

FIRST PITCH

JAY

She had her hair in a ponytail today. I think that meant she had soccer practice after school. Not that I kept track of her schedule or anything. I'm just an observant guy.

"Hey, you coming to Lannister's tonight?" my buddy Joey asked.

Forcing my attention from the back of the blonde's head, I turned to him. "I don't know yet. What time are you heading over?" Our teammate was throwing a party and I wasn't sure if I wanted to go. The last time, a bunch of kids had gotten piss-drunk and I'd had to call an Uber to get home. My ride was busy hooking up with some girl, both of them drunk off their asses. I didn't do that shit. The last thing I needed was to screw up my game or jeopardize my future by getting caught drinking underage. I didn't know why these guys risked it.

The one thing making tonight's party at all tempting was that I was pretty sure Emily Vasser would be there. Emily Vasser of the shiny blond ponytail and star right-forward of North High School's soccer team. That, and I finally had my drivers' license, so I could leave the party whenever I wanted. I stole another glance at Emily as she got up from her desk and smiled at the girl next to her. I felt her smile like a punch to the gut, even though it hadn't been directed at me. I didn't think I'd ever seen a girl as pretty as Emily.

"Around 8:30. I'm catching a ride with Russ. I'm sure he'd pick you up too." Joey slung his backpack over one shoulder and I followed him up the aisle between the desks.

"Nah. I'll drive myself if I end up going."

We headed for the door and I took one more look over my shoulder, but Emily was moving toward the other door at the back of the room. Damn.

“Come on, man. You gotta come.” Joey swept his overly long hair out of his face.

I shrugged noncommittally. We didn’t have a game tomorrow, so I had a little leeway. And it wasn’t as if my parents gave me a curfew. That was way too orthodox for them. Hell, my dad would probably let me smoke weed if I asked him. I reminded myself never to let any of my friends in on that little secret. “We’ll see,” was all I gave Joey for the moment.

“Hey, Amy!” Joey suddenly shouted as one of the cheerleaders walked by. She turned and smiled at him. He gave me a quick backward glance as he took off in her direction. “I’ll see you tonight, Miller!”

I shook my head and laughed to myself. Joey was a good guy, a good friend. His parents were fairly loaded so his future was pretty much set, making it easy for him to carry on with his easygoing lifestyle. But he wasn’t one of those stuck-up assholes.

I continued down the hall to my locker and gathered everything I’d need for the weekend before heading out to catch the bus. It was a bit embarrassing taking the bus, but I couldn’t afford a car and I wasn’t about to ask my parents or my sister to help. When I got one, I’d do it on my own. But registration, insurance, and gas were expensive—and that was on top of the price of the car itself. I was lucky, though, that my parents let me drive one of their cars when they weren’t using it. Like tonight. I took one last look around the parking lot, hoping to spot Emily, but she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe going to the party wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

The bass pounded through my body as I approached the front door of Chase Lannister’s house. The first thought to cross my

mind was that his parents must be idiots. Who lets their seventeen-year-old kid stay home by himself for an entire weekend? I guess his older brother was supposed to be checking in on him, but that guy was in college and surely had better things to do on a Friday night. In addition to the thundering music, I could hear voices drifting from the backyard. I knew I should turn right back around and go home because it was only a matter of time before a neighbor called the cops. But I'd come this far and I at least wanted to see if Emily was there. So I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

There were plastic cups scattered over every horizontal surface, and I immediately spotted several couples openly making out amongst the crowd. I pushed my way through my classmates, pausing to say hi to some of my friends and passing on the offers of beer and liquor. About half my team was in attendance, and I just hoped Coach didn't catch wind of this thing.

"Hey, there he is!" A solid body knocked me sideways and I turned to see Russ smiling broadly at me, his eyes just this side of glassy. "Joey said you wouldn't show, but I knew you would!" He put his hand up for a high-five and I raised mine to meet it.

"Yeah, well, I guess I didn't have anything better to do." I grinned and he punched me in the arm. I tried not to grimace. That guy was a beast, which I guessed was appropriate since he played defense on the football team.

I cleared my throat. "Hey, have you seen Emily Vasser around?"

Russ's mouth spread in a mischievous grin. "Ah. I see. Looking to get some action tonight, huh? Nice choice, my friend."

I tried not to let my face redden. God, I was so bad at playing it cool. I attempted a return grin and a nod, not sure how it came off.

Russ patted my shoulder a bit too hard. "Saw her out back a while ago. Stay safe, my man!" He laughed and turned back to

the guys he'd been talking to. I swallowed hard and headed for the kitchen and the patio beyond.

My eyes zeroed in on Emily as soon as I stepped outside. She wore tight jeans and a blue shirt with the shoulders cut out. The color matched her eyes and I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears as I looked at her. She was so damn pretty. Her long blond hair hung straight down her back and her lips were pink and curved up in a smile. I wasn't sure if I could go through with this, but I knew I had to try or I'd regret it forever. I forced my feet to move, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of Emily and her two friends.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. "Hey, how's it going?" I addressed all three of them, not wanting to be rude. Her one friend—Darcy was her name, I think—let her eyes sweep my body from head to toe, giving me a smirk. I had no idea what to make of that. The other girl sent me a wave, and Emily tucked her hair behind her ear with one hand and looked down at her shoes before meeting my eyes and finally sending me a small smile. "Hi, Jay."

