

VALENTINE'S DAY #3
from nick's pov



TDO Bonus Chapters

Nick's Confession #1

I have a Bookstagram account (@starkficktion) with 300k followers because I enjoy anonymously engaging in book discourse

I'd been obsessed with Emilie Hornby since the first day of school.

Well, maybe not *obsessed with*, but definitely distracted by. There was just something about her quiet smile and the way she color-coded her lecture notes that made it hard for me to ignore her, especially now that she'd popped up in my dreams two nights in a row.

Nothing sexual, but both nights she'd rear-ended my truck on the way to school.

That was all I could remember; just Emilie Hornby, crashing into Betty. Weird, right?

So when a moron who didn't know how to drive in snow slammed into me on the way to school, you can imagine my surprise when I approached the idiot's vehicle and discovered it was her.

Holy *shit*.

"Hey - you okay?" My eyes ran all over her, searching for any sign of injury while my heart pounded in my chest. "You hit pretty hard."

"I think so," she said, nodding, and I stepped back so she could get out. The smell of her perfume – *I would recognize that scent anywhere, swear to God* – made me drunk for a half-second before she climbed out and shut the door. "Oh no – it's smoking."

I followed her gaze to the hood of her van, where smoke was indeed beginning to pour out from underneath, and I said, “We should probably get out of the road.”

I got out my phone and called 911 while we walked over to the sidewalk, trying not to look at her as I spoke to the operator. The last thing I needed was for her to think I was checking her out, but I couldn’t stop myself from stealing one quick glance.

Which I immediately regretted.

Because no one wore clothes quite like Emilie.

She had this way of taking an outfit that belonged on an accountant somewhere – today’s black dress was no exception - but instead of styling it with pearls and old lady heels, she paired it with boots and tights and it *worked*.

Holy shit, did it work.

I realized she was watching me stare at her like a stalker, so I whispered, “Aren’t you cold in that?”

Her teeth were *literally* chattering, but she said, “Nah – I’m good.”

I wanted to laugh because it was so obvious she was lying.

God forbid you admit you were wrong on the outfit.

“They’re on their way,” I said as I put away the phone.

“Thanks,” she said, then added, “I’m Emilie Hornby, by the way. We sit at the same table in Mr. Bong’s class.”

Did she seriously think I didn’t know that? On most days, I did my best to pretend she wasn’t sitting beside me, driving me to distraction by taking perfect-penmanship notes and using hairpins to ensure nothing escaped from her low ponytail, but she couldn’t think I didn’t recognize her.

Could she?

I narrowed my eyes. “We do?”

That made her eyebrows go down. “Yes, we do. Since the beginning of the year.”

“Hmmm.” I don’t know why, but I liked the way my feigned unawareness obviously irritated her. “You sure?”

“Yes, ” she said, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

God, it was so hard not to laugh.

“Are you doing okay here?” I asked.

“I. Am. Wonderful,” she said, sounding anything but.

The first emergency vehicle showed up then, and everything proceeded to hit the fan. Her creeper van caught on fire, and then a cop wrote her a ticket while the firefighters put out the flames. I got the old jacket out of the back of my truck and handed it to her, feeling bad, and she actually took it with a *thank you*.

After the fire was out and the car was being hooked to the tow truck, I offered her a ride to school and she surprised me yet again by accepting.

“Thank you so much for the ride. It’s very nice of you,” she said, and she gave me a fake smile that bugged the shit out of me.

I didn’t want polite Emilie.

“It’s not really nice,” I said, putting the car into first and releasing the brake. “So much as it is practical. If I let you walk to school and you freeze to death, surely that would put a crimp in my karma. But by giving you a ride somewhere that I’m already going – no sacrifice on my part at all – I’m actually *earning* good karma.”

She muttered *lovely* under her breath, and God help me, I liked ruffling the feathers of Miss Good Girl.

“It *is* lovely,” I agreed, giving in to the smile.

