

The Hostage Heir
by Lenore Black

"You're here for the security position." The man behind the desk raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"Um, yes, sir." Christopher Lucas tried not to squirm under the weight of the scrutiny, resisting the urge to wipe his clammy palms on his pants, doing his best to forget that the man behind the desk was one of the wealthiest men in the state. *Langston Keller puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like anybody else.* It sounded feeble, even in his own head.

Mr. Keller tented his fingers beneath his chin. "The job is to look after my son Jason, to keep him out of trouble."

Christopher wasn't sure what kind of trouble a person could get into in Blue Cove—and he'd lived here all his life—but hey, a job was a job.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "I understand, sir."

After a moment Mr. Keller nodded, as if Christopher had passed some sort of test. "You're never to let Jason out of your sight, not for any reason. You'll work as part of a team. Mr. Walsh will fill you in on the details." He waved his hand in dismissal.

Apparently, Christopher was hired.

A forty-ish man in glasses, wearing a weary expression, was waiting for him out in the hall. "Bill Walsh, head of security here at the Kellers' summer house. So?"

"Mr. Keller said you'd tell me what to do?"

Mr. Walsh let out his breath. "Thank God. Half the people don't make it past the 'eyeball test,' as the old man likes to put it. And I can't keep good help because— Well, anyway, come on. I'll show you to Jason's room, and you can get started. Call me Bill, by the way." He set off briskly down the hall.

Christopher hurried after him, kind of wishing that he'd flunked the eyeball test. Not that babysitting some rich guy's son was the end of the world or anything. It was just a crappy way to spend the summer. Christopher would much rather be out on the boat with his brother, helping with the family fishing business. But since their dad had died three years ago, money had been tight. So here he was, stuck with the Kellers until Labor Day.

"This way," Bill said, turning down another corridor.

Like most Blue Cove natives, Christopher had mixed feelings about the summer people who turned their town inside out every May. He had often been curious, though, about the grand homes up here on the promontory. Now that he was actually inside one, he couldn't keep his mouth from dropping open. The marble floor was shiny enough to see his reflection in it. There were so many paintings lining the walls it looked like a museum. Windows stretched all the way to the ceiling, making the sky and sea seem like part of the decor.

"So, here's the deal," Bill said, as they hurried along. "You'll be two hours on with Jason, two hours off doing general patrolling of the grounds. Jason lives to make our lives as difficult as possible, so don't trust him for a second. Don't believe a word he says. Never leave him alone. You'll only get one chance here. Slip up, and you're out."

"But—" Christopher frowned. Why would Jason Keller want to give his own security people a hard time? Weren't they there for his protection? Shouldn't he be glad about that?

Before he could get out any of these questions, Bill added gravely, "I'll try to keep you on day shift, but if the old man decides you're on nights, you're on nights." He stopped outside a door. "Here we are." He clapped Christopher on the back. "Good luck, kid."

You're going to need it hung unsaid in the air.

Bill went striding back down the hall, leaving Christopher to fend for himself. He hesitated outside the door, finally working up the courage to knock. There was no answer, and he stalled there, not sure what to do. He could go after Mr. Walsh, but he'd been very clear that Jason Keller wasn't to be left alone. Christopher took a deep breath and barged on in.

He found himself standing in a living room filled with impossibly expensive things. The rug beneath his feet was so thick and plush it felt like walking on air. The furniture looked to be antiques, covered in pale, fragile-looking fabric. Silk maybe. Christopher wasn't sure. He just knew it was something his fisherman's hands probably shouldn't touch.

"Hello?" he called out.

Still no answer, and he drifted further inside.

In the next room, he found acres of books in floor-to-ceiling bookcases. There was even a sliding ladder, like the one at the town library. A desk sat facing the windows, as if its owner liked to look out at the cliffs. The desk was covered with yet more books, photocopied articles and sheaves of handwritten notes.

Christopher continued on into the next room and stopped in his tracks. In the middle of the space stood a veritable fortress of a bed, with thick wooden posts, an ornately carved headboard, and a wrought iron canopy hung with heavy panels of green velvet. It was the kind of bed, he thought, where a prince should sleep.

"Being stared at is not the most pleasant way to wake up." The voice came from deep within the shadowy recesses of the bed hangings.

Christopher practically jumped out of his skin. He hadn't realized there was someone actually in the bed.

"Oh, um, sorry?" he managed feebly.

The covers rippled, and a young man sat up, fixing Christopher with a resentful glare. Christopher sucked in his breath, possibly loudly enough to be heard. He wasn't sure what he'd expected from Jason Keller, but certainly not the kind of beauty that felt like a punch to the gut—wild chestnut curls and cheekbones sharp enough to cut, creamy skin and big, dark blue eyes.

Jason sighed. "I don't suppose there's any hope of you going away." He threw back the covers and slid out of bed.

Christopher was too busy staring to answer. The top of Jason's black silk pajamas hung open, showing off nipples the color of dark pennies, a flat belly and strong chest. The pajama bottoms barely clung to his hips, like an invitation to... Christopher swallowed hard.

"What's your name?" Jason asked, as if the question bored him.

"Christopher." His voice cracked a little.

Jason drifted closer. Christopher had never been especially self-conscious. He was tall and athletic, with the tow-headed, tanned looks of someone who'd spent his life on the ocean. Next to Jason, though, he felt like a ham-fisted yokel, in the new chinos his mother had bought him for work and the ill-fitting jacket with the

Keller Corp logo on it he'd been given by the employment agency.

"So you're my new jailer?" Jason said, appraising Christopher with unfathomably dark eyes.

Christopher frowned, confused. "I'm here to look out for you."

Jason's mouth quirked up mockingly. "Well, you certainly are strapping." He circled around, touching his hand lightly to Christopher's chest and back and biceps. "I feel safer already."

Christopher gritted his teeth. *Just count to ten*, his mother used to tell him.

Jason looked slightly disappointed not to get a rise out of him, but that didn't keep him from continuing on imperiously. "As your first official duty as my protector, you can save me from starvation. Mrs. Schmidt will have a tray for me in the kitchen."

