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GAME CHANGER

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Chapter One

Tuesday, January 14, was the day Kip Grady learned that loud blenders and hangovers didn't mix.

He hadn't meant to drink so much last night, but Chuck and Jimmy had been in town and he hadn't seen those guys in months. It wasn't like he'd gotten *wrecked*. He *had* been aware that he needed to be at work at six the next morning, but he'd still managed to drink just enough to make the high-powered blenders his mortal enemy.

But he had a job to do. And that job was to make the best damn smoothie he could for the busy-looking woman waiting at the counter.

"Here you are, ma'am." He tried not to wince as he handed the customer her order. "One Green Warrior smoothie with a wheatgrass shot."

He glanced at the clock. Six-thirty. Jesus Christ.

There was no time to rest his head on the inviting pile of oranges that sat on the counter. The weekday morning rush at Straw+Berry tended to be steady right up until nine. Maria was working with him this morning, and that was cool. They worked well together because, while neither of them was par-

ticularly invested in this job, they took it seriously and did everything they were supposed to. Plus, she was funny.

"Which of these damn smoothies cures a hangover?" Kip moaned when the shop was briefly empty.

"Um, none. But allegedly the watermelon one."

"Okay. I'm going to make myself a giant watermelon one with, like, five Advils in it."

"I think you mean five 'wellness boosts.'"

Kip did make himself a giant watermelon smoothie, and he did feel slightly better after drinking it. He took *two* Advil.

"So what were you up to last night, anyway?" Maria asked.

"Oh, just hanging out with some college friends."

"Yeah? Are they cute?"

"Nah. I don't know. Not my type." Chuck was big, burly, and bearded. Jimmy was the complete opposite: short, slim, and looked about seven years younger than he actually was.

"Are they super-successful juice-bar baristas too?"

"*They* got jobs in their field. They're both working in Boston. Business something? Insurance? Finance? I don't know. They wear suits to work."

"You wear an apron. That's pretty great."

"Yeah, I'm super proud."

"And a ball cap with a little strawberry embroidered on it. Come on!"

Kip threw a chunk of frozen pineapple at her.

"Tell you what, Kipper. I'm going to be nice and do all the prep work in the back this morning so you can just rest your pretty head when the rush is over."

"Yeah?"

"Yup!"

"You are the best and I love you," he sighed happily.

"I know. Now look alive! We've got businesswomen coming in and they want liquefied kale!"

It was another hour of steady rush before Kip was finally

able to enjoy the quiet that Maria had promised him. She went to the back room to chop fruit and vegetables, and he slumped onto a chair he had dragged behind the counter and pressed his face against the wall. It was a nice, cool wall.

He hadn't even realized he had closed his eyes until he was startled by someone clearing their throat. Not aggressively. Just enough to let him know they were there.

He opened his eyes and stood quickly. "Sorry, sir," he stammered. "What can I—?"

Kip's mouth may have dropped open like a cartoon character's. Possibly his jaw was on the floor, and his tongue may have rolled out of his mouth like a carpet. It just so happened that the *hottest man he had ever seen* was standing in front of him.

"Um, what can I get for you?" Kip managed.

The man was tall, blond, and, well, *ripped*. And Kip *knew* he was ripped because he was wearing a ridiculously tight Under Armour zip-up jacket thing and sweatpants. He must have just finished a run, the way his damp hair clung to his forehead and his skin glistened with sweat.

"Good morning," the sweaty man said cheerfully. "Sorry to wake you."

Kip's cheeks flushed. He dipped his head a bit so the brim of the stupid baseball cap would conceal it. *God, the hottest man in the world is standing in front of me and I am wearing an apron and a strawberry baseball cap.*

"You didn't... I wasn't..." Kip took a breath. *Pull it together!* "Sorry. Had a bit too much fun last night."

The man raised an eyebrow. "On a Monday night?"

"Yeah, well, you know the life of a smoothie maker...live fast, die young, right?"

The man laughed. Kip nearly fell over.

"So what's good here?" the man asked, squinting at the menu.

"Um, there's one with blueberries and pineapple and kale—but you can't taste the kale, I swear! It's good. I like it."

"That would be the... Blue Moon Over Brooklyn?"

"Yeah. All the names here are kinda dumb."

The man pointed a long finger at Kip's name tag. "I like *your* name."