She cleared her throat and said, “I love this song, by the way. Metallica’s awesome.”

That made me take my eyes off the road. “*You* like Metallica.”

Bullshit, Emilie.

I don’t know how I know, but I know that you’re lying.

I could see her nodding in my peripheral vision as she said, “Sure.”

“Then name three songs,” I challenged.

“What?” she said, annoyance making her sound like a pissed off little sister. “I don’t have to name three songs to prove I like them.”

“Then I’m going to assume you’re a poser.”

“Posing at what, exactly?” she replied, all outrage. “Someone who likes the sound of angry old guys barking out words?”

I wanted to laugh, but just grinned, instead. “See? I knew you didn’t like them.”

She rolled her eyes again, and then I *did* laugh.

“Do you always come at people when they’re just making small talk?”

I was *loving* this side of her, this agitated, riled up version of our unflappable valedictorian. “I wouldn’t call it *coming at people*. I just think if your small talk is about a band, you should probably know about said band.”

“I was being polite – ever heard of it?”

Mreow, I thought, but calmly said, “I wouldn’t really call pointless lying “polite.”

“It wasn’t lying,” she argued, shaking her head again. “I was mentioning it for the sake of conversation. It’s what strangers do when they’re attempting to be nice.”

“But we aren’t strangers.” I looked away from the road and at her, still smiling as I said, “You said you’re my lab partner.”

“I *am* your lab partner!”

It was hard to hold in more laughter as I said, “So then why did you say we’re strangers?”

“I have no idea,” she huffed, shaking her head.

And I have no idea why I’m messing with you.

I only knew that it was Valentine’s Day and I was actually smiling, so my mind was already blown and it wasn’t even eight o’clock yet.

“Wait a second,” I said, doubling-down on the messing, “Now I know where I’ve seen you. Aren’t you the girl--”

“Who sits by you in Chem? Yes,” she snapped.

“—who choked in the cafeteria?”

She made a little gasp sound, which made me glance over.

And she looked frustrated as fuck. I needed to stop, because torturing the girl who tortured me by merely existing didn’t help anything, but I was having fun and I never had that anymore.

Ever.

“I didn’t choke,” she said, clearing her throat before adding, “It just got stuck in my throat.”

“Wouldn’t that be the literal definition of choking?”

“No, it would not,” she corrected like an agitated teacher. “Choking is when food gets stuck in your windpipe and you cannot breathe. I could breathe; I just had food stuck in my esophagus.”

I pressed my lips together and squinted. “You sure that’s right?”

“*Of course* I’m sure – it happened to me.”

I made a noise in my throat, like a grunt of disbelief. “I’ve just never heard of that – I don’t know if it’s a thing.”

“I am *telling* you that it happened so you actually *do* know that it’s a thing.” Her voice was getting high-pitched as she explained, “Some people have a condition where food can get stuck in their throat. I have to take omeprazole every morning to ensure it doesn’t happen again. So it is definitely a thing.”

I pulled up to a stoplight and when the truck stopped, I turned my head and looked at her. “Are you sure you’re my lab partner?”

She groaned – literally – and said, “*Of course* I’m sure.”

“That girl is super quiet, whereas you seem pretty chatty.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m not chatty.”

“You seem excessively chatty, actually.”

“Well I’m not.”

“Yeah, okay.”

She was quiet for the rest of the ride, which was good. Because as I turned into the school parking lot, I reminded myself that a. she had a boyfriend, a douchey loser boyfriend who wore blazers to school – what the hell was *with* that, b. I didn’t care if she had a boyfriend because I

wasn't looking for anything, and c. the buzzing feeling I had with her in my truck was just the result of perfume intoxication.

Nothing more.

She muttered a grouchy little *thanks* when she opened the door and got out of my truck, but I couldn't *not* smile – yet again - when she unwrapped herself from E's oversized jacket and hurled it in my direction.

Nick's Confession #2

*I've never participated in a line dance because
if I wanted to look like a dipshit, I'd grow a mullet*

Was it possible to crack a tooth from clenching your jaw too hard?

