

DARED

and

Confused

**A Love is an Open Road story
by**

Adara O'Hare

DARED AND CONFUSED

Jackson Conroy and his friends have been playing “Truth or Dare?” together for years—long enough to know exactly how the game is going to go every time they get together, much to Jackson’s chagrin. As the group has gotten older and gone off to college, the games have become fewer and further between. Now with graduation looming just around the corner, the group decides to get together over their final Spring Break to play a few more rounds while they still can.

The game starts no differently than any other they’ve played for the past several years, but this time Jackson’s best friend takes an opportunity to corner him into kissing Chet Montgomery. Chet makes good on the dare to kiss Jackson without any hesitation. But it’s when the kiss ends that Jackson’s confusion begins.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

DARED AND CONFUSED

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Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A photo of two cowboys in their early twenties kissing in a barn. One man wears a maroon-and-white gingham shirt and a black Stetson, and the other a blue-and-white gingham shirt and a straw-colored Stetson.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It started with too many shots of Jack and a game of "Truth or Dare?". It was only supposed to be a quick kiss. I've never kissed another guy before. So why did I find myself back in his arms, lost in his brown eyes the next night? And why does the thought of never kissing him again make me feel like I would be missing out on the hottest thing in my life?

Please give these hot country boys their story.

I would prefer a contemporary story, no fantasy or paranormal. Hot sexy times would be greatly appreciated!

Thank you,

Liza

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, college students, young adult characters, friends to lovers, first time, blow job, frottage, coming out, "Truth or Dare?", HFN, Southern U.S.A. colloquialisms, pomosexual, gray asexual

Word Count: 17,068

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Liza for the fun prompt. I've wanted to write a "Truth or Dare?"-based story for a while, and this was the perfect opportunity. (I had a wee bit too much fun with the dialect also.) I hope it meets with your approval.

Thank you to everyone who helped whip this story into shape. To my beta, Jay: thank you so much for your thoughts to help me get this story ready; you were right on the mark. To my editor, Anna: thank you for your insights; they helped me get it right. To the DRitC Event Team: you're amazing—beta readers, editors, formatters, proofreaders, QAers, and cover designers—this event wouldn't be what it is without all of your hard work. (And as I'm part of that team, I would know!) Thank you so much for all of the eyes and expertise you lend. This story is better thanks to all of you.

DARED AND CONFUSED

By Adara O'Hare

It was their last Spring Break together before most of them would graduate from college, and the group had been sitting around the campfire for the last hour, knocking back the first of three fifths of Jack Daniel's and a couple twelve packs of beer, trying to take the edge off of the chilly Texan night.

"Hey, Jacks—" Linc started.

Jackson waited for it.

"—truth or dare?"

"Well, hrm. What should I go with this time?" Jackson pretended to think about it for a moment. "How 'bout truth?"

Kristin groaned while Linc muttered, "Pussy," and Budd shouted, "Jesus H., Jacks, man the fuck up!"

All of it rolled off him like water off a duck.

"Where'd yer name come from?" Linc asked.

Jackson rolled his eyes. Budd clinked his beer bottle with Linc's, saying, "Heh, some things never change."

Indeed. He was tired of answering this particular question, but nowadays it was something of a tradition to start off the game by asking him this.

Gathered on the logs were his best friend Gabriela, Lincoln, Budd, Kristin, and he, who had all graduated together. And though Chester—or Chet, as he preferred—had been three years ahead of them in school, he'd always been part of the group as well. The six of them had been playing "Truth or Dare?" together for over a decade.

Tonight, however, Kristin had also brought her new beau with her, Nash by name, and Gabby had brought along her boyfriend, Rusty. Gabby's little sister, Maria—though everyone called her Meg—had tagged along this time as well. She was the only one under the legal age to drink, but she sipped slowly on a beer, occasionally making faces at the swill.

At least the story would be new to these three.

