowlands—your world—can we be killed."

"So why didn't the person who put you here kill you?" She couldn't imagine how the King could even have enemies, he seemed so kind and caring, but obviously someone had decided they didn't want him around.

"Fear," he replied. "It is no small thing to kill a king, you know. He thought it safer to simply remove me. My fault—I should have known something was amiss when he agreed so readily to come hunting in your woods with me."

Taylor wanted to ask who "he" was, but something in the King's face stopped her. She knew she didn't like it when people started poking and prying about stuff she didn't want to discuss.

"Do you come here a lot?" she asked. It seemed kind of weird that the elves would come slumming in Lake Forest when their own world was supposed to be so beautiful.

"From time to time, at the changing of the seasons." He gave her a wistful smile. "Elfland is eternally beautiful, but it is static. Some of us like to come to your world, to feel something of the passing of time. Does that sound odd to you?"

"A little." She set down the now-empty plate that had held the apple slices. "If I lived someplace as beautiful as your world, I don't think

I'd ever want to leave."

His green eyes met hers, and Taylor felt a funny little shiver go down her spine. She'd seen that look before—it had been on Brian Morehouse's face right before he leaned in to kiss her at Jenna's party last summer—and she wondered what she would do if the King tried to make a move. Kiss him back, probably. He was the best-looking guy she'd ever seen.

But he didn't. Instead, he said quietly, "I hope that one day you will be able to see it."

She stared back at him, thinking she must have misunderstood. "See it? I could—I mean, people like me really can go to Elfland?"

"Oh, yes. It is an honor reserved for only a rare few, but you have more than earned that honor, I think."

To get away, to go someplace where death and old age didn't exist, where she could be far away from Lake Forest and the sea of crap her life had become—for that, Taylor thought she would do an awful lot.

"We have to get you out of here," she said.

He nodded, but then set his jaw and looked away. Fine, so he still didn't want to discuss it. But Taylor knew she wasn't going to let the matter go as easily as that. Not when he could be her ticket out of here forever.

It took a few days, days in which Taylor had to sneak down to the basement for a precious stolen minute here and there. Finally she got so exasperated that she faked a sore throat so she could stay home from school. Normally her mother would have stayed at home with her, but she had a big presentation that day and couldn't miss work.

"I'll call to check in," she told Taylor as she gathered up her briefcase and hovered near the foot of the couch. "No telephone."

"Like I'd want to talk," Taylor croaked, doing her best to imitate the cloggy beginning stages

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of a cold. If she concentrated hard enough, she could almost feel the imaginary post-nasal drip running down the back of her throat.

“All right.” Her mother hesitated, then glanced over at the coffee table, as if to reassure herself that the bottle of juice, box of tissues, and packet of throat lozenges would be enough to keep her daughter alive until she got back. “I’ll call around 9:30. My presentation isn’t until ten.”

“kay.” Taylor picked up the glass of juice and took a sip, ostentatiously wincing as she swallowed.

That seemed to do the trick. Her mother nodded and moved off down the hallway and then through the door into the garage. Taylor pulled the blanket more tightly around herself and settled down to wait. She knew she couldn’t just spring up off the couch the second her mother was out the door. No, she’d have to give it a good fifteen or twenty minutes, enough to make sure the coast was really clear and that her mom hadn’t decided to turn around halfway to work and stay home after all.

The time ticked by as Taylor flipped through cable channel after cable channel. Nothing seemed remotely interesting, but that was all right. She didn’t plan on watching anything all the way through.

Finally it seemed safe. She kicked off the blanket and made her way down into the basement. She didn’t really like going to see the King in a sweatshirt and faded yoga pants and with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, but of course her mother would have been instantly suspicious if Taylor had been wearing anything else.

He was still in the far corner, in almost the same position. Probably elves’ feet and legs didn’t fall asleep like ordinary human beings’ limbs did, but it still looked horribly uncomfortable. He seemed paler, too, although he

continually insisted that he wasn’t suffering any ill effects from his confinement.

Taylor knelt next to him and said, “You have to tell me, you know.”

The King sighed. “I shouldn’t.”

“You look like crap, you know that? I have to get you out of here. But if I do, I want you to take me with you.”

“It would be the least I could do for you, considering...”

“Considering what?”

“What you will have to do in order to free me.”

She waited, watching as he frowned and then worried at his lower lip with his perfect white teeth. Somehow she knew he was about to tell her. She didn’t want to say anything that might throw him off.

Finally he said, “Do you remember how I told you that these cords are bound by magic, and only magic can break them?”

She nodded.

“The magic required for such a thing is a dark and terrible one. Only a blade soaked in blood can sever them.”

Well, that didn’t sound very good. But... “So, what, I just have to get a knife and dip it in some blood from a roast or something, and we’re good to go?”