It felt like bicuspid loss was a definite possibility as I did my best to survive the onslaught of memories brought on by Valentine's Day. Everywhere I looked as I walked down the hall, I saw garish reminders – posters, heart-shaped balloons, locker signs – of this day last year.

Of getting called to the office, where my dad was waiting for me with terrible news amongst the pink crepe paper hearts and freshly-delivered carnation bouquets.

I cranked the music in my AirPods a little louder, trying to drown out the world, but then I saw her.

What in the literal hell?

It was in the quiet hallway near the office, my traffic-avoiding shortcut, when I saw Emilie Hornby hiding behind the big potted trees.

I usually only saw her in Chem, but today I was on my second sighting already and there were still three periods left before Mr. Bong's class.

I should buy a lottery ticket, especially after the whole dream thing.

She hadn't seen me, so I crept up behind her and said, "What are you doing?"

She gasped and her head whipped around, and that impossible-not-to-smile thing happened again as she looked like a kid who just got caught stealing. But instead of answering, her guilty gaze darted behind me and she said, "Shhhh. Go away."

“Um.” I waved a hand toward the trees and said, “Are you stalking someone from back here?”

“No,” she said, smoothing a hand over her already-smooth ponytail and raising her chin. “I’m waiting for my boyfriend. Can you—”

She stopped talking as something caught her attention. I followed her gaze, and that dipshit boyfriend of hers was coming down the hall, flirting with Macy Goldman as he headed our way.

Emilie watched them, her face intently observing the duo as if she were trying to figure something out. She had on that clear, shiny lip gloss, the one she applied every day during Chem that I knew smelled like angel food cake, and I momentarily forgot everything that wasn’t Emilie’s lips.

God, I loved cake.

“You sure he’s your boyfriend?” I whispered, but she didn’t even look at me as she watched Josh and Macy exit the school.

“Wait!” she yelled, jumping out from behind the trees. Emilie grabbed my sleeve and tugged, pulling me along with her as she ran after them.

What. The. Hell.

I let her drag me behind her, curious to see what was about to go down even as my arm burned where she was touching it. Even as I heard the bell ring and knew I was tardy to Trig.

Josh Sutton turned around and in a split-second, everything crossed his weaselly little face. Guilt, irritation, surprise, and then he smiled and said, “Em!”

Macy’s eyes went back and forth between Emilie and I and she looked as confused as I felt.

“Um,” Emilie said, clearing her throat. “Are you going on a coffee run?”

It was weak and a lie – all four of us knew that wasn’t what she was wondering – but her asshole boyfriend said, “Yeah, you know Carson. He needs it every day.”

I wanted to throw something at his face, but before I could even fantasize about that Emilie said, “Nick and I are dying for coffee and need to get out of here. Care if we come with?”

What. The. Hell.

She looked at me like she was waiting for me to call her out, whereas her boyfriend was looking at me like he was trying to figure out who I was to her.

Macy said, “Of course.”

Josh was still staring at me with his eyebrows down but he said to Emilie, “You know how big my car is, Em. You up for riding in the middle?”

That’s right, Jacket Boy drove an MG like he thought he was Ferris Bueller or some shit.

“Sure,” she said and started walking toward his car – we all did, and she looked at me with big eyes that begged for me to go along with whatever this was.

I did *not* need to get in trouble for ditching class, and I definitely had no interest in squeezing into Josh’s midget.

But somehow, I found myself doing exactly that.

I was wedged in-between the door and Macy Goldman as Josh started the car and proceeded to drive like it was a Porsche and he was racing someone. Emilie was two people away from me in the tiny front seat, but when he took a wild corner and she gripped the back of the seat, she accidentally touched my shoulder.

Macy was leaning forward, so I was able to look directly at Emilie, who was giving me a wide-eyed look like she had no idea what to do in this situation.

So I mouthed the words *what the fuck*, just to make her smile.