“My momma always said she met m’daddy while starin’ at a Jackson Pollock paintin’, and she swore she saw the same pattern flash before her eyes the night they conceived me, so that’s why she decided to name me Jackson Pollock Conroy,” he replied.

“Man, that story never gets old.” Budd hooted. “Jacks, take off yer shirt, ya truth-tellin’ pussy.”

“Says you,” Jackson muttered as he removed the gingham button-down, per the specially made house rule that applied mainly to him because he *always* said truth anymore. The night air hit his skin, making it prickle with goose bumps, and it pebbled his nipples instantly. “Jeezus, it’s colder than a witch’s tit out here. Who in the Sam Hill decided we should get nekkid tonight just ’cause we’re all home for Spring Break, anyway?” He shivered and scooted closer to the fire. “Kristin, truth or dare?”

This was also something of a tradition; Jackson’s first question always went to Kristin, just in case she ever decided she might feel like telling the fucking truth for once about the night of Junior Prom, but her answer to him was always—

“Dare.” She smirked, already somewhat toasted.

“I dare ya not to touch Nash sexually in any way for the next five minutes, including kissing,” Jackson said, smirking back at her. House rules prevented him from making it any longer than five minutes, or he would have.

Kristin dropped her jaw in surprise, and she gaped at him silently for a whole four seconds before she burst out laughing.

“Fuck that!” she hollered as she slammed a hand down on Nash’s jeans-covered family jewels and grabbed zealously, causing Nash to wince in pain (and the rest of the guys in sympathy). She then swiped an unopened fifth of Jack out of the paper bag at Budd’s feet, removed the cap, and took a generous swig before anyone could tell her to take her penalty shot. As per house penalty rules, she also removed a piece of clothing—her shirt—proudly displaying her large endowments in a bright-red sheer bra that clearly revealed her puckered nipples beneath.

Linc clinked his bottle with Budd’s again. “Yup, some things never change. She’ll be the first one drunk an’ nekkid again, like usual.”

“Yeah, but this time her boy Nash over there gets to plow that field instead of you or me.” Budd snickered and added, “Or Jacks over there.”

Jackson shot Budd a dirty look. “Fucker. You know I ain’t done *that*.” Jacks nodded in Kristin’s direction.

“That’s not what she says.”

“Yeah, an’ that makes her a liar as well as a whore, don’t it?”

Nash looked like he was about to jump up from his log to pummel Jackson, but Kristin put her hand on his arm.

“Naw, babe, it’s all good. It’s just part of the game,” she explained. “Sides... ya already knew I’s a whore before ya met me. Jacks, though”—she looked over at Jackson and batted her eyelashes at him—“he ’n’ I have history.”

“Yeah. Jacks.” Budd snorted. “And me, and Linc, and at least half of our graduatin’ class. In fact, not countin’ Rusty o’er there, who’s as new to the group as Nash is, I think the only man here who can claim to have *not* seen yer cooter is Chet.”

Jackson was about to angrily emphasize his innocence at the top of his lungs, but Chet spoke first. “Uh uh. Don’t drag me into this mess y’all got goin’. I was at A an’ M when that shit hit the fan.”

Linc and Budd and even Rusty laughed, and Nash relaxed his posture and settled onto the log once more. Nash threw a questioning look at Jackson, who turned away to stare stonily at the ground.

“Jacks—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jackson cursed under his breath.

“—truth or dare?” Kristin finished.

“You know it’s truth.”

“Then play bang, marry, kill from the people in this circle. And”—she hurried to continue—“at least one of the three has to be a guy.”

“That’s more of a dare than a truth,” Jackson protested.

“But you have to tell the truth about who you would do each of those things with,” Kristin explained.

“Ruling?” Jackson asked the group.

Budd looked at Lincoln and they shrugged. “She’s right. You’re basically just telling the truth. Should be natural for ya at this point, Jacks.”