He shook his head. “If only it were that simple. No, the blade must be soaked in the warm blood of a sacrifice...a human sacrifice.”

No wonder he hadn’t wanted to say anything to her. Taylor sank down on her heels and stared at him. “It won’t work any other way?”

“I’m afraid not.”

She knew she couldn’t do it. Oh, she’d had thoughts from time to time, stray fantasies when she was angry and fed up and didn’t know how to change things. Now, she knew exactly what she had to do to change her life. The only problem was that someone had to die.

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The King said slowly, "There is more."

"More?" Taylor raised her eyebrows. How much worse could this possibly get? "You mean human sacrifice isn't enough?"

"No." The next words came in almost a whisper. "The sacrifice must be of someone close to the one who wields the knife. Only the power of severing such a bond is enough to break the cords which bind me."

For a few blissful seconds, she didn't really understand what he was saying. Then the meaning of his words sank in, and Taylor's heart began to race. To free him, she would have to—

She bit her lip. It was impossible. There was no way.

And yet...

How else could she free him? More importantly, how else could she free herself? Maybe this was the answer she'd been waiting for all along, ever since she'd found herself trapped here in Lake Forest, alone, friendless, hating everyone and everything.

She got to her feet. For some reason, her legs shook a little.

"What are you doing?" the King asked. His green eyes widened in alarm.

"What I have to," she replied, and hauled herself back up the stairs.

Her mother came home a little before five. She must have left work early because of her worry for her daughter, and Taylor felt a little pang at that realization. But she couldn't let small kindnesses stop her. If her mother had really cared, she would never have dragged Taylor here in the first place, taken her away from everything important.

The knife went in more easily than she had thought. It slid into her mother's stomach, blood welling up against her ivory silk shirt. She let out a surprised little whimper, the bag of groceries she'd been carrying in one hand slipping from

her fingers. The plastic made a soft rustling noise as it hit the woven rug in front of the sink.

Her mother's hand went up in some sort of defensive gesture, but all that did was leave her abdomen unprotected. Taylor stabbed once, twice, three more times, and her mother fell to the floor, a pool of dark red spreading out across the polished sandstone tiles.

Blood dripped from the knife in Taylor's hands, and she ran at once to the service porch and the basement stairs. She didn't dare let any more of the precious fluid be wasted than necessary.

The King looked up at her with startled eyes as she approached. "Taylor, no—"

"You promised," she said, and knelt next to him. She reached out with the knife to touch the cords that bound his hands. As soon as the red-slicked blade touched the silver, it separated and fell away, writhing like a snake with its head cut off. Even as he raised his hands before him, she moved to free his feet.

He stood. She was a little shocked at his height—all this time he'd been forced into a sitting position, and somehow she'd never stopped to think what the length of those legs might mean once he was fully upright.

She climbed to her feet as well.

His eyes met hers, anguished. "I should never have asked this of you."

"It's all right," she replied. "Just say we can go now."

"Soon," he said. "Soon. I must return to my kingdom first, to reclaim what is mine. I would not want to bring you into the middle of a civil war."

"But—"

He bent, and his lips brushed her mouth. Warmth spread out from that kiss, heating every inch of her body. "I will return. Trust in that."

And then he was gone. The cords that had held him vanished as well, and Taylor was left alone in the basement, the bloodstained knife still clenched in her hand.

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She took a deep breath. He'd said he would come back. Probably it was smart of him to make sure he was taking her to a safe place. She knew he wanted to take care of her, the way she had taken care of him. The memory of his mouth on hers was enough to convince her of that.

But she figured she should take care of a few things in the meantime.

There was no way she could drag her mother's body out of the kitchen, but Taylor took the knife over to the sink and scrubbed it as hard as she could with the little soap-filled brush, then returned the blade to its normal resting place in the butcher block. Afterward she took off her blood-stained hoodie and sweat pants and threw them in the washing machine with lots of soap and bleach. Then she went upstairs to get some fresh clothes, to brush her hair and put on some lip gloss. After all, she wanted to look decent when the King returned to claim her.

She sat on her bed and settled down to wait.

Christine Pope is a native of Southern California. Her short fiction has appeared in *Astonishing Adventures* magazine and *Luna Station Quarterly*. Her contemporary romance, *Fringe Benefits*, was published in April 2010 by Pink Petal Books. A paranormal romance novella, *Playing With Fire*, will be published this August. Go to www.christine-pope.com for more information.

Jane Burson is a graduate of The University of Texas at Austin with degrees in Textiles & Apparel Design, Business Administration Honors, and Liberal Arts Honors. Jane is interested in folklore and fairy tales, historic and ethnic fashion, and the textile arts. She currently lives in Texas. Jane has done periodic freelance design and illustration projects since high school. You can view more of her work at <http://janey-jane.deviantart.com>.