She almost did, I could see it in her eyes, but then *she* mouthed the words *please help me*.

I sighed and had no idea what I was even doing there or how in God's name I could "help" her, but I'd do my best.

She asked Josh about the coffee, and it was hard to believe they were a couple. They were so...polite, so *not* natural together. But I couldn't believe she liked the guy at all, to be honest. I mean, was he objectively good-looking and smart? Yes. But he was also desperate for the entire world to think that which made him pathetic as hell.

She *had* to see that, right?

And he was obviously still close with his ex, which seemed like a giant red flag to me.

Did she see *that*?

"You don't have class this hour, Macy?" I asked, looking directly at Emilie so she'd catch on.

She rolled her eyes.

"I'm in Carson's class with Josh, so I just told him that Josh needed help carrying the drinks."

"Ah," I said, still looking at Emilie. "That's convenient."

"I texted you earlier to see if you wanted something," Josh said, clearly covering his ass.

"Oh, yeah, my phone is dead," she said, which was surprising. Emilie wasn't the type to let her phone die. Emilie was the type to have two spare power banks in her purse, one for "just in case" and one for back-up, just in case the "just in case" wasn't working properly.

"I always forget to charge mine, too," Macy said.

“I actually dropped it in the toilet,” Emilie said, and her face went red the minute the words left her mouth. Swear to God I could *see* the internal conflict on her face as she realized what she’d said. “I mean, not a dirty toilet – it wasn’t dirty.”

Oh, no – stop, Emilie.

But she didn’t.

She blinked fast as she said in a panicked voice, “I mean, yes, all toilets are dirty, but I mean there was nothing in–”

“Holy Christ,” I interrupted, just to get her to stop talking.

She looked at me, shell-shocked, like her entire world had been shaken by her own verbal diarrhea.

I wanted to laugh again.

But then Captain Elbow Patches whipped his car into Starbucks, pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head and said, “Okay, so I know what the girls want. What about you, dude?”

I looked out the window – *I just can’t look at that guy* – and said, “I’m good, but thanks. Dude.”

The ride back to school was just as awkward but with dripping cups this time, the air filled with inane conversation in a pathetic attempt to cover the elephant in the room.

Elephant = Josh and his two ladies.

But when we went our separate ways in the hall, I noticed it. *Sad*. A big cloud of sad darkened Emilie’s face as she watched her boyfriend and his ex-girlfriend walking away.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I said, hoping to interrupt her thoughts. “Witnessing that level of awkwardness was downright entertaining.”

“Shut up,” she said, but her angel food lips turned up into a tiny smile.

“Seriously.” I wanted to stay there indefinitely, looking down at her pretty face, but I turned and started walking away, instead. “You’ve really made this an amazing day, Emilie.”

Nick's Confession #3

I was named after Santa Claus

I got to Chem early that day, so I saw the stress on Emilie's face the second she walked in.

Something was wrong, and even though it wasn't my problem, I didn't like it.

Which was probably why I was watching her like a dumbass when she sat down and unzipped her backpack, instead of ignoring her like I usually did.

"So that was weird, right?" I said, referring to our bizarre coffee road trip.

She rolled her eyes and opened her textbook, ignoring *me*.

"One minute you were telling me to go away, and the next you were dragging me along on the world's most awkward trip to Starbucks."

She kept ignoring me, and I don't know why, but I lowered my voice and said, "You do know he's cheating with her, right?"

It wasn't my business, but goddammit, Emilie deserved better.

"Can we go back to not talking?" she muttered, barely giving me a glance as she flipped through her book.

"I don't think we can." I flattened my hand on her book so she had to stop flipping and look at me. "Because we're no longer strangers."

She did look at me then, those green eyes moving over my face like she was trying to figure out why I was suddenly in her business.

Good luck, sweetheart – I can't figure it out, either.

“But we can be,” she said, moving my hand off of her book. “I’m chatty – and you *hate* that – and you’re surly, which *I* hate. So let’s just pretend we never ran into each other this morning and you can go back to not knowing who I am.”

It was impossible not to smile at that, at how incredibly misinformed she was. Apparently I was *good* at my feigned ignorance, because the truth was that I felt like I didn’t know who anyone was at school *but* her.

“I don’t think I can do that,” I said, crossing my arms, leaning into my newfound enjoyment of engaging with her. “And you didn’t invite me to coffee. Technically, you dragged me.”

Bong walked in and started lecturing, but that weird dude wasn’t going to stop me.

“Guess what I read last period?”

“Shhhh,” she said, not looking at me.

“Dysphagia.” I leaned a little closer to her and said, “That’s what it’s called when food gets stuck in your throat but you aren’t choking.”

She made a noise, like she laughed but was trying to hold it in. Her eyes met mine and she said, “What is your deal?”

I shrugged. “No deal.”

“You never talk to me in Chem, and now you have information on the weird health thing that happened to me in the cafeteria.” Her long-lashed eyes narrowed to a squint and she said, “What are you up to?”

“I just wanted you to know,” I said, chuckling at her suspicious look, “That I looked it up, and it actually *is* a thing.

“I know it’s a thing – it’s *my* thing!”

“Emilie?” Mr. Bong sighed and looked at her because she’d just yelled in the middle of his lecture, and her cheeks got that sweet shade of pink that I was quickly becoming a big fan of.

“Sorry,” she said quietly.

I pressed my lips together, holding in a laugh, but then she looked at me.

She shook her head and tried scowling. She tried really hard.

But her eyes squinted and the corners of her angel food lips curled up the tiniest bit, into a reluctant smile.

I felt like I’d won something.

Nick's Confession #4

*I got in trouble for being "too happy" in second grade.
My incessant giggling drove my teacher so nuts that she called my mom.*

I looked up and it felt like the universe was playing a joke on me.

Because right there in the hallway, between me and the exit, were Chris Bray and Emilie Hornby.

What was this – the *fourth* time I'd seen her at school that day?

The hallway was loud, but I heard Chris tell her they had to walk home and then I heard Emilie say in the saddest, most depressing voice, "I cannot believe this day."

Don't do it. Don't do it, you fucking softie.

"You guys need a ride?"

You did it, assbag.

They turned around and it was almost comical, the difference in their expressions. Chris was beaming at me as if I were Santa Claus himself, and Emilie's eyes were narrowed like I'd just offered to murder her.

Chris said, "For real?"

"Sure," I said, shrugging. I was in no hurry to get home, where my parents and I would work very hard to pretend we *weren't* thinking about Eric as we ate dinner and watched TV, each of us secretly counting the minutes until we could escape to our bedrooms and grieve in secret.

"You ready now, or--"

“I have to do something first,” Emilie interrupted, giving Chris a very pointed look. Like she was reminding him of the “thing” she had to do. “I have to, um, run something to the north hall meeting room really fast.”

Chris narrowed his eyes and it was clear he wasn’t into whatever her plan was. “I just wanna go home, Em.”

Em.

“I need to find Josh first,” she said, holding up a one-sec finger and saying, “I’ll be quick.”

She turned away and started hauling ass down the hallway, so I looked at Chris and then we followed her.

She looked over her shoulder and frowned. “You don’t have to go with me – I can meet you at the car.”

“Nah – we want to,” I said, locking eyes with her and making her sigh loudly.

“Can’t you go over to his house later, like a normal human being on Valentine’s Day?” Chris said, whining as he followed behind me.

“I just have to give him his gift before I go.” She ran up to the door of the meeting room, where a “Mock Trial In-Session” sign was taped up on the green metal. “One minute and I’ll be ready.”

Emilie pulled open the door and popped her head inside. She whisper-yelled, “Josh! Pssst – Josh!”

What was she thinking right now?

