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books

By Chelsea Curto

The DC Stars series

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FACE OFF

CHELSEA CURTO

PAN BOOKS

One

EMMY

I've been around a lot of penises in my life, but the one six inches away from my face is the last one I ever wanted to see.

"Grady." I throw my arm over my eyes in a desperate attempt to shield myself from his flaccid dick. "We made it two seasons without this friendship turning weird, and you pick my last day to act like a creep? And in a sacred space like our locker room of all places?"

"Someone stole my boxers." Grady Whitlock, my best friend and one of the only reasons I've survived my stint as left winger with the San Diego Iguanas of the ECHL, the NHL's AA league, has never been the shy type. "You know I'm not like that."

"The proximity of your balls to my mouth says otherwise. I think I might have nightmares."

"Hang on." There's a string of mumbled curses followed by the zip of a duffle bag and the rustle of clothes. "Okay. You can look now."

I open one eye and sigh in relief when I find myself staring at dark jeans and not a scrotum. "Thank god. Who stole your boxers?"

"Probably Andrew," Grady grumbles. "The fucker has had it out for me ever since I beat him in last week's practice shootout. Sorry, Em."

"I forgive you, but only if you never show me your junk again," I say.

"Maybe we can hypnotize the memory out of you."

"That, or I'll take a sledgehammer to my skull. You're going to have to find someone else to flash, buddy. My flight is in three hours, and then I'm out of here for good."

Grady frowns. "This place isn't going to be the same without you, Emmy."

"Getting called up to the big leagues was the last thing on my bingo card for this year, and I'm this close to freaking out." I pinch the air with my thumb and forefinger. "Come to think of it, can you show me your dick again? It's veiny, but it's way less terrifying than thinking about the future. Me? An NHL player? Are they *sure*?"

"Ah." He rubs his jaw and smiles. "We're in the deflecting stage, I see. People call what you're experiencing *emotions*, Emmy. You should embrace them. They don't make you weak."

"I know that." I wave him off, but a string in my chest pulls tight when I look at him. "It's all very sudden."

He walks toward me. When he's close enough to reach, he cups my cheeks with warm fingers and calloused palms. "You can do hard things, Em. This transition isn't going to be easy, but it's the opportunity of a lifetime."

Dammit.

I was really hoping to sneak out of here without our conversation turning deep. Grady has this way of drawing big, scary

feelings out of me and forcing me to wear my heart on my sleeve, and I'm not sure I can handle that today.

I fidget with a loose thread on my shorts. My palms are clammy as I tug on the long, frayed strands of denim, and I swallow down a deep breath.

"Am I out of my mind to take this offer? For giving up the sure thing I have here? You know I hate sitting still, but it feels like I'm jumping into the ocean without a life vest."

"Think of it as the next step. A redirection," Grady says, always the voice of reason in our locker room. "You've worked so hard for this. It was only a matter of time before an opportunity came knocking."

Call me selfish, but I *have* worked hard for this.

Really fucking hard, and now I have a chance to play for the DC Stars, our NHL affiliate team.

The Stars used to be a powerhouse who made it to the playoffs a record-setting twenty-four years straight. They're in a slump now, and they can't seem to break out of it.

They're coming off their eighth losing season in a row. A Stanley Cup Champion banner hasn't been unveiled in a decade and a half, and things aren't starting well for them this year, either.

An early season injury left their elite rookie winger with an ACL tear, and they've been rotating AHL guys through the empty roster spot without any success.

I learned all of this during a call with my agent and the Stars head coach. After nearly half an hour of flattery and reciting a list of my accolades that stretch back to high school, Coach Saunders extended me a contract offer because he liked how I played and admired my tenacity.

I kept waiting for someone to tell me it was a joke. A giant misunderstanding that should've happened to a different Emerson Hartwell, but the punchline never came.

And now here I am, with my bags packed and my heart in my throat as I lean forward and hug the man who's become a brother to me.

I've never been one for tears, but my nose stings and my vision blurs when Grady squeezes me tight. He smells like day-old sweat, but I don't care. I don't know when I'll get to see him, and I want to savor this moment.

He pulls away and gives me a serious look that tells me he's about to go into protective mode. "Do you remember our rule?"

"No fornicating with teammates." I laugh. "Don't worry. I learned my lesson last time."

"That includes Maverick Miller. He doesn't believe in rules. He's got a girl in every city, and he's been pictured with models and actresses every other week. There's a rumor floating around that some big-time reality dating show offered him the lead, but he turned them down."

I roll my eyes. "I've dealt with those kinds of guys my entire career. I don't care how pretty or famous he is. I'm not touching that with a ten-foot pole."

"Good." Grady kisses the top of my head and ruffles my hair. I swat him away, and his attention bounces to my cubby. "I never thought I'd see your locker empty. Where did all your shit go? There used to be nineteen hairbrushes and enough plants to supply oxygen to an entire town."

"Fuck you." I put my hands on my hips. "Don't talk about Fernie and Freddie Ficus like that."

"Their leaves were in my space. I'm glad to see them go." Grady reaches in the front pocket of his jeans and pulls out a folded piece of paper. "This is for your new locker, if you can find any room for it."

I unfold the crinkled note and choke on a laugh. It's a photo of us we took on my first day with the Iguanas two years ago. His arm is slung over my shoulder. I'm leaning into him. We're wearing matching grins and matching jerseys, and I remember it like it was yesterday.

"Look at us," I say. "We're babies. You had all your teeth."

"And you thought bangs were a good idea."

"Never again." I bite my bottom lip. "You don't think the Stars called me up for a 'diverse hire' thing, do you? So they can be the first team with a woman on their roster?"

"Fuck no. They called you up because you're the best skater in the ECHL *and* the AHL. Because you can go toe-to-toe with any guy in all three of the leagues. Who gives a shit if you have tits and wear a sports bra?"

"I wish everyone had the same attitude as you. Look how long it took me to win over the guys here—an entire season."

"That's because you're prickly, not because you're a woman. You're my little cactus." Grady pinches my cheek, and I glare at him. "If your new teammates want to talk shit, make them back it up when you scrimmage. Kick their asses then gloat humbly. If you're feeling extra feisty, bring up their positions in the standings." He stares at me, and his expression turns softer. "They're going to make a movie about you one day."

"This is getting weird. I've never had someone tell me so many nice things in a row without trying to get laid," I joke.

"Yeah, yeah. You need to work on accepting a compliment

every now and then.” He clicks his tongue. “Tell me about this person you’re going to be staying with. Is she safe?”

“Piper Mitchell wouldn’t kill a bee if it stung her. We were friends in high school, and she works for the Stars in their broadcasting department.”

“Teenage you had friends?” he asks, and another laugh slips out of me. “That must have been a sight.”

I flip him off and look around the locker room I’ve called home for two years, my heart hammering in my chest.

“It’s the end of an era, isn’t it?” I ask.

“And the start of a new one.” Grady lifts his chin toward the door. “You know I hate goodbyes. Get out of here before I chop up your plants and feed them to the birds.”

“You’d never.” I hug him again, and a piece of me roots itself to him with the embrace. “Be good, Whitlock. Keep your dick in your pants.”

“My confidence is taking a nosedive today. Is it really that bad? God, maybe that’s why Sabrina didn’t call me back after Saturday night at the bar.”

“Because your penis hangs to the left? I doubt it. It’s probably because her name is Samantha, not Sabrina.” I pat his shoulder. “Look at you turning into a fuck boy.”

“Dammit.” He tips his head back and stares at the ceiling. “I really liked her. The bar was too loud. I couldn’t hear. That’s on me for not asking her to repeat herself.”

“There’s always next time.” I scoop my bag off the floor. “I’m rooting for you.”

“Hey. No sleeping with your teammates just because you’re cold and bored and suffering from Mid-Atlantic seasonal depression.”

“I promise I’ll behave.” My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I check my notifications. “I should go. My ride’s here.”

“Love you, Emmy. Have the time of your life,” Grady says.

“Love you too, asshat.” I poke his side and pull away. “There will be a ticket waiting for you at will call if you make it out east.”

I head for the door that leads to the practice facility’s lobby and glance over my shoulder. This is the biggest step I could ever take in my career, and when Grady smiles at me, I know I’m going to be okay.

Two

EMMY

A monsoon greets me on my ride from the airport to Piper Mitchell's apartment, and I'm drenched by the time I make it to the entrance of the upscale residential building.

The ride up to the eleventh floor is quick, and I wrestle my suitcases down the hall to Piper's door. I knock twice, and it flies open.

A five-foot-three blonde with bright blue eyes greets me with a hug that knocks the wind out of me, and for the first time since I touched down at Reagan International, I smile.

I never had a lot of female friends growing up. I gravitated toward sports and made it my mission to get picked for the boys' teams. All my spare time was spent training, clearing my schedule for practice and trying to prove myself. It was exhausting.

Not like the other girls, the guys on my recreational hockey team would say after I took an elbow to the face in a game. *One of us*, they cheered when I wiped blood from my nose.

I'd laugh it off, but deep down, I *wanted* to be like the other girls.

I wanted someone I could talk to about first kisses and bad dates. Period cramps and hot substitute teachers.

It's been hard to recreate that girlhood as an adult, though. People like to tell me I'm difficult to get along with. Closed-off and too snarky. It's how I've always been, ever since I can remember. I'm not angry but unsettled, which is why I'm always chasing the next big opportunity. Why I'm looking for the next place to go.

That usually translates to leaving before any real connections are formed, and the cycle continues.

Piper was different.

She snuck her way in when we were partnered up in English Lit our sophomore year, and it stuck.

If she's the sunshine, I'm the storm cloud.

One of us is the people-pleaser and the other is the people-avoider.

Two total opposites who found a friendship that works.

We lost touch in college—I was busy keeping my grades up to maintain my athletic scholarship. She was busy with broadcast journalism and falling in love with the legacy-student-turned-tech CEO who, as it turns out, ended up being a massive douche.

They split up last year, and we reconnected through Instagram DMs that turned into weekly FaceTime calls.

I'm not a big believer in soulmates, but I think Piper might be mine.

She found me when I needed her the most and made me feel lovable. Capable.

When I called her and told her I was coming to play for the Stars, she invited me to stay with her. It was like no time

had passed in our friendship, and she was so excited for me, you would've thought *she* was the one who made the team.

"You're here," Piper exclaims.

"I'm here, and I'm soaked. I'm going to ruin your floors," I say.

"Who cares about the floors?" She lets me go and motions me inside. "How was your flight? Do you want to take a shower before I give you the tour and help you settle in? Are you hungry?"

She's talking a mile a minute, and my jet-lagged brain is slow to catch up.

"Do you mind if I rinse off?" I look down at the puddle forming at my feet. "The guy in the middle seat ate an onion sandwich, and I think the stench followed me."

"An onion sandwich?" Piper leans forward and sniffs my shirt. "That's disgusting. What comes on an onion sandwich?"

"Bread and onion. That's it," I say. "My poor rideshare driver gagged the whole way here, so I'm definitely losing my five-star rating."

"The decency of the traveling public has gone out the window. Thank god we fly on charter planes. If I had to see someone walk into the airplane bathroom without shoes on, I'd track down an air marshal and make sure they landed in jail." She tugs on my arm and guides me down the hall. "I'll show you your room so you can get cleaned up, then we can do the whole tour."

"Holy *shit*, Piper. I know you sent me photos, but this place is massive." I glance at the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. The DC skyline winks back at me, and I'm officially impressed. "This would go for millions in California."

"It's great, isn't it?" Piper grins at me over her shoulder. "If that fucker was going to cheat on me with his secretary and then say the divorce was my fault, you bet I was going to drag him for everything he was worth."

"How have you been holding up?" I ask.

"I'm fine," she says, but her smile is strained in the corners. "I had no clue how much he was limiting me until I was away from him, you know?"

I do know, and I hate that my sweet friend now does too.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, and I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

"Don't be. I'm on the other side of it, and things are going well." Her megawatt smile is back in place, and she stops us in front of a door. "This is your room. There's a bathroom attached, and I have towels set up for you. There's even a towel warmer."

"Gosh you're fancy." I hesitate before I lean forward and hug her again. "Thank you for taking me in."

"You don't have to thank me. This is going to be fun. There's no rush to settle in. I'll be in the living room when you're ready."

With a wave and a flip of her hair, she saunters down the hall and hums a tune that sounds suspiciously like "Goodbye Earl."

Thirty minutes later, I sit next to Piper on the couch and accept the beer she hands me. We knock the bottles together in a celebratory cheers, sit back and relax.

"I can't believe you're here, Em. And not only are you here—you're signing a contract with the Stars."

"How many people know about the signing? Did a memo go out?"

"No. I only found out when the broadcast team was given your stat sheet so we could do some research on you. I have a feeling it's going to be released to the media very soon, though. There's always someone who tells someone who tells someone else, and the next thing you know, it's plastered all over ESPN. Maverick knows, of course, so when it gets leaked, we can blame him."

Maverick Miller.

I've watched his highlights, and I know he's an incredible hockey player.

He's the former NHL Rookie of the Year. A First Team All-Star five seasons in a row. A recent Ted Lindsay Award winner, voted as the most outstanding player by the members of the NHL Players Association.

He might be an athletic phenom, that once-in-a-decade number one draft pick you go all in on because you know he's going to win you a Stanley Cup, but his social media is littered with posts that scream *look at me*.

I did a deep dive on him on my flight over, and I wish I hadn't.

There are pictures in VIP sections at clubs with an obnoxious silver chain around his neck. Other photos of him lounging in a suite at a DC Titans football game and throwing out the first pitch for the DC Dolphins baseball team.

I'm all for flaunting your wealth and showing off what you've earned, but he's the league's golden boy. The one modeling in magazine spreads wearing suits that cost eight thousand

dollars and the guy who gets everything handed to him on a silver platter.

I heard a story that he wanted to use a public gym during the off season, and they shut down the building for two hours so he could get a workout in.

I bet no one's ever told him no.

It's difficult to play with people like that. There's ego involved, a *me* not *we* attitude that makes the locker room tense and uncomfortable.

I've seen it firsthand, and I don't want to be a part of that environment again. If that's how the Stars are operating, I'm not going to last more than a week.

"Miller," I say, and I hide my curiosity with a sip of my beer. "We have a morning skate planned for later this week, and I don't want to go in without knowing more about what he's like off the ice. My friend says he's a fuck boy. Is that true?"

Piper blushes. "I don't know anything firsthand, but on the road, he's been known to sneak someone back to his hotel room after curfew. The women are always very enthusiastic."

"That has to mean he's an asshole, right? Someone who doesn't have his priorities figured out."

"Not at all. Maverick is kind of like a puppy. He's full of energy and bounces around everywhere. Everyone loves him, and the work he does for charitable organizations is admirable. He also wears his captain hat well. It's why he's still here, even through all the losing crap: he believes in these guys, and he loves DC."

Interesting.

I can't say I've pictured the guy getting his hands dirty and doing charity work, but I tuck that away for later.

"Why have the Stars lost so many games? They haven't had a winning season since Miller was drafted. A guy that good should turn a whole organization around."

"I've only been here a few years, so I don't have the whole story, but I've heard rumors about toxic coaching. Sounds like he wasn't utilized to his full potential in his first couple of seasons. They'd leave him on the bench down the stretch in the third period, and he'd get frustrated. He also led the league in time spent in the penalty box his first two years with us."

"He has a temper?"

"It's not a temper—he wouldn't hurt a fly. He's very loyal, and he doesn't like seeing his teammates taken advantage of. Coach Saunders came in, and the dynamic has shifted. Coach is a lot easier to get along with while still having that authoritative personality. The guys finally believe they have what it takes to succeed after being told they weren't good enough for so long," Piper explains.

"And there have been injuries," I say, and she nods.

"Yeah. It's such a bummer about Finn Adams. He was having a solid preseason, and he and Maverick meshed really well. But accidents happen, and that means you get the chance of a lifetime, Emmy. Are you excited?"

"Being the first woman to play a regular season game in the NHL would be..." I pause and rub my thumb up the neck of my beer bottle. "There aren't words. I'm so proud of myself, but I'm also terrified. The attention that comes with being a professional athlete is overwhelming, and even more so when you're playing without a dick in a male-dominated sport."

She giggles. "God. You're going to piss so many people off. The Chads and Joshes are going to lose their minds."