

Changing-1

Chuck ignored the noise of the trucks around him. The engines revving, running at high idle; the trucks driving by. He ignored the smell of exhaust, of diesel, garbage, and other things that had been dumped on the hot asphalt he didn't want to consider. Truckers, as a whole, weren't the most considerate people. He mostly ignored the sense of being looked at as he slowly lifted the barbell with the seventy kilos of weight on it, bar included.

He'd been at his exercise for an hour and his white tank top had to be near transparent with sweat and stick to his muscular frame. He stopped just before the point he could lock his elbows and held the position for two full breaths, then, on the exhale lowered the bar, held he down just before his arms hung straight to maintain the tension two other breaths and raised it on the inhale. He did fifteen more before his arms reached the shaking point and he knelt to put the barbell down. Then sat on the workout bench.

This was the last of his exercises. Every morning before his day officially started, he did his exercises. It had been this way since he was fifteen, as a way of telling his father that if he ever touched him, Chuck would be able to stop him. The man hadn't, but the look was always there in his pale green eyes. Even when his mother was alive his father would look at him like that, with the silent promise that one day, he would make Chuck's body his.

He hadn't, and over the following twenty-five years Chuck had days when he could convince himself the looks hadn't been really that; it had been the overactive imagination of a repressed teen living with a difficult man. But never for too long. The looks had been too much a part of his growing up to ever fully convince himself he'd imagined it.

He stood and folded the bench flat before slipping into the truck's side box. Then he removed the weights off the barbell and placed them in the rack he'd build in the box. Then in went the bar, and he tied everything down with bungee cords. He closed the box, locked the truck, and grabbed his bag before heading to the building for his shower.

Women still watched him. Everywhere he went, within minutes of starting, women would stop by. Most of the time they watched for a few minutes and moved on, but so stayed the entire time. Wolf whistles weren't uncommon. He ignored them, as he ignored the calls to join them, the offers of showers at their place, of company for his shower here. He looked ahead as if he didn't understand them.

If one forced the issue and approached him, he'd used the French his mother taught him to ensure her attempts went nowhere. In the US, the odds of encountering someone who spoke French were low, especially this far from the Canadian border.

Sometimes a man would make the offer and saying no to them was more difficult. As much as he preferred being alone, he liked men, while women left him indifferent. He didn't know if that made him screwed up, considering he grew up under the constant fear of his father abusing him, or it made him tough, but sometimes he told those men yes.

Not today. Only women called to him today. Even inside, he turned heads. Once he paid for his shower and grabbed his towels, a few of the looks said they were thinking

of offering to join him. He ignored the looks, the people, found his room and entered, closing the door on the rest of the world for the next thirty minutes.

* * * * *

Washed, shaved, and dried, Chuck exited the shower. He dumped the towels in the basket and headed to the cooler. This stop had fresh eggs, stamped as being from a local farmer. He grabbed a dozen since this meant he wouldn't have to make a detour to stop at a Walmart before his scheduled stop to one. He had to have miscounted how many he'd bought the last time. He should have had enough to last him. But they were only a couple of dollars more. It was worth it to avoid the inconvenience.

He added a loaf of bread since he felt like sandwiches for lunch and he had cold cuts leftover that would go bad soon.

He placed his purchases on the counter and kept an eye on the register's display as he pulled his wallet and the cashier scanned his items.

"What are you trying?" the words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself in a low, threatening growl. He cursed mentally. He *knew* this wasn't what it looked like.

"What?" the woman on the other side of the counter asked, looking worried as she took in his massive frame.

"Don't try that, lady." At least he hadn't cursed. Now if only he could stop himself from growling. "The sign said a buck ninety-nine, and you charged me two ninety-nine for it."

She glanced around and Chuck became aware of the people around him; not that it would stop him. The only thing he could do now was mitigate the damage he might cause.

"It's two ninety-nine in the system."

Chuck leaned forward. "Lady, this bread's one ninety-nine, don't make me go get the sign."

"Is there a problem?" a man approached behind the counter.

"You're trying to screw me over," Chuck growled. He needed to figure out how he could get himself to just state the problem instead of losing it like that.

"Sir, the system says it's two dollars and ninety-nine cents, that's what the bread cost."

Chuck's hands closed into fists on the counter. His entire life he'd had to deal with people screwing him over, from his father to his supposedly best friend to—

"Actually," a woman called from the aisle. "He's right, the Wonderbread is marked at one ninety-nine, your system has the wrong price."

Chuck looked at the man and smiled. *There you go, fucker.* Innocent bystander for the win. Those happened rarely enough to Chuck, he was going to milk it as much as he could. His smile turned nasty.

"Why don't you fix it, and maybe you can double-check the rest of your prices in case you're *accidentally* screwing over other people too."

The man looked the crowd over and Chuck only now noticed the manager badge

at his breast. *Well, how is that for justice? Now you get to be put under the microscope. I hope you enjoy it.*

The next minutes were spent with the manager going over each item on Chuck's receipt; the bread was the only one where a mistake had happened. And it was a mistake, Chuck knew that. People at large weren't out to get him. Once the manager was done, Chuck paid and headed to his truck, where he'd be alone and wouldn't have to worry about anyone else until he reached the customer in Cornwall, in two days.

He'd make sure not to interact with anyone at his stop tonight. Maybe a rest area instead of a truck stop; fewer people there, less need to interact with anyone.

Changing-2

The ax came down as hard as Richard could manage and the log split into two; the point digging into the stump that served as the chopping base. He stretched, his back cracking. At his age, many sites on the internet claimed he should be slowing down, but Richard wasn't a man who did anything slow, not unless the situation required it for proper completion of the mission.

He wasn't on a mission. He was retired; the firm said. Richard was waiting, he knew, until a time came when the firm had someone they needed dealt with the way only a man like Richard could manage. He would be ready when the need came. He would die on the job, he had no illusion about that, but it wouldn't be because he hadn't done all he could to remain in an optimal operational state.

He picked up the split logs around the stump and added them to stack. At this rate, he'd have all the wood he'd need for the winter by the end of the month. Living at his cabin, in the middle of nowhere North Ontario, didn't give him a lot to do. If he traveled more than five kilometers in any direction alarms would sound in so many locations they'd have him back here before he could reach whatever the closest town was. Then they'd move him and he'd have to reconnoiter his environment again.

He was getting too old to have to go through that again.

He pulled the ax out of the stump and placed the next unsplit log on it. He steadied his breathing, raised the ax, and brought it down as hard as he could. The ax down in the round, but it didn't break in half. He worked the ax out.

There was a time, even only a few years ago, when he could split such a log in half with one strike. Or severe a neck with a same ax. He didn't like doing it that way, too messy, but he'd had to resort to it at least once in his career, it had been a fireman's ax, not a lumberjack's, out of a firefighting kit thing in a hotel in Belarus, fifteen years ago. He smiled. He'd been kept active then. Even at fifty-five, he'd been considered at the top of his form. Or, considering the firm had only gotten him back five years before after looking for him for twenty years, they wanted to get as much out of him as they could before he escaped them again.

Or maybe he'd had to deal with the backlog of all the people they hadn't been able to remove in his absence. They needn't have worried. After twenty years of civilian life, he'd had enough. There had been excitement there, but on the whole, it had been too

boring for him.

Richard had been, and still was, a man of action.

He brought the ax down hard and the round split in half. He smiled. Two strikes wasn't too bad at his age. He put one half on the stump and proceeded to spit it into manageable sizes.

* * * * *

He went through three more rounds over the next hour and was finishing it when he heard the vehicle approaching on the trail leading to the cabin. A four by four F-150 pickup. Ford Strong. Magma Red, the official name for the color. Richard knew it well. It was the only vehicle he'd seen in the last two years.

He was putting the logs in the rack when it appeared out of the trees and stopped in front of the cabin. The man who stepped out was twenty years his junior, but like Richard, he was in shape. Jackson preferred jogging over spitting logs, but he had to have access to trails, while all Richard had was the forest, and he hadn't felt like creating his own trails.

"Hey Richard," the man clad in blue jeans and a denim shirt called. "How is it going?"

"It is already Friday?" Richard answered, keeping his tone neutral. "I thought I still had a few more days before I had to submit to your treatment again."

"I can leave, you know. I only show up because every Friday is what you said you wanted. Once a week, you said. To release the pressure since you aren't active and can't find men to do it with anymore."

Richard faced Jackson. "You do know I will grow bored, eventually. One man does not lend itself to the level of variety I'm used to."

"You lived with a woman for eight years, Richard. And you didn't leave her, cancer took her. I'm confident you could have stayed with her until you were caught again."

"You're mistaking me staying with her, with me only using her for my sexual needs, Jackson. I have told you before, I lived with her and her son, sex only happened rarely with her. And Toronto has a plenitude of men. Variety was easy to come by. Whatever my tastes were that evening, I could find it." He regarded the younger man. "You are talented, I will admit that." Richard picked up the ax. "But one day, you will leave me wanting, and I'll have to send a message to both our masters."

Jackson reached behind him. "Is that today?"

Richard laughed. "Come now. You know that day isn't going to be when you expect it." He hung the ax on the pegs on the side of the cabin.

Jackson moved his hand back to his side. "You want to get to it now, or after we've put away the groceries?"

"After." Richard hurried to the pickup. "I don't want the ice cream to melt."

Jackson chuckled, grabbing two of the paper bags. "You and your ice cream."

Richard looked through the other bags until he found the one with the containers of Neapolitan ice cream and took it and another one. "Sex and ice cream are the only

things that keep me going in this boredom inducing seclusion. How long was the drive from the grocery store?”

“Not long enough to melt the ice cream, although if you don’t put them in the freezer, I can’t guarantee how long until it’s soup.”

The three containers went in the freezer without pause, then came the usual work of putting away the rest of the grocery while looking for any sort of clues as to where his cabin was located. He knew he was in Ontario because he’d made that a condition for not running again. His masters didn’t need to know he wouldn’t, anyway. The north he knew because of the shorter summers, but the north of Ontario was a big place. He was confident he was north of Sudbury, but the further north he went, the wider Ontario got and, unfortunately, the Aurora Borealis could be seen even in Sudbury under the right conditions, and a cabin away from all light pollution was as good as it got, so it didn’t help place him.

The groceries were no more helpful. All generics from a No Frills. All the same ‘No Name’ yellow packaging. Richard had no problem admitting the exercise was academic. He didn’t intend to run.

But there might be a need to run, and Richard liked being prepared. When he reached the road at the end of the trail, he wanted to know in which direction to go to reach a town. That meant he needed to work out what was around, and as usual, Jackson was proving less than useful in that area.

With the groceries analyzed and put away, Richard undid Jackson’s shirt. Now came the attempt at getting his handler to reveal something the more pleasurable way. He wasn’t going to use the most pleasurable way today, since Jackson hadn’t bored him yet, but inducing and withholding pleasure served as a type of torture Richard was also good at, and he might break his impeccably trained handler before he grew bored.

“Not going to the bedroom?” Jackson asked. Letting Richard pull the shirt off him.

“There’s a counter here that’s perfectly functional.”

The man smiled. “Feeling kinkier today.”

Richard snorted. “I just don’t feel like waiting until we reach the bedroom.”