Kip glanced at his own name on the tag, as if he didn't know what it said. Like an idiot.

"It's, like, a nickname," he said, as if the hot guy had asked him for further information. Which he had not. But Kip kept talking because that's what he always did. "I mean, everyone calls me Kip. So it *is* my name. But not, like, my *real* name. It's, um... Anyway. You want one of those blueberry smoothies?"

"Sounds good," the man said, politely ignoring how fuck-
ing dumb Kip was being.

Kip got to work loading the blender with various frozen fruits and fresh kale. Fortunately it required focus, and then the machine was loud enough that he couldn't talk over it. He glanced over it at the man, who was now standing with his hands on his hips, studying the uninspired photos of fruit that decorated the small space. Kip's eyes didn't know where to land, rapidly jumping from broad shoulders to ridiculously huge arms to a muscled back tapering into a trim waist to an ass that was frankly just—

Kip shook his head and turned off the blender. He fumbled for a plastic cup and filled it with blue smoothie. "Here you are, sir."

The man turned, nodded, and handed Kip a folded, slightly damp twenty-dollar bill from the pocket of his sweatpants. He waved his hand when Kip tried to hand him his change. "Keep it."

"Seriously?" Kip asked, watching him take his first sip. Watching his pink lips fit around the straw.

"Yeah." The man smiled. "We'll call it a finder's fee. This is delicious."

Kip smiled back. "Glad you like it. Have a nice day."

The man toasted him with his smoothie cup. "You too, Kip."

Kip felt a little giddy at the sound of his name coming from this man's mouth. As his dream man exited, another man who was not nearly as attractive walked into the shop.

"Holy shit!" the new customer said, jerking a thumb toward the door. "That was Scott Hunter!"

"Huh?"

The man looked at Kip like he was very dumb. "Scott *Hunter*."

"You mean, like, the hockey player guy?" Kip said.

"*What?*" came a voice from behind him. Maria stood in the doorway to the back room. "Did I seriously miss Scott Hunter?"

"I don't think... Do you really think that was him?" Kip asked.

The customer nodded. "Oh yeah. Definitely. Surprised he shows his face around town, the way he's been stinking up the ice lately."

"He's not doing well?" Kip did have *some* awareness of who Scott Hunter was, of course—everyone did, sports fan or not. He was the star center and team captain of the New York Admirals. Three years ago he had led Team USA to Olympic gold. But Kip mostly knew him for his Hugo Boss ads. He was a big fan of those ads.

Kip liked hockey just fine, but he hadn't been following the NHL too closely. Scott Hunter had always been, to his knowledge, celebrated and beloved in this town. The King of New York, really. But apparently Kip had missed something.

"Yeah, he's been terrible this season," the customer continued. "Hasn't scored a goal since November! Don't know what they're paying him all that money for. They should trade the bum."

"Well..." Kip said, not sure how to finish. It was ridiculous, but he felt personally offended by this guy's criticisms, and was compelled to defend Scott Hunter. "Maybe he's just going through some stuff."

The customer snorted. "He can go through it in the summer. We're not gonna make the playoffs this year if he keeps this shit up."

Kip still felt inexplicably angry, but shrugged it off and gave the guy his smoothie so he would leave.

When they were alone again, Maria said, "Was Scott Hunter really in here?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I mean, now that that guy mentioned it, I think it had to be. I was kind of distracted by how hot he was, but, yeah, he definitely looked like Hunter. And, uh, he gave me a huge tip."

"How huge? We have to split it, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It was like a thirteen-dollar tip!"

"What?"

"Well, if it *was* Hunter, that's probably, like, nothing, right? He probably doesn't care about money at all."

"Must be nice."

"Yeah."

"Soooo," Maria said, leaning over into Kip's personal space, "he was hot?"

"Oh my god." Kip grinned. "He was *volcanic*. He didn't look real."

"What was he wearing?"

"Workout clothes. He'd just been running, I think. Really *tight* workout clothes."

"Oh my god."

"Yup."

"I can't believe I missed it. If he comes back, you have to tell me. Even if I'm in the *bathroom*, just get me!"

"Sure, that won't be weird."

Maria started loading the freshly chopped fruit and vegetables into the fridges. Kip helped. They worked quietly for a few minutes.

"Hey," Kip said, "he said my name."