Jackson scowled when Gabby and Chet nodded too. The others remained silent.

"Fine. Well, I'd marry Gabby." He turned to face Rusty and smiled. "No offense, man."

"None taken," Rusty replied.

He turned back to Kristin. "And ya know I'd kill you."

"What? You mean you'd bang a guy over me?" Kristin looked taken aback, as though the thought had never occurred to her Jackson might actually answer that way. "Who ya gonna bang then?"

"What difference does it make?"

"You have to answer or take the penalty," she said. "And it has to be a guy."

"Chet," Jackson said without hesitation because the thought of doing anything of the sort with Lincoln or Budd was laughable, and he didn't know Nash or Rusty that well. "But, seriously, what the fuck difference does it make how I answer? Just 'cause you said I had to pick a guy, and I did, doesn't make it mean somethin'. It was just one of yer stupid stipulations."

"But it does mean somethin'," Kristin replied. "Fine. Would ya have said Meg if I hadn't said it had to be a guy?"

Jackson took a swig of beer instead of answering, carefully avoiding a look in Meg's direction, but in truth he was hiding a frown. Would he have said Meg, if Kristin had given him the opportunity, just because she was the only other girl? He didn't like her *that* much and didn't want to give her the wrong idea, especially given her crush on him. So probably not. And that brought him back to the answer of Chet.

Did that mean something?

"Whatsamatter, Jacks? Cat got yer tongue?" Kristin arched an eyebrow at him, daring him to respond.

"Enough of this shit. Take somethin' off already," Budd complained. "I ain't drunk enough for trash talkin' yet."

Jackson removed his boots and tossed them behind him.

"Gabby, truth or dare?"

"Dare."

“I dare you to let Rusty remove your bra and feel you up under your shirt for five minutes. In front of us.”

Meg's eyes grew round as saucers at Jackson's words, and she looked over at her sister, who was whispering quietly with Rusty.

“Okay,” Gabby replied after a moment, turning her back toward Rusty for him to remove her bra.

Jackson grinned. He knew his dare was just racy enough for Gabby to do it. She wasn't the exhibitionist Kristin was, but she really liked Rusty, and they had been together nearly a year, long enough that she was comfortable trusting him.

After removing her bra, Rusty sat Gabby on one knee facing slightly toward him and slid a hand inside the front of her shirt, kneading her breasts slowly but visibly beneath it. Gabby hid her face in Rusty's neck as she moaned. Meg turned her red face away from them, unable to watch her sister being groped. Budd whooped, and Lincoln adjusted himself none-too-discreetly.

Jackson grinned at the couple, but their display of affection didn't affect him. Unlike Linc, whose erection was visible in his jeans, Jackson's dick never stirred during their games, no matter how much skin was showing—female or male—or the acts being performed. It just didn't titillate him the way it did the others.

His lack of reaction had never bothered him so much as it made him feel different from everyone. His buddies were always talking about how hot some chick was, expecting him to join in the conversation, but he never saw it. They didn't turn him on.

No one turned him on.

“Ay, *Diós*, I might actually lose tonight,” Gabby said. She looked up at Chet distractedly. “Chet, truth or dare?”

“Dare,” Chet responded.

Gabby looked over at Jackson and bit her lower lip.

Jackson didn't like that look in her eyes. She was about to do something—

“I dare you to kiss Jacks for at least fifteen seconds...”

Jackson sat there, unable to believe what he'd just heard, unable to move a single muscle but for the involuntary and suddenly very loud beating of his

heart. He couldn't have heard her right. He was on the verge of asking her to repeat herself when she added the nail to the coffin.

“With tongue.”

Jackson barely heard one of the guys—not Chet—mutter, “Ho-ly hell,” and suddenly that was the only thought in his brain: Holy hell. Holy hell. Holy hell.

He turned his head to look at Chet, who was finishing a long pull on his beer. Jackson's eyes automatically followed Chet's movements as he swallowed and calmly set the bottle down gently next to the log they shared, and then Chet turned...

