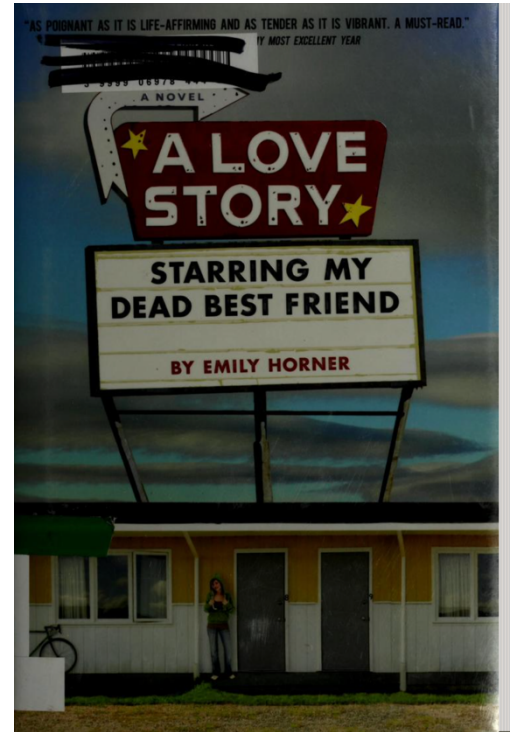


**PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT
CONTENT**

**SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT
AVAILABLE AT TEXAS
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

**BOOK REVIEW
*A LOVE STORY STARRING MY DEAD
BEST FRIEND*
By Emily Horner**



BOOK REVIEW *A Love Story Starring My Dead Best Friend* By Emily Horner

want to pounce on a job right away without making a plan or waiting for everything to line up perfectly.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, actually, I kind of do."

I looked at her, trying to find something on the surface that would tell me who she was and why she did anything she did, and I couldn't even begin to guess at her motives, or figure out whether or not I could put even a thread of trust in her. But she just shrugged and started to walk to her car, waving me forward over her shoulder.

I took the front wheel off my bike and loaded it into the trunk of her little black SUV, and we were off. For a while we didn't talk, and Heather spun between the radio stations so that we would have something to break the silence.

"So, are you ever going to explain why you're not going back to St. Joseph's next year?"

"Oh, you know Catholic schools. The gangs, the drugs, the violence."

"No, really."

Quiet. "Aw, **hell,**" she said in the end. "I guess I have to start somewhere. Have you ever had one of those breakups that is so boiling-in-oil painful that you can't even stand to go to the same school anymore, lest you catch a glimpse of their face in the hallway and start crying all over your math test?"

"No," I said honestly. "But I get the running away from your problems part. It's stupid, though, right? They always end up following us around anyway."

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I looked over at Heather, her head silhouetted in the driver's-side window, resting just for a moment on her outstretched fingertips. "It doesn't work?"

"Well," I said ruefully, "maybe next time I'll try something faster than a bike."

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to when they came on MTV. All of us, grass-stained and heartbroken; me, off-key and singing anyway. Because Julia used to tell me to.

We started reassembling our old routines, bit by bit. We started hanging out under the big oak tree for lunch again. And then, one day a week and a half after the memorial, Ollie came up to us holding a huge sheaf of paper in his hands.

"You know how Julia was working on a big secret project?"

"Wait, that was a *real* secret project?" Amy said. "I sort of assumed the secret project was making out with you." And I snickered, even though I shouldn't have snickered, because every so often I would e-mail her or pass her a note inviting her somewhere, and she'd just answer CAN'T, SEKRIT PROJECT. And then I'd assume the same thing.

"Much more exciting than that," Ollie said, and he started passing out his photocopies—thick enough that they were held together with the big industrial-size staples. The first page bore its title in a big typewriter font:

TOTALLY SWEET NINJA DEATH SQUAD

LIBRETTO & SCORE

MUSIC & LYRICS BY JULIA REINHOFER

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P.S. THIS IS NOT A REAL DRAFT, SO STOP READING, OKAY?

P.P.S. I REALLY MEAN IT. WAIT FOR THE SECOND DRAFT OR I **KILL** YOU.

"This is what we're going to do," Ollie said.

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"That's all?" It came out as a squeak. "She was *good*?"

"This isn't a popularity contest. It's not about who I think is a decent human being. But she can act, and she can sing, and she's graceful on her feet, and I think this play deserves that much. Julia deserves that much."