"Who? Hunter? He actually said the word 'Kip'?"

"Yeah," Kip said dreamily.

"God, I'll bet when *he* says it, it doesn't even sound dumb."

Kip threw a strawberry at her.

Kip saw the headline the next morning on the train: *Night of the Hunter!* He leaned forward a little to read the front page of the paper of the passenger sitting opposite him. Apparently Hunter had scored a hat trick last night and got two assists in a 7-1 trouncing of Washington. Kip smiled. He felt oddly proud of him.

Yeah, so nice that millionaire superstar had a good night. Sheesh.

The Admirals were playing in New Jersey tonight, the paper said. As Kip walked the two blocks from the train station to Straw+Berry, he thought about the last time he had been to an Admirals game. Must have been at least eight years ago. No, longer, because he'd never seen Hunter play except on television.

Jesus, am I just going to think about Scott Hunter all the time now?

He yawned as he took his key out and unlocked the door to the shop. He needed to find a job with a later start. Getting up before five to be at work before six was ridiculous. Especially for minimum wage.

The morning went the same as most weekdays: steady rush from about seven until nine, and then a bit of quiet before the customers Maria had dubbed the "yoga moms" started to trickle in.

"Your boyfriend had a good night last night," Maria said as she restocked the orange bowl.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Scott Hunter. Scored, like, a million goals or something."

"Three goals," Kip corrected her, "and two assists."

"Oh, sorry. Didn't realize you were such a hard-core fan."

"I'm not! I read the paper on the way here. It's, like, big news or whatever."

"Oh my god! You are mad crushing on him right now! You went home last night and Google-image-searched Scott Hunter, didn't you?"

"No!" Yes.

"Whatever. You are such a fanboy. So cute."

"I hate you."

"You don't."

Maria stacked oranges and Kip swept the floor behind the counter even though it wasn't that dirty. He just hated standing around doing nothing.

At a little past ten, the door opened and Kip was once again faced with Scott Hunter in sweaty workout clothes.

This time Maria was there to witness it. "Holy shit."

Kip elbowed her as subtly as possible.

"Good morning again, Kip," the man who was definitely Scott Hunter said.

"Good morning, um... *Jesus*. You're Scott Hunter, right?"

He looked amused. "I am."

"That is so awesome," Maria breathed.

"It's, um," Kip started, then switched courses. "Great game last night."

"Thanks! Thought I might get another one of those blueberry smoothies. When something goes right in my game, I like to try to repeat what I did that day."

"Right," Kip said. Scott's eyes were blue. They were so blue.

"So...another blueberry smoothie, please."

"Right!" Kip broke out of his trance and got to work making the smoothie.

Scott Hunter was, once again, wearing an absurdly tight Under Armour jacket and sweatpants. His hair was damp and mussed, and his skin was slightly flushed from exercise. Kip Grady was, once again, wearing a fucking dumb apron and a ball cap with a goddamn strawberry on it. But at least he wasn't hungover this time.

He handed the star athlete his smoothie and tried not to focus too closely on the way his lips wrapped around the straw. It was difficult because Scott was looking *directly at him* as he took his first sip. His lips curved up a bit when he noticed Kip's staring.

"Thanks again, Kip," he said. "Hopefully I'll see you next game day."

He raised the smoothie cup in a farewell salute, and then he left.

When Kip turned to Maria, her jaw was on the floor.

"'Hopefully I'll see you next game day?'" she said. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"What?"

"He's completely into you, Grady!"

Kip turned as red as the strawberry on his hat. "Oh, come on. That's not what he meant."

"Sure it isn't."

"It isn't! He's just superstitious. He means he hopes it works and he has a great game tonight so he'll be back again next game day! That's it!"

"I know that's what he was saying on the *surface*, idiot, but that's not *all* he was saying."

"He's not even... Oh my god. I can't believe I'm talking about this. Scott Hunter is *not* into dudes. And he's *definitely* not into dudes who work at smoothie shops."

"If you say so."

"I'm going to go back there and chop the pineapple," Kip grumbled.

"Better check to make sure we have lots of blueberries stocked," Maria singsonged after him.

Kip stood in the living room of his best friend's Tribeca apartment, admiring the view of the Hudson River. He couldn't even imagine what a place like this would cost.

Living in New York City was *expensive*, but Kip had a super