I was able to see over her head, so I could see the people in the meeting room. Owen Collins – a total asskissing dickhead who was one of Josh’s buddies – yelled, “Joshua, you are being paged by your girlfriend.”

Which made everyone in the meeting room turn to stare at Emilie.

“This is so romantic,” I muttered, wondering why someone as smart as her was acting so desperate. Over a guy like *that*.

“Hey, Em.” Josh came to the door and looked at her like he was confused. “What’s up?”

“I, um, I have your present.” She held up the wrapped box and said, “I thought maybe we could do our exchange really quick before I go.”

“I don’t have your present with me,” he said, and it irked me that he wasn’t being nice about it. At all. Because even though she was kind of acting bonkers at the moment, she was still *Emilie*.

Emilie read books for fun, asked for extra credit, texted her grandma during Chemistry, and cackled like a child when her friends pummeled her with snowballs in the parking lot (I’d been parked one row over the previous week when they’d waged war).

She hummed to the Taylor in her Air Pods while reading before the bell, for the love of God. She was...all of *that*, yet he looked like he wished she’d disappear.

Such an idiot.

“And I really have to go,” Josh added dismissively.

“But don’t you have to work after this?” Emilie tucked her hair behind her ears and continued to force the issue. “I really want to give you my gift *today*.”

“Desperate much?” Chris murmured, and Emilie kicked him in the shin while keeping her attention on Josh.

I didn't know what her deal was, but it was clear she had some goal with Josh she was intent upon achieving ASAP. It was very on-brand for her, the way she refused to abort her plan even though it was absolutely failing, and I sensed it was about to be her demise.

"Listen, Em," Josh said, looking straight-up annoyed now. "I don't know what this is, but I'll talk to you later. I *have* to go."

"Okay," Emilie said, her face falling. She opened her mouth and somehow I knew. I knew what her goal was and I knew what she was about to say. "Well, um, I just wanted to tell you that I love--"

"Chicken." I pulled open the door, making Emilie stumble backward as I nudged my way in beside her, my hip pushing against hers. "She loves chicken and thought you, her boyfriend, should probably know that."

Josh scowled, looking back and forth between me and Emilie, and then he said, "Who even *are* you?"

"I'm Nick," I said, grinning as he looked like he wanted to choke me. "Remember?"

"I don't *love chicken*," Emily growled, pushing me out of the way with her whole body. "I love--"

"Look, I have to go, Em," Josh said coldly. "We'll talk later."

Josh walked away and the door slammed behind him. I watched as Emilie turned around, but she didn't look as embarrassed as I would've expected. Or even very sad. No, Emilie looked...like she was recalculating.

"I cannot decide whether to hug you after you humiliated yourself so badly, or kick your ass," Chris said.

"Please," she said, turning away from the door and walking into his chest. "Kick my ass."

Chris wrapped his arms around her and she buried her face in his hoodie.

And I was so...envious that it made my throat tight. Not *jealous*, but envious of the way Chris and Emilie had each other. Envious of the way she instinctively fell into him and the way he automatically reassured her.

Envious of that natural comfort.

And I felt like I was intruding somehow.

Chris gave me directions to their houses while we walked to the truck, and it was surreal that she'd hit me that morning with her car. Somehow, it felt like everything had changed, yet it'd only been six hours.

"Is everything okay, Em?" Chris asked her as he buckled in beside me on the bench seat and I started the car.

"I, um," she said, "I just really wanted us to have a big Valentine's Day moment."

"I'd say you succeeded," I said under my breath, putting the truck in gear and pulling out of the spot.

"Shut it," she said.

Yes, everything HAD changed. She was no longer the polite girl pretending to like Metallica around me.

"I'm not going to say anything bad about Joshua because I respect that you like him, but don't you think he was kind of...prickish to you just now?" Chris grabbed her hand and said, "I mean, yes, you were acting oddly, but he was a bit of a tool."

I felt Emilie look over at me as she quietly said to Chris, "Maybe we can talk about this later."