"No. She deserves better than this thing where we're at each other's throats and miserable. And do you really think she'd be happy about putting Heather in the play after how horrible she's been—not just to me, to everybody who didn't fit in? Jon, you remember what she was like to you. And Julia too."

Jon looked at the floor. "Yeah," he muttered. "But a constant barrage of low-grade teasing and smirking is sort of the definition of middle school. If it hadn't been her it would've been someone else."

"It was a long time ago anyway," Ollie said. "And if you don't get that, maybe you *should* just go."

Please. No. "Don't shut me out of this."

"You don't get it, do you?" Ollie said. He only took a step toward me, but it made me back away until I was all the way out in the deserted hall. The others were staring at me from behind him. "I'm just saying what everybody knows. You kept leaning on Julia's pity even after the friendship was over, and she let you."

I was stingy-eyed with the shock that he'd actually say it out loud, but I wiped my face with the back of my hand and bit my lip and kept staring up at him.

"Maybe she felt sorry for you because you didn't

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have any other friends, and maybe she was flattered by you hanging around like a lovesick puppy, but you can't mistake that for real friendship."

He turned away sharply. "And I'm not flattered that you wanted to fuck my girlfriend."

I took it like a slap, biting the inside of my cheek. One second more and I would've shoved him; but Lissa was already between us. "Time out, time out, time out."

Jon pulled me out down the hallway, and the door slammed shut. I ran, but he ran to keep up with me.

"Why are you the one who's going after me?" I snapped. "Is it like some gay person thing?"

"It's because if I stayed back there with Oliver, I'd have to beat him up."

"Well, okay," I said. "Get on it."

"Cassie, *calm down*." He sighed. "No, never mind. Get pissed off. You've got that right. But he didn't mean it, and you know that."

"Don't apologize for him."

"I'm not!" Jon said. "I'm just saying."

"Well, don't." I brought the back of my hand up against my cheek again and realized that I had stopped crying. This was the story of my life since middle school. I knew how to deal by now.

"I'll kick his ass if he doesn't apologize. Cut him some slack, though, just for now. It's not such a good time for him."

"It's not party time for any of us! I don't see why he gets

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more slack than me just because they were having *sex*."

"You're right," he said, and was quiet.

We were both quiet for several minutes. "You'll kick his ass for me?" I barely managed to smile.

"Maybe not. I could put superglue on him in his sleep, though."

"That works."

I could breathe again. I was not some pathetic friendless creature, if I had Jon.

I pulled myself up onto a table and sat there, swinging my legs in the air. Not calm, not yet, but cooling down.

"Hey," I said, "can I ask you a question I'm pretty sure I don't want to know the answer to?"

"Shoot."

"Was Ollie really, actually . . . jealous? Of us?"

"Kind of," Jon said. "In the sense that he was jealous when he wasn't Julia's first, second, and third priority, yeah. But he wasn't worried about you putting the moves on her."

"Oh?" I said as noncommittally as possible.

He was very slow to answer, and when he finally said something, it was, "Well, um, it's just . . ."

"It's just I wouldn't know how to put the moves on someone if I had a color diagram and an instruction booklet."

Jon grinned at me. "I wouldn't go that far. You're good with color diagrams."

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"It's not fair. You keep your hair short and admit to liking math and don't wear makeup—which, by the way, I am not allowed to do—and don't take an interest in fashion—which, by the way, I am also not allowed to do—and you make it to sixteen years old without ever having had a boyfriend, or even getting kissed, and everybody decides that you're a lesbian. Even if Heather Galloway had never told everybody that I was."

"Lissa says that homophobia is a tool the patriarchy uses to scare straight people into gender conformity," he deadpanned.

I blinked.

"Yeah, well, Lissa paints her nails, and wears more skirts than I do."

Still, he didn't ask. He had more sense than that, and maybe he'd been through too much of life to ask what I had been asking myself since I first discovered that everyone had reached that consensus without asking me.

Because, here was the thing. There was not and had never been a single boy who I really found attractive in an I-want-to-take-off-your-pants-now kind of way. Not in school, not among one-hit-wonder boy-bands and movie stars. I listened to other girls fawning over this one or that one and I just didn't get it. But there wasn't a single girl either. So clearly there was something terribly wrong with me, and I was probably only attracted to Mongolians or something. I probably wouldn't even make it to cat lady status when I got old. Guinea pig woman, maybe.