Christopher shook his head. "They said I'm not supposed to leave you alone."

Jason raised an eyebrow. Christopher had never imagined that so much entitlement could be conveyed with such a simple gesture. He'd love to tell Keller where to stick it, but his mom wouldn't be too happy if he got fired on his very first day. He let out his breath heavily, turned on his heel, and set off to fetch breakfast.

The house was a maze of corridors, and Christopher took more than a few wrong turns before finally stumbling onto the kitchen. A tiny, bird-like lady with gray hair and a stern expression stood at the counter chopping something that Christopher didn't even recognize.

"It's fennel," she said, without looking up from her work.

Christopher ducked his head sheepishly. "Um, are you Mrs. Schmidt?"

"Yes, and you are Mr. Keller's new spy," she said, her mouth tightening with disapproval. "Poor Mr. Jason doesn't get a moment's peace."

"I'm just here for his security," Christopher said, exasperated. What was with people here?

Mrs. Schmidt put down her knife and turned a look on him. "Yes? Then you must not be very good at your job if you're here and Mr. Jason is somewhere else."

"He wanted breakfast!" Christopher told her defensively. "He said—"

"We have a procedure. You use the intercom in Mr. Jason's room. Someone brings the tray." She pushed it into his hands, turned her back on him, and resumed her work.

Christopher hustled all the way back to Jason's room, thankfully managing not to get lost this time. He fumbled the door open, and, oh God, Jason was nowhere to be seen. He put the tray down and dashed into the study and then the bedroom. Nothing. He even got down on his knees and checked under the bed as if Jason were an eight-year-old who might be playing hide and seek.

There was a door off the bedroom that Christopher hadn't noticed before. *Oh please, oh please*. He opened it, and Jason bumped right into him coming out of the bathroom freshly dressed.

"Oh, thank God," Christopher couldn't keep from saying out loud.

Jason smiled with amusement. "Were you coming to help me in the shower? That's certainly service."

Christopher put his hands on his hips. "What was that all about? A joke? I'm supposed to be looking out for you. Don't you care about your own safety? I mean, assuming there is some actual threat, and all this fuss

isn't just some stupid whim."

Jason studied him for a moment. "Oh, there's a threat all right. Just not one you can protect me from."

He left Christopher to untangle that cryptic remark and sat down to his breakfast. There was coffee, juice, fruit, and a silver serving dish on the tray. Jason lifted the cover to reveal French toast and bacon. Christopher's stomach threatened to rumble even though he'd had a hearty breakfast himself only a few hours ago. *I can't keep you boys in food*, his mother often joked.

Jason drank two cups of coffee, picked at the fruit, and then sat back against the cushions, apparently finished. "It's a beautiful day out. I'd like to get some exercise."

Christopher stared at him. "I can't believe you made a big production out of breakfast, and now you're not even going to eat anything."

Jason waved his hand like the young lord of the manor he was. "You can have it if you want." His expression turned leering. "You look like you're a growing boy."

Christopher rolled his eyes. If Jason Keller thought a few come-ons were going to make him quit in some kind of homophobic panic, he really had another thing coming.

"So." Jason rose to his feet. "Exercise."

He breezed out of the room, and Christopher scrambled after him. They followed one corridor and then another and arrived at a door that opened onto a lush expanse of lawn. Jason headed straight for a graveled walk. Christopher spent most of his life outside—swimming, running, surfing, pretty much every imaginable summer sport—but he had to hustle to keep up. For a spoiled rich boy, Jason was really quite fit. Christopher tried not to pay too much attention to the play of muscle across Jason's shoulders, the flex of thigh as he strode forward, the firm curve of his ass.

Just remember what a jerk he is, Christopher reminded himself.

Jason left the gravel walk, cut past a flowerbed, and started toward the path that led down to the beach. Another security guy sporting the same dumb blazer came running toward them waving his arms. Jason picked up the pace.

"Hey!" the other guy yelled.

"Don't you think we should see what he wants?" Christopher said.

Jason sighed irritably, but he did stop.

The other guy caught up to them, breathing heavily. His name badge read: *Terry*. "You know you're not allowed past the outer lawn, Mr. Keller."

Christopher looked from Terry to Jason and back again, confused. "I'm right here with him."

"You must be new," Terry said and then turned back to Jason. "Those are the rules. You know the deal."

Christopher expected an outburst, but Jason just said dryly, "How fortunate you're here to remind me."

Terry checked his watch. "We can switch now," he told Christopher. "I'll take over with Mr. Keller. You can patrol the perimeter. Just make a circuit along the outer lawn. Call Mr. Walsh on the walkie-talkie if you see anything suspicious."

Christopher watched Terry herd Jason back toward the house as if he were a wayward child. He really

didn't understand the way they did things around here. Still, he had a job to do. He took off for the outer lawn, ambling along, checking for danger lurking among the begonias. The only intruder he came across was a chipmunk.

After a while, another security guy came to take his place, so he could grab a quick lunch. Then it was his turn to take over for Terry.

"He's all yours," Terry said, with obvious relief.

Jason was seated at a table on the patio, deeply immersed in a book, jotting notes. He didn't look up when Christopher sat down across from him. Christopher figured he should probably get used to being ignored. He was just the hired help, after all. He settled in for a long afternoon of boredom.

By the end of his shift, Christopher was completely exhausted even though he'd done next to nothing all day.

"Hey, honey," his mom called out to him when he got home. "How did it go?"

"Okay," he said half-heartedly.

His mother came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dishtowel, eyebrows raised in concern. "You know how important this job is."

Ever since Christopher had brought home his first report card in elementary school, his mom had been determined he'd be the first Lucas to go to college. But his family was just making ends meet as it was with fishing. Tuition money would have to come from somewhere else, and no job in Blue Cove paid better than the Kellers.

Christopher kissed his mom on the cheek. "It went fine today. I swear."

He jogged upstairs to his room, changed into his trunks, and hit the beach to do a little body surfing. Occasionally his thoughts would turn to Jason, and he tried very hard to ignore the flash of warmth in his belly. It was just aggravation. That was what he told himself.