“Oh, come on, Emmer. After he witnessed that pathetic display of lovesick tomfoolery, I’d say he’s fine to be grandfathered into this discussion.”

That made me smile.

“Did you talk to Alex today?” she asked Chris, totally changing the subject.

Chris started talking about the guy he had a crush on, and that envy was back because I kind of wished I was their friend.

Talk about a lame, second grader thought, right?

They talked about Alex all the way to Chris’s house, and when he got out, he went over to Emilie’s window. I tried my best not to eavesdrop, but I wanted to fist-pump when I heard him tell her she was wrong and that she didn’t love Josh.

Yes, Chris!

But Emilie defended herself. She dug in her heels on the fact that she *did* love him, even though he was a cheating asshole who’d treated her like shit.

How could she think she loved him?

“You know you don’t love him, right?” I said as I backed the truck out of Chris’s driveway. I knew it wasn’t my business but the words wouldn’t stay inside.

“What?” I felt her watching me as she said, “How would *you* know?”

“How would you *not* know?” I asked, for some reason angry at her for even considering the notion that she might love that guy.

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Well, you should have it with *someone*,” I replied, glancing over. “You’re saying the L-word, but a few hours ago you were hiding behind plants to see if he was cheating on you.”

“That’s not what I was doing--”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s *not*,” she said defensively, looking at me like I was a lunatic. “I was just waiting for him.”

I pulled up in front of her house and turned to face her, shoving the truck into gear. Wanting her to hear me, desperate to convince her not to love him. “Even if that were true – and we both know it’s not – the vibe between you and your ‘boyfriend’ was awkward and polite. It was tense and weird. For fuck’s sake, it wasn’t love.”

Her eyes moved over me, over my face, and my breath felt stuck in my chest when she said, “Why do you care?”

The question lingered, and I felt like she knew.

Her big green eyes were pinning me down and I felt like she could see it all.

Because you deserve better.

Because I think about you all the time.

Because the thought of you saying those words to him makes something inside me hurt.

I cleared my throat. Shrugged. Said, “I don’t.”

“Good.” She grabbed her bag and reached for the door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime,” I said, swallowing as her perfume lingered behind her.

Nick's Confession #5

I've got a full-ride to Stanford but can't bring myself to tell my parents.

Valentine's Day

Well that was the weirdest dream I've ever had.

I laid there in bed (it was only five a.m. and I didn't have to get up until seven), staring at the ceiling fan above me as moments from the dream replayed in my mind. Usually dreams were like hazy recollections of blurry images, tiny snippets you could *sort of* remember (like the previous Emilie Hornby rear-ending Betty dreams), but this one was very different.

Because I remembered all of it.

Every single detail.

Like it had actually happened.

Emilie Hornby, dressed in a black plaid dress with tights and boots, hitting me with her car. *I was being polite – ever heard of it?*

Ditching class to get Starbucks with her and her boyfriend in his stupid car. *Please help me.*

Making her smile in Bong's class by mentioning dysphagia. *What are you up to?*

Ruining her attempted love profession. *I don't "love chicken."*

Giving her a ride home from school. *Why do you care?*

Eric telling me he knew exactly how to make her fall for me. *Just give her the jacket.*

It was the most vivid dream I'd ever had, and I was sad that something had woken me.

Not that the dream itself had been great – I hadn't brought Eric back to life or kissed Emilie or even convinced her that her boyfriend was a jerk. As far as dreams went, it was remarkably realistic.

But I'd been so *with* them. Like deeply, intimately, feel-them-in-my-every-molecule *with* them. I could count the freckles on her nose and hear the gravelly sound of Eric's voice because they'd been *so* there, and I fucking missed them already.

I rolled onto my stomach and put the pillow over my head, tightly closing my eyes. It never worked, but I was going to try my hardest to fall back to sleep and return to that dream.

Because all I wanted was a couple more hours with Eric, Emilie Hornby, and zero real-life consequences.

That wasn't so much to ask, was it?