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Dad pushed his glasses up along his nose and frowned. My parents were Quakers, and beyond being pacifists, and not allowing makeup and cable TV, this was what they believed in. When the Spirit tells you to do something, you had better be listening. Even if it seems crazy, even if it seems dangerous, you had better be prepared to take a step outside what is safe and sane.

I didn’t believe that **God** told some guy, however many thousands of years ago, “Hey, build a ginormous boat in this desert over here.” I liked it as a story, though, because it seemed like the kind of thing **God** ought to say. There were crazy stupid things that needed to get done, or should have gotten done, or turned out to be wonderful when they did get done. And maybe, if **God** ever did tell people what to do, it was to stick up for these crazy stupid things that no one in their right mind would ever do otherwise.

Things had shifted in the hour and a half I’d been thinking about this. It wasn’t just that I didn’t want to work on their play, and it wasn’t just that I didn’t want to have to deal with Heather and Oliver. I imagined the long flat yellow fields out on the road, where the sky is enormous and you feel like you could go on forever, and I wanted that like I wanted air or water. I wanted to be swallowed up in that great expanse of nothingness. I wanted to devote myself to a purpose.

I looked up, and Dad was looking out of the garage,

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toward the great expanse of suburb. “I know, okay? Me needing to do this doesn’t mean anything. Everything’s a matter of life or death to someone whether it’s going to the party on Friday or being allowed to stay out past curfew. And just because I think this is different, it doesn’t mean it actually is.”

Now he looked at me. “But it is different,” he said, and he put his hand on my shoulder and I just nodded because I didn’t trust myself to say anything without starting to cry.

“Have you talked to your mother?”

I shook my head.

“She was talking to Sheila a few nights ago.” Julia’s mother. “She was saying that she didn’t know what to do with Julia’s ashes. She thought that Julia would have wanted to go so much further.”

Sure. Her parents were always putting away money for summer camp, or college, or a piano that was half-way in tune, and there wasn’t much left over for big vacations. That was why Julia had wanted California, to get as far away as she possibly could, just for once.

“We know how much she meant to you,” Dad said. He waited for a moment.

And that was when I dared to let myself hope.

I spent the whole weekend talking to my parents, and Julia’s mom, and starting to assemble a list of everything

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The bakery was decorated in crayon-bright colors that almost reassured you that nothing bad could ever happen. We got a small, high table by the window and ordered cakes that were tiny and perfect, layered with chocolate and fruit.

"Of course I had to be dumb enough to pick the place I always used to go with Gianna. But I'm not going to think about that now."

"It's out of the way." And also, as far as I could tell, out of the way from St. Joseph's, and from Heather's place.

"That is the point." She raised her eyebrow and stuck her fork into three layers of chocolate mousse. "She used to get antsy when we sat by the window . . ."

"You didn't want to talk about it."

"I lied. And plied you with pastry."

She smirked, and I smiled back, a little befuddled. I was okay with us being civil to each other. I was okay with us talking through our issues. But since when were we *friends*?

But I got the sense that this wasn't the right time to argue with her. So I didn't. "You can do that, if the food's this good."

"So. Last night my sister and brother and nephews came over for supper, and while I was sprawled out on the floor in the middle of playing knights-and-dragon with the little guys, there's a knock at the door and it's Gianna. And we have a great big screaming fight right out there on the porch. And all I can think is—for months I wished that I could introduce her to my sister and brother and little nephews, and *that's* how it finally happens.

"Karma," Heather said, pointing her fork at me. "You see? The universe has dealt with me for everything I did to you."

I didn't see.

"I spent a good year or two being a total bitch because I didn't want anyone to find out that I was *gay*, including myself, and by the time I managed to deal with

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PROFANITY COUNT AND OTHER SENSITIVE WORDS

F*ck – 1

Sex – 5

Beer – 3

Gay – 13

S*cks – 4

B*tch – 3

H*ll – 7

Jesus (in vain) – 3

D*mn – 5

Condoms – 1

Kill – 7

God (in vain) – 16

RED FLAGS

Language

Drinking

NORMALIZING:

Over the course of the last several years, subjects not consistent with most citizens of the United States are being normalized and pushed into our society via social media, TV, music and our public school system.

This book falls under the definition of Normalization.

Definition:

Normalizing a person refers to social processes through which ideas and actions come to be seen as “normal” through repetition or through ideology and propaganda. To alter, modify, convert, change, adapt.

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools.