

CLEAN BREAK

Farm College #2

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Chapter One

TRAVIS

I was thirty minutes early for my first Entomology 101 class of the semester, so I popped a squat on the floor next to the hallway vending machine to watch the thirst-trap cowboys walk by. The Entomology Department was part of the College of Agricultural Sciences, and the class was in the ag building, so the hall was blessedly full of corn-fed eye candy.

The only reason I was taking Entomology 101 was because the teacher, Dr. Greer—who was total Daddy goals—had told me it would be fun. I'd needed to add a blow-off class to my schedule in order to keep my full-time student status, and there was something satisfying about taking the weird bug class during my last semester of undergrad. It appealed to my sense of ridiculousness.

A pair of pristine work boots moseyed up to the vending machine, and I glanced up to get a view of the guy's long, denim-wrapped legs. They were thick, like tree trunks, stretching the worn jeans in the most mouth-watering way. My

perusal lovingly passed the dude's hips, waist, strong chest, and landed on his face.

Connor fucking Blume.

Out of all the hot cowboys I could have checked out this morning, the first one to catch my eye was the one guy I'd have been perfectly happy to never see again.

I tugged my hood down and drew my knees to my chest, hoping he wouldn't notice me.

He dropped some quarters into the machine, made a selection, and bent over to pull his food out of the compartment at the bottom, which was when he spotted me, *of course*. We both froze, eyeing each other. I glanced away, and he straightened with his snack in his hand.

He'd bought raisins. Seriously. *Who the fuck buys raisins from a vending machine?*

I legit hated him. Everything about him. From his auburn hair to his powerful thighs to his choice of vending machine snack. He sucked.

He just stood there, not saying hi or smiling or anything, so I shoved my earbuds in my ears. Asshole must have gotten the point because he turned on his heels and lumbered off.

Okay, he didn't *lumber*. His walk was too precise for that. Everything about Connor Blume was precise. Unless he was tipsy. Then he was a bumbling, insulting mess.

I tried to concentrate on the music blaring in my ears—it was one of my old running playlists—but it was too easy for my mind to wander. And it did wander, straight over to Connor holding up a wall at the end of the hallway. He was surrounded by other students, and they all appeared to know each other.

I didn't know anyone here.

This building suddenly felt far away from the English building, which was much more likely to have people like me—artsy, weird, queer, Black.

Though, Connor was queer—no doubt about that.

He was watching me now, eating his stupid raisins.

Connor seemed uneasy in crowds. I hated that I knew that about him, but it was one of the things that had enticed me when I'd first noticed him a year ago. Every Wednesday he'd show up with his friends at the Lumberyard—the only gay bar in Elkville, Oklahoma—and sit through the evening like he was in a dentist's chair. That cautious, uncomfortable cowboy act had made me want to ease him. Draw him out.

Lot of good that had done. I always fell for jerks.

Jerks shouldn't be hot—it wasn't fair—but Connor, undeniably, was both. I'd never seen him with stubble, but he had a delicious red shadow on his jaw this morning. He was wearing a Carhartt jacket, like every redneck ever, and it added dimension to his broad chest.

That chest had felt so good under my hands the one time I'd gotten close enough to touch him.

Connor dropped his box of raisins, and they spewed all over the hallway. He kneeled to clean up his mess, and his face was flushed. Oh yeah, he was hot and bothered by my eye-hate-fucking.

Which was good. Because he bothered me right back.

“Travis Bradford. I was happy to see you on the class list.”

I tore my eyes away from Connor and scrambled up to greet one of my favorite people ever. Dr. Greer was stocky and had a silvery beard and deep brown skin. Plus, one of the best laughs ever.

“Hi, Dr. Greer. After hearing you talk about this class last semester, I decided I couldn't miss it. I hope I'm not the only non-major enrolled.”

Dr. Greer was the faculty sponsor for QSOC—Queer Students of Color—one of the student groups out of the Spectrum Center here on campus. I'd met him on my college visit when I'd been a restless, heartbroken eighteen-year-old searching for a new home after all my hopes and dreams had been ripped apart. My parents had been understandably

wary about me going to college in a wheat field in Oklahoma, but Dr. Greer had put them at ease. He was good at that.

“Nah. We usually have several non-majors. It’s a fun class, so word gets around. Any news on those law school applications yet?”

I grinned. “I’ve gotten an early acceptance and a denial. Still waiting on my number one school, but don’t want to jinx it.”

Dr. Greer’s big, booming laugh drew the eyes of students around us. “Let’s change the subject, then. Did you have a nice holiday break?” he asked.

I caught up with Dr. Greer until it was time for class to begin, and we walked into the room together.

The classroom was set up stadium style, with long tables rather than desks. Most students had already found seats, which left me with few options that weren’t the front row or uncomfortably close to Connor, whose presence in the fourth row was like a shining beacon. Or a bin of smelly garbage I needed to avoid.

Garbage, for sure.

I squeezed into an empty seat at a table with three girls wearing shirts announcing they were on the equestrian team. Connor was in the row behind me, which was for the best. I wouldn’t be tempted to stare.

Maybe I’d be able to make it through this entire semester without having to interact with him. If we did have to interact, I could pretend I didn’t know him. Didn’t remember him. He’d only broken my ridiculously easy-to-break heart last year, which was my fault for cultivating a dumb crush on a man I hadn’t actually known. I probably wasn’t anything to him except an almost-hookup that had petered out before it got good.

Yeah, I didn’t want to know him at all.

Falling for assholes was a past-Travis mistake, and I was

working on myself. Becoming a better person. Focusing on my future and career rather than boys.

Past Me: got way too invested in dumb crushes.

Current Me: had no shits to give about boyfriends or crushes or anything beyond no-strings hookups.

Future Me: was going to hightail it out of this cow town and forget all the fuckboys in it.

“Good morning and welcome to Entomology 101,” Dr. Greer said cheerfully from the front of the class. All the chitchat died down as he passed out the syllabus and started the boring first-day-of-class ritual of reading it word-for-word.

It didn’t matter how cool a teacher was, I’d never met one who could make syllabus day interesting.

Dr. Greer outlined the different course modules—basic biology and behavior of insects, folklore and mythology of insects, insect-borne illnesses, insects and agriculture, insects and forensic science. He flipped the syllabus to the next page, and the class followed suit, the rustle of paper soothing and familiar.

On the top of the page was the heading, *Madagascar Hissing Cockroach Observation Project*.

“As I’m sure you know,” Dr. Greer stated, “you’ll all be taking home a Madagascar hissing cockroach for most of the semester.”

Excuse the fuck out of me?

Dr. Greer had not told me I’d have to take a bug *home with me* when he’d waxed poetic about this class. He continued to explain the project, but I had static in my ears. My skin prickled, like bugs were crawling over my arms. Which was apt, truly.

How gross.

“Now, let’s talk about assignments,” Dr. Greer continued, as if he hadn’t just dropped a bomb. “You’ll see on the syllabus that there are daily ‘partner assignments.’ *Yes, I know.* I hear your grumbling. I don’t care. These are participation and class

assignments, so it's not like you'll be dependent on someone else for large projects. You'll be paired with your buddy today, and if people drop or join the class, we'll rearrange as needed. I'd suggest sitting next to your partner going forward, as we'll have daily discussion questions where you'll be required to converse with them and turn in your answers. If you have major issues with your assigned partner, please don't hesitate to visit me during office hours, and we'll work it out."

I was feeling less and less sure about this class. I'd take boring-ass literature about some middle-aged fuckhead's existential crisis any day of the week over a cockroach and busy work.

Dr. Greer moved on to explanations of the midterm and final, as well as minutiae about the Madagascar hissing cockroach project. We wouldn't get our cockroaches until after the first drop date, so I'd have a couple of weeks without a pet bug to care for. *Thank you, Jesus*. Also, this class didn't have many assigned readings.

Maybe things were looking up.

"That's about it, class," Dr. Greer said. "If there are no questions, I'll pair you up with your partner so you can meet and exchange contact information before class is over . . . No questions? Awesome. I've found the easiest way to pair up is alphabetically by last name."

Ah shit.

My adrenaline spiked and sweat slicked my skin. That was worse news than a pet bug. *Blume* and *Bradford* were way too fucking close.



CONNOR

My day had been going exactly as planned. I'd walked to all of my classrooms yesterday, so I knew the most efficient route to

each. I'd woken up with enough time to iron my shirt and still get to my first class early. And I'd remembered quarters, so I could get a snack before said class started.

I'd also made three different lists last night, so I felt prepared for the day.

One for class materials:

- Planner
- 3 College-ruled Notebooks
- 4 Pens
- Notecards
- Whiteout
- Yellow Highlighter

A to-do list:

- Schedule meeting with advisor
- Buy Scantron forms
- Deep clean kitchenette in apartment
- Work shift at Feed Store

And, lastly, a list of goals for the week:

- Complete class readings for next week
- Finish deep clean of entire apartment
- Be social – to a degree
- Delete Tinder, again
- Go to the gym twice

Travis Bradford was not on any of my lists.

A lot of non-agriculture majors took Entomology 101 because of the Madagascar hissing cockroaches, but Travis had never struck me as someone who would be interested in insects. Not that I knew Travis. I didn't.

I hadn't realized how much I wanted to know him until I'd

ruined all chances of it ever happening last year. Now the thought of facing him turned my stomach.

As soon as Dr. Greer announced that class partners would be assigned using alphabetical order, I started taking stock of the students I knew in the class. There had to be someone with a last name between his and mine. Blume and Bradford. There were so many letters between *L* and *R*.

“Please raise your hand as I call your name, so your partner can find you,” Dr. Greer instructed. My heart was hammering so hard I could feel it in my temples. I could taste it on the back of my tongue.

He started in the *As*. In no time at all, he’d called my name.

I raised my hand, and Dr. Greer smiled kindly. “And Travis Bradford.”

Fuck. Little tendrils of anxiety snuck through my brain and attacked. Travis was sitting in front of me. I’d stared at the back of his head for the entire class, so I had a great view of him. When Dr. Greer called his name, he didn’t flinch, like me, or react at all for several stomach-churning seconds.

Finally, he lifted his arm and rotated around slowly. When his eyes met mine, there was no recognition in them. No reaction. He didn’t smile or nod. Or glare. Nothing.

There was a lot of commotion in the room as Dr. Greer continued calling names and students moved around the classroom. Normally, that much noise and socializing would have put me on edge, but it paled next to the unease already slithering through me. I stared at Travis as he stood up. The guy next to me vacated his seat to join his class partner, and Travis made his way toward me, taking the long way around to get to my table.

I was hit by *déjà vu*. He’d come at me like that once outside the Lumberyard, slowly, as if he were approaching someone who was skittish. I’d wanted him badly that night, but I’d been so surprised by his interest that all my words had jumbled in my

brain until they fell from my mouth in a disastrous mess. At least I would never again make the mistake of blurting out that I found kissing “*distasteful*,” especially with my dick in someone else’s hand.

If only I could blame that night on my best friend, Desiree. Desi had been lecturing me about asking for what I wanted when it came to sex and being honest about what I didn’t like. And I didn’t enjoy kissing. Not usually. Especially with a person I didn’t know. It was too wet and invasive. I hated feeling spit dry around my lips, or a tongue all thick and slick and unwieldy in my mouth.

But that night, I’d been tipsy—hence, my lack of filter and use of a word like “*distasteful*”—and Travis had misunderstood. I couldn’t even remember how that conversation had fallen apart so quickly, only that it had.

Travis took the seat next to me. His face was blank as he presented his hand for me to shake.

“I’m Travis. Nice to meet you.”

I shook his hand and stared at him—at his bright brown eyes and plush lips and smooth dark skin. Did he not remember me? That didn’t make sense. He’d glared at me so hard before class that I’d gotten flustered and dropped my raisins. People didn’t frown at other people like that if they were strangers, did they?

After a couple of seconds, Travis said, “Dude, this is where you respond with *your* name.”

I pulled my hand back. He knew my name, and not just because Dr. Greer had said it. “I’m Connor.”

Travis scoffed, and I picked up the closest object—a pen—and gripped it hard in my fist.

He was messing with me, right? Surely he remembered.

But what if he *didn’t* remember me? It wasn’t like our weird encounter was exactly inspiring. If he didn’t remember me, we could hit reset.

“I guess we should exchange emails and phone numbers.

I'm pretty good about attendance, and I do *not* like carrying deadweight on assignments," Travis said pointedly.

"I am not deadweight." Just because I didn't speak up in class did not mean I was a bad student. I was shy. I had anxiety and OCD. Those things sometimes locked me up. Travis could deal with it.

"I never said you were."

I shook my head, frustration making my thoughts feel poorly cobbled together, and scribbled my email and phone number on one of my blank notecards.

After I handed it to him, he stared at it for a long second. "Your handwriting is scary perfect."

He reached over, his arm brushing mine and stealing my breath, before snatching a notecard from my stack. He wrote down his number and email address and handed it back.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome. I might drop this class though," he said airily, as if it didn't matter. "I didn't know about the cockroach thing. Not sure I can handle a pet bug."

"I thought everyone knew about the Madagascar hissing cockroaches. They're why most people take this class. It's why it's popular." People were starting to leave the classroom, but I'd missed Dr. Greer releasing us.

"Well, some of us aren't know-it-alls." Travis's voice was cutting, and a chill rushed down my spine. I'd heard variations on that insult my whole life—uptight, stuffy, stuck-up, fussy, anal. A "know-it-all" wasn't that bad in comparison, but it hurt.

"Are you always a jerk?" I said before I could stop myself.

Travis touched his chest in mock horror. "Excuse me?"

I clammed up. I hated conflict, even conflict I brought on myself, and I could *not* believe those derisive words had escaped me. He made me lose my head, had since the moment I'd first met him.

After glaring for an uncomfortable length of time, Travis

gritted out, “You’re not exactly making me want to work with you, Connor Blume. Normally it takes scared, repressed douchebags at least an hour to insult me. This might be a record.”

My stomach hit the floor. I started to apologize, but Travis cut me off.

“Nothing to say?” He shoved the notecard with my number on it into his backpack. “And I’m the jerk?”

He was out of his seat and halfway to the door before I’d taken a breath. He was leaving, and this might be my only chance to talk to him if he dropped the class. Apologizing to Travis Bradford had not been on any of my three lists, but my mom liked to say that I needed to be more spontaneous.

I caught up with him on the fourth-floor landing.

“Travis,” I called, and he came to an abrupt stop, creating a bottleneck on the stairs. I shuffled him out of the way and into the fourth-floor hall, which was deserted.

He rounded on me, and there was fire in his dark eyes. Up until that moment, he had seemed mostly unaffected, like I was a big joke. Maybe it was messed up, but the anger in his eyes and the hard set of his square jaw made him the sexiest guy I’d ever seen.

“What the fuck do you want?” he bit out.

“I want to talk.”

“Then talk.”

I glanced around. We were the only ones in the hallway, but the thought of anyone coming upon us made my hands shake. I hated being the center of attention. I hated other people’s eyes on me. Hated making a scene.

I jerked open a storage-closet door that Travis had stopped beside. It had a shelf of cleaning materials, but was mostly full of office supplies for the graduate assistants who shared offices on this floor.

“Please,” I said with a gesture toward the open door. “Can we talk in private?”

He eyed me. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Travis stormed into the closet and I followed. He shut the door behind me and leaned against it. Someone had tacked green, glow-in-the-dark stars to the back of the wooden door. They were barely illuminated in the dim light of the room. It made the closet feel dreamy.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He exhaled noisily. His warm breath hit my neck and raised goosebumps down my arms. I took a step closer to him.

“For what? Calling me a jerk?”

“Yes.”

He scowled when I didn’t go on.

“Is that all? Why did you pull me in here?” he asked.

I opened my mouth to respond, but lost all thought when he pushed his black-framed glasses higher up his nose. The smarty-pants thing really did it for me, and now we were in an enclosed space, and he smelled good.

We were so alone, and it hadn’t occurred to me until that moment that coming into this storage closet with me took courage. The last time we’d been alone, I’d hurt him with misplaced words and my own self-consciousness. He’d hurt me with acerbic comebacks. It hadn’t been pretty. But still, he’d followed me in here.

He rolled his eyes. “Jesus Christ, I’m not sure I can handle the uncomfortable silences for a whole semester. Are you like this with everyone, or am I extra special? Because I’ve gotta tell ya, I don’t—”

I reached up, cupped his smooth jaw, and ran a thumb over his full bottom lip. His voice cut off abruptly. I couldn’t help but zero in on his mouth, his straight white teeth, the pink of his tongue as his mouth dropped open on a gasp.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to keep holding his face steady and still and press our lips together. The desire fired

through me, so shocking that I didn't want to ignore it. I never wanted to kiss.

"Travis," I whispered, pressing a half step closer to him. "Can—"

"You don't kiss men." His eyes were wide, and he was breathing hard.

"So you do remember me."

"Of course I fucking remember you," he snarled.

"I was a little tipsy last time we talked, and you had my penis in your hand. I wasn't speaking clearly."

A barely there smile flitted across Travis's face. It felt like a victory, until he said, "I'm sorry, Connor. You're gorgeous, but I don't play with homophobic shitbags. I'd hate to get my *gay* on you."

I dropped my hand. "What are you talking about? I'm not homophobic."

He ran a fingertip from my chin, over my Adam's apple, and tapped it against the hollow of my throat. That fingertip alone was more erotic than most of my previous sexual encounters, few though they were. I swallowed and had to force myself not to pin his wayward hand to the wall. I wanted to hold him down.

"No offense, baby doll, but a man who lets other dudes touch him or suck him off or *anything* like that without being willing to return the favor or even give the other guy a *kiss* is not the type of man I'm going to waste my time on. Or my friendship."

He'd misunderstood me. Story of my life.

There were so many things I wanted to say to that. Starting with, *You didn't suck me off last year.*

And, *I would have happily sucked you off.* It would have been heaven on earth, to have him in my mouth. I was good with my mouth for most things except talking. Next, *Before you approached me last year, some asshole had told me that I was only bisexual*

because I hadn't sat on the right dick yet, and I was flustered and mad and uncomfortable.

Lastly, *I want more than anything to be your friend.*

But I didn't say any of those things.

I kissed him.

Travis was taller than me, which was novel. He also had the sexiest mouth—it was quick with a comeback and a smile, but he only seemed willing to extend *one* of those to me today. I'd thought about his mouth relentlessly last year after I'd told him I wasn't a fan of kissing. I'd wondered if kissing him would have been different.

It was.

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