Leaving the beach behind every morning for a day of mind-numbing dullness up on the promontory never got any easier, but at least Christopher started to feel a little less like an interloper on the job. He got to know some of the other security guys, not just Terry, but Billy, Dale, Joe, Xavier. Blue Cove was a small town, and they soon found they all had connections. Billy had dated Christopher's second cousin Amanda. Xavier's mom taught at Blue Cove High, and Christopher's brother Danny had been in her twelfth grade homeroom.

Mrs. Schmidt still didn't give him the time of day, but Joe assured him, "Jason's like a son to her. So she hates our guts."

Christopher totally didn't understand that reasoning, but he decided not to take it personally.

Today the schedule had him patrolling the grounds first thing. By the time he came to Jason's room to take over for Terry, Jason was already stationed at his desk, frowning over his books, scribbling notes, typing away at his laptop. He didn't look up at Christopher's arrival, much less bother with "good morning," but at least the two of them had come to something of a truce. There had been no more stupid pranks since that first day.

Christopher settled into his favorite spot, a leather club chair, one of the few things in the room he wasn't afraid he might break. He had mentally braced himself for two hours of nothing to do but staring off into space, but was surprised to find a stack of magazines and paperbacks sitting on the side table next to his chair. He wasn't quite sure what to make of their appearance. Of course, it was ridiculous to believe that Jason had put them there just for him. Then again, he couldn't imagine Jason was the *Sports Illustrated* type.

He picked up a magazine to see if Jason would say anything, tell him to get his hands off his property or make some sarcastic remark about being pleased that Christopher could actually read. But Jason didn't glance up from his work.

Christopher flipped through a magazine, watching Jason curiously over the tops of the pages. His surveillance did nothing to help him solve the mystery of Jason's unexpected generosity, but he did enjoy looking. He stared at the curve of Jason's neck, the way he rubbed his thumb along his jaw when he was thinking, the sharp snap of his wrist as he turned the pages of his notebook. He'd apparently recovered from whatever had been ailing him yesterday, when he'd been listless, slumped at his desk, yawning, dark circles under his eyes. Christopher figured he must have the occasional bout of insomnia or maybe he'd stayed up late working.

At lunch, Christopher went to the kitchen to eat the sandwich he'd brought from home.

"Oh, hey," he said to the other guys gathered around the table. "Has anyone seen Dale? We were talking about going surfing after work, but I don't think I can—" Suddenly everyone was looking anywhere but at Christopher. "What? Did something happen?"

For a moment, there was complete silence.

At last Xavier volunteered, "Dale doesn't work here anymore."

"Did he get another job?" No one answered, and Christopher frowned. "Wait. He got fired?"

"Hey, man," Joe told him. "Probably a good idea to mind your own business, you know?"

This just made Christopher even more curious, but it was clear no one was going to tell him anything. He'd have to wait until work was over and he could ask Terry about it.

In the afternoon, Jason had moved out to the patio. Christopher brought along a few magazines and angled his chair to get some sun.

"So you like reading about sports."

It took a moment for Christopher to get over his surprise that Jason was actually talking to him. "Um, yeah. I played lots of sports when I was in school. Basketball, baseball, football, whatever was in season. What about you?"

The moment the question was out of his mouth, Christopher wanted to take it back. It wasn't as if they had actual conversations or anything.

But Jason surprised him again, answering companionably, "Fencing." Christopher's dubiousness must have shown, because Jason smiled. "It's the sport of kings. Only suitable diversions for the Keller heir."

"Are you any good?"

"Very," Jason said, his voice dipping low. There was an intensity in his gaze that might have been a challenge or possibly...interest.

Christopher could feel himself blushing, and he quickly changed the subject. "So, um, I didn't say before, but thanks. For the magazines and stuff, I mean."

Jason shook his head. "It was really for my own benefit. Your restlessness is remarkably distracting."

An apology was halfway out of Christopher's mouth when he realized that there was a playful light in Jason's eyes.

Christopher smiled a little ruefully. "I'm not too good at doing nothing. I'm used to being active."

Jason's gaze traveled lazily over Christopher's body. "Yes, I had that impression."

Christopher's stomach did a nervous little flip-flop, and he couldn't decide if he was disappointed or relieved when Jason went back to his books.

By the end of Christopher's shift, Jason was ready to return to his study, so Christopher helped him carry his books inside. They were heading down the hallway to Jason's room when Mr. Keller rounded a corner. At the sight of his father, Jason's demeanor changed abruptly. His relaxed good humor disappeared, his shoulders went stiff, and his eyes were suddenly wary.

"I see you're well looked after," Mr. Keller said.

Christopher had always assumed that Jason and his father must be close. Mr. Keller certainly spared no expense for Jason's security. But there was nothing like concern in his tone.

"I'm watched every minute of every day, just the way you like it," Jason said bitterly.

He brushed past his father, and Christopher hurried after him. When they were alone in Jason's room, Christopher tried to ask, "What was that—"

Jason cut him off. "Not now. I have work to do." He settled at his desk, but Christopher couldn't help noticing that he kept looking up from his books, distracted.

Joe came to take over, and Christopher went to clock out. He caught up with Terry, impatient to ask about Dale.

The moment they were out of sight of the house, Terry lit up a cigarette. "I seriously need a beer."

Christopher nodded distractedly. "So, um, what's up with Dale? He didn't get fired, did he?"

Terry took a deep drag off his cigarette. "Just don't get stuck on the night shift, dude. That's all you need to know."

He wouldn't say any more about it.

Mondays were Christopher's day off, and when the first one rolled around, it was like winning the lottery. He spent every possible moment out in the sun, shirtless and shoeless, swimming and fishing and walking on the beach. When he went back to work the next day, he felt like he'd been away for years, and he was determined not to give a second thought to anything he heard or saw at the Keller house. Their quirks really weren't his problem.

His resolution lasted until just before lunch when Jason threw a wrench into it.

"You've never asked me what I'm doing," he said casually, not looking up from his computer.

"Uh, no," Christopher said.

Jason glanced over his shoulder. "But you have wondered."

"Okay, so, yeah," Christopher admitted. "I'm curious. But I didn't want to be nosy."

Jason spun around in his office chair, once again in a talkative mood. "I'm working on my Ph.D. in history. I'm ABD." At Christopher's questioning look, he explained, "All but dissertation."

"Wow," Christopher said. "So you're going to be Dr. Keller? That's so cool. Your dad must be really proud."

Jason made a sour face. "My *father* is the reason that I'm not at this very moment at the university with the full resources of an academic library at my fingertips." He lifted his chin. "But I'm not letting that get in my way. My specialization is early American maritime history, and as it turns out, Blue Cove has quite a colorful past."

"But, wait," Christopher said, confused. "Why would your father do that? Doesn't he want you to get your degree?"

"My father wants me to be a true Keller," Jason said dryly. "Which means making money. My mother was the scholar in the family." He nodded toward a photo in a silver frame sitting on the corner of his desk, a sweet-faced woman with curly hair and big eyes, a feminine version of her son.

"Did she—" Christopher stopped. He didn't know how to ask the question.

"She died when I was twelve," Jason said, a flash of sorrow across his face. "Cancer."

"I lost my father three years ago," Christopher said quietly. "Drunk driver."

Jason met Christopher's gaze, and there was understanding in his eyes. Christopher wanted to say something. He just wasn't quite sure what—*I'm sorry* or *thank you* maybe. Then the door swung open, and one of the kitchen staff came in carrying the lunch tray, and the opportunity was gone.

"Oh, hey," Christopher said, scrambling to his feet. "Terry will be here soon. I should probably—"

"Why don't you join me?" Jason asked, taking Christopher by surprise. "I'm sure Mrs. Schmidt can come up with lunch for one more. If you wouldn't mind dining with me, that is?"

"No," he stammered awkwardly, feeling his face go hot. "I mean, that would be nice."

Jason nodded to the girl from the kitchen. She scurried off and promptly returned with another tray. Jason and Christopher sat down to eat at a table by the open window. A breeze lifted the curtains, carrying the scent of azaleas from the garden.

Mrs. Schmidt had made fresh crab salad. "Mmm," Christopher said around a mouthful of it, unable to help himself. Mrs. Schmidt might not be big on personality, but man, she was a good cook.

Jason grinned, but it wasn't like it had been that first day. There was no trace of the lord of the manor, just amusement and even... warmth. Jason sipped at his water, and his expression turned more serious. "It must have been hard on your family. Your father's death."

Christopher's throat tightened, and for a moment, the crab salad threatened to get stuck. "Yeah. I mean, my

brother's gone on with the fishing business. But— " *It's not the same.*

It was never going to be the same.

"I'm a little surprised you're not out helping your brother."

"I used to, on the weekends and summers and then full time after I graduated from high school." Christopher reached for another roll. "But my mom— She wants me to go to college, and I need a better paying job than fishing to afford that."

"And what about you?" Jason asked. "Do you want to go to school?"

"Yeah. I mean, I—" Christopher's chest clenched with just how much he wanted it, and wow, that made him feel guilty. Fishing had been his family's way of life for seven generations.

"It's not betraying your family to choose a different path," Jason said, as if he could read Christopher's mind.

"No. I know," Christopher said, a little defensively. "Nobody's trying to hold me back."

Even his brother was all encouragement. *College will open up a lot of opportunities, bro, Danny had said. Over in Ramsey, there are all those high-tech companies. You get your degree, and you could land a good job working at one of them. Fact is, we could use the help.*

Christopher kept this part of the story to himself. Jason was being really nice, but Christopher could hardly discuss his family's money problems with him.

"Oh, um, sorry," a voice called out.

Christopher looked around, and a guy he didn't recognize was standing in the doorway, shifting his weight awkwardly. He wore the security staff blazer and a nametag that read "Pete."

"Where's Terry?" Christopher asked, frowning.

Pete shook his head. "I don't know. I'm new. They, uh, told me I should come here. It's time for my two hours on?" He eyed Jason and Christopher uncertainly as if afraid he was interrupting something.

This made Christopher leap to his feet. "Oh, yeah. Sure." He darted a look at Jason. "Thanks for lunch."

"My pleasure." Jason's smile was quick and genuine, and Christopher *felt* it, right in the pit of his stomach.

He hightailed it out of there, not even sure why his cheeks were burning so hotly. They hadn't been doing anything. It was just lunch. He was so focused on this train of thought that he didn't even notice Terry coming out of Mr. Keller's office until he'd practically mowed him over.

"Oh, sorry, man. I wasn't paying attention. Hey, where have you been? Why's the new guy filling in for you?"

Terry's mouth pulled into an unhappy line. "I'm being put on night shift. I just got the word. Sucks, dude."

Christopher nodded sympathetically. He imagined it really wasn't much fun having to stay up all night.

"I'm sorry we won't be working together anymore," Christopher offered.

"Yeah," Terry said grimly. "Me too."

It felt a little lonely without Terry on day shift. Christopher did his best to get to know Pete, but the guy seemed pretty clueless. Of course, Christopher had probably been much the same way when he'd first started.

On Friday, when Christopher got to work, he found the door to Jason's room wide open, angry yelling spilling out into the hall. His heart started pounding, and he broke into a run, screeching to a stop when he got to Jason's bedroom.

Jason lay sprawled on top of his still-made bed, looking like he had one hell of a hangover, dark smudges beneath his eyes and a bright red hickey on his neck. Christopher's hands curled into fists at the sight of it. Jason had obviously slept in his clothes, leather pants and a tiny little t-shirt, fashionably ripped. Mr. Keller, Bill Walsh and Terry were circled around the bed. Terry looked resigned while Bill Walsh appeared to be wondering why God hated him so much.

Mr. Keller was the one doing the shouting. "I want to know where you were last night and how the hell you keep slipping out."

"Your concern is so touching," Jason said sardonically.

Mr. Keller's face turned a deeper shade of red. "You have no respect for me or yourself or this family's reputation!" He grabbed Jason by the arm and shook him.

Christopher took a step forward, instinctively protective, but Jason warned him off with a look.

Mr. Keller drew in a deep breath and collected himself. "Fine. You want to play games? You think you can defy me? It's only a matter of time before I figure it out." He turned to Terry. "You're fired. And you." He pointed a finger at Bill Walsh, nearly jabbing him in the nose. "You're next if you don't do something about this situation." He strode out of the room, Bill Walsh following closely on his heels.

"Man, I'm really sorry," Christopher told Terry.

Terry just shook his head. "It's okay. I never liked this job anyway."

"For what it's worth," Jason told him. "I'm sorry you got caught up in this war between my father and me."

Terry nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry, too. It never felt too cool being your prison guard." He smiled ruefully at Christopher. "See you on the beach, huh?"

He headed off, leaving just Jason and Christopher.

"I know what you're going to say," Jason said tiredly. "Your friend got fired because I—"

Christopher broke in, "Are you okay?"

Surprise flashed across Jason's face, just for a second, and then his expression went blank. "I'm fine."

"I didn't— But I should have," Christopher stammered. "Realized what was happening. How can your father get away with keeping you locked up like this?"

Jason shrugged. "You can do pretty much anything you want if you have enough money. In his own twisted way, I'm sure my father thinks he's doing what's best for me. In a few months, I turn twenty-five, and then I come into my money. So this is my father's last dying gasp of power over me, and he's going to use it to teach me a lesson."

"I really don't understand," Christopher told him.

"My father is trying to make me into the man he thinks I should be," Jason explained wearily. "He bribed the university to rescind my privileges, because academia is just a bunch of nonsense as far as he's concerned. My place is at the company, even if I have absolutely no interest in business. So I paid him back with some rather colorful exploits that would have made for very interesting headlines if he hadn't spent a lot of money to cover it all up."

"What—" Christopher started to ask.

The corner of Jason's mouth curved up. "That's a story for another time. Anyway, when dear old dad suggested a summer in Blue Cove as a peace offering, I was naive enough to believe him. It was only after I got here that I realized he meant it to be a re-education camp. Unfortunately for him, this house hasn't proven to be quite the fortress he was hoping." His smile had a sharp edge of satisfaction. "Not knowing how I foil his security is practically killing him."

Christopher thought back to his early days on the job, to Jason's initial antagonism. It all made so much sense now. He'd called Christopher his jailer, and that was exactly what he'd been.

"Come on," he said, with sudden decisiveness. "Get dressed. It's a beautiful day out. Let's go to the beach."

"I appreciate the thought, but someone has already been fired today. You shouldn't risk—"

"The house is in chaos." Christopher reasoned. "Everybody's distracted. That new guy Pete has no clue what's going on. If we go now, no one will even notice."

Jason hesitated, clearly tempted.

"You know you want to," Christopher coaxed him.

Jason smiled at Christopher. "I should have realized you'd be a rebel."

He changed into shorts and a T-shirt, and they slipped out of the house, making a beeline for the path to the beach. No one tried to stop them, and five minutes later, they strolled along the sand, getting their feet wet in the crashing waves.

Jason stared contemplatively out at the ocean. "You must miss this. You probably feel as much a prisoner in my father's house as I do."

"I'd always rather be on the water," Christopher admitted. "The difference is I could quit my job if I really had to. But you—"

He trailed off, meeting Jason's eye guiltily. It wasn't his fault, of course, that Jason's father was holding him captive, but he hated that he'd been duped into helping.

Jason regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and then stripped his t-shirt up over his head.

"What are you doing?" Christopher asked nervously.

"Like you said, it's a beautiful day." Jason pushed his shorts and underwear down his legs. "I'm going swimming."

No one had ever accused Christopher of being particularly subtle, and now wasn't going to be the time when he started. His mouth fell open wide at the sight of Jason naked—all that creamy skin, his narrow waist, strong thighs, his...

Jason smiled. "Are you coming?"

"I—" Christopher stuttered, shaking his head no.

"You don't know what you're missing." Jason said with a slow-burning smile.

Jason turned to wade into the water, and Christopher couldn't help staring. He didn't even realize he was holding his breath until Jason dove into the waves. He watched Jason swim, catching the occasional flash of bare skin in the bright dazzle of sunlight, uncomfortably conscious of the ache in the pit of his stomach, the heat prickling on his skin that had nothing to do with the weather.

After a while, Jason headed back to shore, emerging gracefully from the waves. "Are you sure you don't want to come in? Feels good to have the sun on your skin."

"Um." It came out in a squeak. Jason seemed in no hurry to put his clothes back on, and Christopher couldn't stop looking at him, at his slim, strong body, the water glistening on his skin.

"So, no swimming then." Jason moved closer until they were almost, but not quite, touching. "Is there anything you do want?"

Christopher didn't really understand what happened next. One moment, he was just standing there, and the next, his hand was curving around Jason's bare hip as if it had a will of its own.

"You're going to get cold," Christopher said in a choked voice. It was a blatant lie. Jason's skin was hot, *burning* beneath his fingers. He stroked his hand up and down, reveling in the touch of it.

"You could warm me up," Jason said softly, leaning closer.

Christopher felt Jason's breath against his cheek. If he turned his head, they'd be kissing. He couldn't remember ever wanting anything more.

"I can't," he said in a small, desperate voice. "If I lose this job— My family—"

For a moment, there was no reaction, and Christopher could hear his own heart thundering in his ears. Then Jason moved away, picking up his clothes and pulling them on. "We should get back to the house before anyone notices we're missing."

He took off toward the path, and Christopher hurried after him. The whole way back to the house, he stole glances out of the corner of his eye, but Jason's expression was always unreadable.

Christopher came to work the next day prepared for things to be weird between them, but Jason seemed to have decided to forget all about the encounter on the beach. He kidded Christopher about the three helpings of cioppino he had at lunch and showed him some of the research he was doing on Blue Cove, perfectly casual, as if it wasn't only yesterday that Christopher had put his hands on Jason's naked body.

In the afternoon, they took up their usual spot at the table on the patio. "I think I've come across someone related to you in my research." Jason turned the open book around so Christopher could read the passage.

Christopher grinned. "Yeah, Elijah Lucas. He's my great, great—I forget how many greats, honestly, grandfather. The colorful character in the family. That's what my dad called him."

"Colorful?" Jason arched an eyebrow playfully. "He was one of the most brazen smugglers in colonial America. He ran whiskey and guns as far south as Georgia. Blue Cove was a hive of illegal shipping activity back then, with all its caves and protected inlets. Elijah Lucas put this town on the map."

"We Lucases are very proud of our criminal heritage." Christopher smiled.

Jason smiled back. His blue eyes seemed even more bottomless than usual today, and Christopher couldn't look away, heat twisting in his belly. *Don't be stupid*, the sensible part of him insisted. He kind of wished that part would shut up.

"I hope I'm not interrupting." Bill Walsh materialized out of nowhere.

Christopher startled so hard he banged his knee against the table.

Jason regarded Bill coolly, lifting his chin. "Yes?"

"Mr. Keller would like to speak with Christopher."

"Me? Why?" His voice came out an octave higher than usual.

"He'll explain," Bill said. "You shouldn't keep him waiting."

Christopher shot a hesitant look at Jason.

Jason smiled reassuringly. "I'll make do while you're gone."

Mr. Keller wasted no time on pleasantries when Christopher entered his office. "Walsh tells me you've developed something of a rapport with my son. This could be very useful, to both of us. You witnessed that disgraceful spectacle the other morning. I will not have him gallivanting all over the place, doing God knows what, putting the Keller reputation at risk."

"I don't understand what I can do," Christopher told him.

"You can help me solve the mystery. There's only one door to my son's room. The windows face the ocean. It's a sheer drop down the side of the cliff. And yet, every few mornings, it's obvious he's been out for a night of debauchery." Mr. Keller's lip curled up. "Well, it has to stop. And you're going to be the one to stop it."

"But Jason's a grown man. I really don't see how you can—"

Keller interrupted, his voice frozen, "I can do anything I put my mind to, young man. That's how I got where I am today. As long as Jason is financially dependent on me, he will comport himself in a way that befits the Keller name." He pointed a finger at Christopher. "And you will help me see to it. From now on, you'll be on the night shift. You'll be stationed right outside Jason's bedroom door until morning. Stay alert. Find out how he gets out, where he goes, and report back to me. Understood?"

"I honestly don't think—"

"You have one chance to get this right," Mr. Keller told him. "If you do, you'll receive a generous bonus. If not, you're fired." He turned back to his computer, making it clear that the conversation was over.

Christopher dragged his feet all the way back to Jason. He didn't look forward to breaking the news to him.

Bill Walsh loitered on the patio, keeping an eye on Jason. He hastily excused himself when Christopher returned. Jason looked up from his books.

Christopher slumped onto the chair next to him. "I'm on night shift starting tomorrow."

Jason's jaw clenched. "I was afraid that might be what my father wanted."

"I—" Christopher swallowed hard. "I don't want to do it. You know I don't want to. But I'll be fired if I don't, and my family— I can't just—"

Jason nodded. "And I can't just let my father win. "

"Yeah," Christopher said sadly. "I know."

Jason's mouth pressed into an unhappy line. "I guess we understand each other then."

Christopher woke early the next morning, the sun slanting cheerfully across his bed, the sound of the waves drifting in through his open window. He yawned and stretched and for a moment felt like all was right with the world. Then he remembered: he started the night shift today. His shoulders immediately slumped.

He wasn't expected at the Keller house until ten that night, so he hit the beach right after breakfast, hoping some time out in the sun might improve his mood a little. He spent the morning surfing and ducked into Louie's, his favorite local dive, for lunch. He was surprised to find Terry behind the bar.

"Dude," Terry greeted him.

"Hey, man. It's good to see you. I didn't know you were working here now."

"Just started. Louie's a cool guy. I think I'm going to like it here. How's things up at the Kellers?" Terry rolled his eyes. "Just as crazy as ever?"

Christopher made a grim face. "Guess who starts the night shift tonight?"

Terry winced. "Dude. Sorry to hear it. That must *really* suck, what with you and Jason...you know." He waved his hand vaguely.

Christopher felt his face go hot. "No. I mean, yeah. We get along okay, I guess."

"Uh-huh." Terry was clearly holding back a smile. "So you got any kind of plan?"

He shook his head unhappily. "Do you remember anything about that night when Jason went out? Anything that might help me?"

Terry looked thoughtful. "It was same old, same old, you know? He had a big powwow with his books. Got sarcastic with me a few times. Then turned in for bed."

"So nothing at all unusual happened?" Christopher said, a little desperately.

"Well—" Terry hesitated. "He did offer me one of those fancy Italian sodas he's always drinking. Right before bedtime. Called it a peace offering."

"Had he ever done that before?"

"Naw." Terry grinned. "I'm not the one he likes to have lunch with." Then his forehead creased. "Now that I think about it, that night *was* weird. I'd gotten used to staying awake on the job, but I just passed out

completely. Didn't wake up until Mr. Keller was standing over me shouting."

The dots started to connect in Christopher's head. The drink might have had something in it, possibly with the help of Mrs. Schmidt. He felt sure she'd do anything for Jason.

"Thanks, man," he told Terry. "I think you might have just saved my job."

Nothing eventful happened Christopher's first few evenings on the night shift, which wasn't particularly surprising. Jason was smart, and he knew how to bide his time.

On the fourth night, Jason off-handedly offered, "Hey, are you hungry? I could use something to eat before I turn in."

Mrs. Schmidt sent in a tray with snacks and two glasses of soda. Jason handed one to Christopher, clinked glasses and said, "A peace offering."

Christopher managed a smile. He brought the glass to his lips, and if he hadn't been tipped off by Terry, he never would have noticed how closely Jason was watching him.

"Oh, hey," he said quickly. "Can I ask you a favor? I was telling my mom about what you found out about Elijah Lucas, and she was really interested. Could I see it again?"

Jason looked a little frustrated, but said, "Sure."

While Jason was fetching the book, Christopher took the opportunity to dump half his soda in a nearby vase, making a mental apology to the Ming dynasty. When Jason turned back around, book in hand, Christopher gestured with his glass. "Hey, this is really good."

Jason smiled ruefully. "Glad you like it."

They chatted a while longer. Christopher yawned significantly a few times, and at last, Jason excused himself to go to bed. Christopher took up his post outside Jason's bedroom door. He wasn't much of an actor, but he did his best to feign sleepiness, going from sitting upright on the settee to slumped back against the cushions to stretched out across it. After a while, he began to make snoring noises. When he heard Jason's door open, he focused on keeping his breathing deep and steady. Jason paused for a moment, and then Christopher heard him cross the room. The outer door to the suite opened and closed.

Christopher's eyes flew open, and he scrambled up. He slipped out the door, just in time to see Jason rounding a corner. Christopher crept after him as quietly as possible. Jason turned down a corridor into a little-used part of the house and stopped in front of one of the paintings. He looked around and then...disappeared.

Christopher raced over to where Jason had last been standing. He ran his hands around the frame of the painting, patted the wall, pressed his fingers along the decorative woodwork, increasingly panicked. Finally, though, he stumbled upon a lever, pressed harder, and a hidden door in the wall sprang open. He hurried through it and found himself at the top of a wooden staircase. He started down, realizing what this was: an old smugglers' passageway that probably hadn't been used since Prohibition. Jason must have stumbled across a mention of it in his research.

The passageway led to the Kellers' private dock. One of the skiffs was gone, and Christopher could just make out the distant whine of the engine. Christopher hopped into the other skiff and started after it.

Jason had a head start, but Christopher had an insider's knowledge of the bay. He steered his skiff into the powerful cross-channel current and gunned the engine, bringing the boat into a protected inlet a little ways down from the main dock where Jason pulled in. Christopher ran flat out and caught a glimpse of Jason as he left the marina heading toward downtown.

Christopher trailed after him, keeping at a safe distance, feeling ridiculous as he darted into doorways and hid behind streetlamps. Jason turned down a side street and went into a nondescript building, without a sign or even a street number. Christopher had never noticed it was there before.

He followed Jason inside, and once again found himself at the top of a staircase. He went down, and at the bottom there was another door. He opened it, and a wave of music blasted into his face. There was a small room packed full of people, talking, drinking, laughing. Along the far wall was a DJ, and couples shimmied together on a tiny dance floor. It took Christopher a moment to register that the couples were all men, and then he stared dumbfounded. He'd lived in this town his entire life, and he'd never had a clue they had an underground gay club.

He pushed farther into the room through the press of bodies. Voices sang out at him: *Hey, pretty boy* and *You looking for a good time, Cupcake?* and *Why don't you come over here, sweet thang?* Christopher blushed and searched the crowd desperately for Jason. A hand grabbed his ass. Another started working its way down the front of his pants.

"Hey!" he squawked, trying to fend off the gropers.

Suddenly Jason stood at his side. "He's with me." He shot a pointed look at the guys circled around, and they melted into the crowd. "I see you managed to follow me," he said to Christopher. "I can't say I'm entirely sorry."

Christopher frowned, an unpleasant revelation taking shape in his head. "Is this what the whole thing with your father is really about? Why he's keeping you locked up? Because—"

"Homosexuality doesn't become his only heir?" Jason said bitterly.

"I can't believe—" He had a flash of gratitude to his own family for always being so understanding. "I'm sorry. That's not how it's supposed to be."

Jason gave Christopher a considering glance, and then suddenly he was on him, taking Christopher's face in his hands and kissing him, hard and hungry. Everything else fell away: how they'd gotten here and why they probably shouldn't be doing this. Christopher wrapped an arm around Jason's waist, and Jason came easily, melding against him, a hot swelter everywhere they touched.

Christopher licked at Jason's bottom lip, so soft and pretty, worrying it with his teeth. He'd wanted to do that since the first moment he'd laid eyes on Jason. He slipped his fingers beneath Jason's shirt, stroked the bare, warm skin at his waist. Christopher wanted... God, he *wanted*.

But he made himself stop long enough to stammer out, "You don't have to. I'm not going to tell your father anything. I wouldn't—"

"That's not why I'm kissing you." Jason hooked a hand behind Christopher's head, pulled him in sharply and kissed him again. "I've wanted you since that first morning you showed up in my room. So fucking ironic. There you were, one of my father's, and all I could think about was—"

"I'm not." Christopher tightened his grip on Jason's waist. "Not his. I—" He kissed back, impatient and sloppy, any notion of finesse drowned out by desperation.

"Come on." Jason grabbed Christopher's hand and pulled him through the crowd.

There was a door tucked away in the corner, and Jason led Christopher inside, to a small hallway with more doors. He produced a key and opened one. The room was spare, plain white walls, a bed neatly made with a simple quilt, a jute mat on the floor. The closet stood open, and Christopher glimpsed leather and shiny fabric, the mysterious party clothes.

"Home away from home," Jason said, with a wry curve of his lips.

"Can—" Christopher took a step closer. "I want—"

"Yes," Jason said.

Christopher grabbed at Jason's shirt, his fingers fumbling with the buttons. He pushed the shirt down Jason's arms, tossed it onto the floor, and then stripped the rest of the clothes off him.

"God," he muttered, dragging his palms slowly down Jason's sides, staring. His hands looked huge, almost ungainly against Jason's compact muscles, his smooth, creamy skin.

Jason bit Christopher on the neck. "I want you to put your hands all over me."

Christopher groaned and walked Jason backward to the bed, following him down onto the mattress. He braced himself on his arms and kissed Jason until his lungs burned and his head buzzed with the lack of air.

"Get this off." Jason grabbed at Christopher's shirt, as if its very existence offended him.

Christopher yanked it up over his head, kicked off his pants and threw his clothes onto the floor. He dove in for another kiss, moaning as their chests slid together, the dizzy rush of skin on skin. Suddenly, he knew exactly what he wanted to do to Jason—or at least, what he wanted to do to him *first*.

"Can I suck you off?" He stroked his thumb along Jason's jaw, meeting his eye hopefully.

Jason drew in a quick breath, curling his hand around Christopher's shoulder. "You're going to kill me."

Christopher grinned and kissed Jason quickly on the mouth and started to move down his body, exploring with his fingers and lips and tongue. Jason's nipple tightened at Christopher's kiss, and when he raked it with his teeth, Jason bucked up, cursing softly, threading his fingers through Christopher's hair. Christopher rubbed his cheek against Jason's belly, the taut muscles quivering at his touch. He followed the line of hair with his tongue and thumbed the crease of Jason's thigh.

Jason's chest rose and fell heavily. His eyes were dark and wanting. If Christopher had needed any encouragement, this certainly would have done it. The first touch of Jason's cock on his tongue felt good, *right*, as if Christopher had been waiting for it for a long time. He took more of the length into his mouth, tightened his lips, teased with his tongue.

"Oh, God," Jason groaned.

Christopher closed his eyes and hummed under his breath, sucking harder. So good, so good. He felt like he could come just from this. A desperate growl spilled out of Jason. He thrust, losing control, and Christopher let him, liked it, liked having Jason using his mouth.

"I can't—" Jason said brokenly. "I have to—"

Christopher stroked his thumb behind Jason's balls, urging him on. Jason gripped Christopher's shoulders, straining upwards, and spilled in his mouth. He slumped back against the pillows, sweaty and undone and so impossibly beautiful it made Christopher's throat hurt.

Jason smiled at him, eyes warm with affection, and rubbed his thumb across Christopher's mouth. "Fucking

amazing."

Christopher broke into a grin, dorky as that might have been. But he didn't know how anyone could keep from smiling when they were Jason Keller-approved. Jason ran his hand up Christopher's thigh, wrapped his palm around his cock, and gave an experimental pull.

Christopher sucked in his breath. God, that felt so good. "I can't—"

Jason stroked him again, once, twice, three times, and then there was no need to warn that he wasn't going to last, because he was coming in Jason's hand.

"God. Sorry," Christopher groaned, flopping onto the bed next to Jason, painfully embarrassed.

Jason kissed him on the mouth, hard and fast. "Are you kidding? That was the hottest thing I've ever seen."

They lay in each other's arms, sweaty and still a little breathless, Christopher's head on Jason's chest, their legs tangled together.

At last, Jason brushed a kiss to Christopher's hair and said, "We need to get back to the house."

"What's the point?" Christopher said, not wanting to move. "I'm not going to tell your father anything, so I'm going to get fired anyway. We might as well—" There were still so many, many things he wanted to do with Jason.

"You're not going to get fired," Jason said determinedly. He reached over the side of the bed and came up with Christopher's pants. "Come on."

Christopher's forehead creased. "What are you going to do?"

Jason brushed a quick kiss to Christopher's mouth. "I'm going to see that we both get what we want."

"But—"

Jason smiled. "Just trust me."

They took the skiffs back across the bay and tied them up at the Keller dock. Jason led Christopher through the door hidden in the rocks and up the stairs. They managed to sneak back to Jason's room without being seen.

"Act like nothing happened, like you never left your post, and follow my lead." Jason kissed Christopher, lingering a moment, and then disappeared into his room.

Light broke on the horizon not long afterward. The outer door to Jason's suite banged open, and Christopher was so startled that he nearly went toppling off the settee.

"Where is he?" Langston Keller demanded.

Christopher scrambled to his feet. "He's, um—" He glanced at the bedroom door.

"We'll see about that." Mr. Keller threw the door open and marched into Jason's room.

An unhappy groan came from the bed. "You've already fucked up my plans for last night. Now you're waking me up at the crack of dawn? Go the hell away."

Mr. Keller raised an eyebrow in surprise at Christopher and then said to Jason, "It's good to see you're where you belong."

Jason let out a long, dramatic sigh, threw back the covers, and sat up in bed. "Congratulations, *Dad*." His voice dripped sarcasm. "I guess you finally found someone who's not a complete moron. Or at least someone who can stay awake long enough to keep me from walking right out the door."

He glared so hatefully that for a moment Christopher forgot they were supposed to be playacting and almost started babbling apologies.

"You should be ashamed of yourself for giving your father so much trouble," he managed at last. It sounded like something out of an after-school special. Christopher *really* wasn't an actor.

Mr. Keller nodded, as if Christopher were not just believable but making all the sense in the world. "You've earned your bonus. And from now on, my son is all yours."

Christopher goggled at him. He figured he must have heard that wrong.

Mr. Keller continued, "When you're at work, you're with Jason. You'll be handsomely paid, and if you continue to keep him in line, you'll receive an even handsomer bonus at the end of the summer."

He turned to Jason, flashing an insufferably smug smile. "I'll leave you to make your peace with the arrangement."

Once Mr. Keller was gone, Christopher stumbled over to the bed, a little dazed. "You're all mine."

"Mm-hmm." Jason wound his arms around Christopher's neck. "You'll have to stay very close." He made the last word sound thrillingly dirty and pulled Christopher into a kiss.

Christopher quickly got lost in happy thoughts of spending time with Jason, being close to him, all the things they could do together... He frowned. "Wait. I can't take your father's money, not when we're—"

"Yes, you can," Jason told him. "Spend the summer with me. Get the money you need for school. In the fall, after I turn twenty-five, I'll be able to go back to the university, and you can come with me."

"Really?" Christopher said almost disbelievingly. "You want me to come with you?"

"Very much."

"That's— I don't know what to say."

Jason touched his fingers to Christopher's cheek, his expression very serious. "Just say yes."

Pictures flashed through Christopher's head of the life he could have: going to classes and getting to tell Jason all about them, being able to help his family and bringing Jason home to meet them. His mouth curved into a smile.

"Yes."