"Hey, Lauren, come to the bathroom with me," Darcy said, grabbing the other friend and taking off before Emily or I knew what had happened. Okay. I think I liked Darcy.

Emily watched them go, a look of slight panic flashing across her face before she quickly schooled it. At least I wasn't the only one feeling anxious.

"Have you been here long?" I asked, cursing myself for not planning some talking points ahead of time. What a lame question.

She didn't seem bothered by it, though. She just shrugged and held up her cup. "Long enough to nurse this beer to room temperature." She wrinkled her nose at it and I decided she was the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

I couldn't help smiling at her. "That bad, huh?"

She shrugged. “Chase gave it to me when I walked in and I didn’t want to be rude. I don’t even know why I’m still holding it.” And with that, she turned and dumped the cup’s contents behind a bush. I held my hand out for the empty cup and she handed it over. I tossed it into a bucket several yards away and Emily cocked her head and nodded. “Nice shot. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

I chuckled and shrugged back at her. “Happy to put my talents to use.” My stomach flipped when she smiled.

Emily’s next words were drowned out by several shouts coming from inside. We both turned as a small group came bursting out the patio door. “Cops!” a few of them yelled.

Without thinking, I grabbed Emily’s hand and took off for the neighbor’s backyard. I glanced back at her and saw her panicked expression. “Come on. I’ll get you out of here,” I reassured as we increased our distance from Chase’s house. I silently thanked my lucky stars that I’d been late to the party and had parked several houses away as a result.

“Wait!” Emily said in a loud whisper when we were at a safe distance. “Darcy and Lauren are still there! I rode here with them.” She pulled her hand from mine and withdrew her phone from her back pocket. Her thumbs quickly ran over the device and she clamped her bottom lip between her teeth as she waited for a response. She finally let out a breath and looked up at me. “They got out and were looking for me. Oh, thank God. I knew this party was a stupid idea!” She frowned.

Before I could even think about my words, I blurted out, “I know. I only came because I thought you’d be here.” As soon as my words registered in my brain, I cursed myself. I could feel my face heat. Thankfully, we were in a dimly lit yard.

Emily’s head jerked back and her eyebrows rose. “Really?”

I opened my mouth but didn’t know what to say. Then she smiled at me. A dazzling smile that went all the way to her eyes. Wow. I

felt myself nod and my own mouth spread in a grin. We stared at each other like we'd been stunned into stillness. Then the sound of voices broke the spell and we remembered where we were and what waited if we didn't get the hell out of there.

I grabbed her hand again and we raced in the direction of my car. I quickly unlocked it and opened her door for her before sprinting over to my side.

"Do we need to grab your friends?"

Emily shook her head, her eyes on her phone again. "They're in Darcy's car. They just pulled away."

That was all I needed to hear. I carefully pulled out of my spot and drove in the opposite direction from the flashing blue and red lights down the street. Emily and I both exhaled loudly when we reached the main road outside the neighborhood. She let out a little giggle and smiled at me. I couldn't help but return it. My heart was still racing, and I wasn't sure if it was from the panic or Emily's close proximity.

"I guess I should drive you home," I finally said.

"Yeah. If you don't mind." She tucked her hair behind her ear again.

"Of course not. I am a gentleman, after all." I pretended to bow at her. I was acting so stupid, but I couldn't seem to help myself.

She gave me her address. "Thanks for getting me out of there, Jay." Her voice went quiet.

I reached over and squeezed her hand without thinking. "I know we both could have gotten in a world of trouble over that one. I hope nobody got ticketed. That would suck."

She sighed and squeezed my hand in return. My skin tingled. "I guess we'll find out tomorrow."

I took a deep breath. Now was my chance. "Speaking of tomorrow, do you maybe want to go to a movie or something?" I

shot a brief look her way and her eyes were wide. What the hell did that mean?!

“You mean, like a date?”

I swallowed thickly and forced a casual expression. “Well, yeah. Only if you want to.” I was crashing and burning. I didn’t know if I should let go of her hand or what.

“Um, okay. I’d like that.”

I glanced at her again and her smile was back. I forced my eyes back to the road before I crashed the damn car. She said yes! I was going on a date with Emily Vasser. Holy shit!

“Great.” I managed to keep my voice steady.

We pulled into her neighborhood and she directed me to her house, leaving her hand in mind the whole way. It made steering and using my turn signal a challenge, but I wasn’t about to let go. Her skin was warm and smooth and it felt amazing against mine. When we reached her house, I finally made myself release her hand so I could put the car in park. We turned to each other and both laughed nervously.

Emily gestured to her house. “I guess I should go.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, unsure of what to do with my hands. “Um, can I get your number? You know, for tomorrow?”

She shook her head and laughed at herself. “Oh, right. Sorry. Of course.” We exchanged numbers and I told her I’d text her in the morning.

Before I could even think about how to end our strange evening, she leaned over the center console and brushed a quick kiss over my cheek. I inhaled the scent of flowers and honey and my heart pounded in my chest. “Night, Jay.” Then she opened her door and ran to her house.

I watched her go and didn’t pull away until she was safely inside. And, even then, I gave it another minute so I wouldn’t run into a

mailbox. I cranked the radio up and sang along to every crappy song that played the entire way home, looking forward to tomorrow and everything it might bring.

*The next book in the Carolina Connections series is coming soon!
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