Holy he—

And he was kissing him, forcefully. It was so sudden that he barely reacted at first. His tongue slid against Chet's, slowly pushing back and forth, then pushing harder, until he was fighting to dominate the kiss...

And then Chet pulled back.

Jackson sat motionlessly, still too bewildered to think, to process what had just happened, whom he'd just kissed.

Chet. He'd kissed Chet. And *goddamn* if he hadn't liked it. A whole hell of a lot.

And that's when Jackson registered the stirring of his dick.

Holy hell.

He couldn't move—couldn't even blink—frozen by the knowledge that kissing Chet had actually turned him on. He stared at Chet, not knowing what to do, his mind on overdrive trying to make sense of the world that had just flipped upside-down.

Kristin hollered, “Whooo-weee an' ho-ly shit! That was fuckin' *hawt!*”

Kristin's voice, which always grated on his nerves, finally woke Jackson from his daze. He forced his face back to a neutral countenance and then lifted his own cockeyed Stetson from his head, rubbing a hand over his hair before settling the hat back in place. He looked over at Gabby to see her peek an eye out from where her face was turned into Rusty's neck, waiting to see his reaction. He shrugged at her uncertainly.

Chet grabbed the brim of his black Stetson and pulled it back into place on his head. “Meg, truth or dare?” he asked with a nonchalance that surprised Jackson. In fact, Chet appeared to be wholly unaffected by the entire episode.

Jackson fought a scowl.

“Me?” Meg squeaked.

“Yup. You’re here, ain’tcha? Truth or dare?”

“Um...” Meg eyed Chet and Jackson, her face registering a hint of fear. “Truth?”

“Ya still a virgin, sweetheart?”

Jackson recognized it as a generous “first truth” question, one given to a fairly shy newbie playing the game with their raucous group for the first time—just embarrassing enough to be worth asking, but not so much as to scare her away. Chet knew just how to rope her in gently.

Jackson frowned slightly at the thought, uncertain why that bothered him.

Though Meg sat across the fire from Jackson, he could clearly see the heavy blush crawling across her face, still very visible in the dim orange-yellow light. She glanced at Jackson briefly before staring studiously at the ground between her legs as she nodded briskly.

While Meg wasn’t looking, Jackson raised an eyebrow at Gabby—it’s a miracle she even noticed given how Rusty was still teasing her nipples—to confirm his suspicion. Gabby nodded to him.

Well, shit. He was hoping that crush would have run its course before now, with them being gone to college most of the time. Apparently not.

When he heard Chet say, “No, sweetheart, you can keep yer shirt on,” Jackson looked up just in time to see Meg slipping a shoulder timidly out of her shirt. “That’s a rule the others made up just for Jacks. ’Cause he won’t say anythin’ but truth, he has to take somethin’ off after every answer, and once he’s nekkid, he starts takin’ shots of Jack.”

Meg made a barely audible, “Oh,” while pulling her shirt back into place, nodding absently.

“It’s yer turn to ask the question, sweetheart,” Chet reminded her.

“Oh! Um, sure.” Meg’s gaze swept around the group, landing just a hair longer on Jackson than anyone else. He started to cringe on the inside, but what she ultimately said was, “Um... Budd?”

“Oh yeah, baby! Ask me. I’ll make it good for ya.” Budd wagged his eyebrows, clearly ready to get on with the game.

And so it went until the fifths were all empty and they called the game over. As usual, Jackson, Budd, Linc, Chet, and Kristin were completely naked, as was Nash, who had fit right in like he'd been playing with them for years. Gabby had only her shirt still on, keeping her mostly covered—the way Rusty obviously wanted it. Rusty himself had only his boxers on, and he was pitching quite the tent, even as cold as it was. And Meg was trying desperately not to be embarrassed about being in only her mismatched bra and panties, shivering because she wouldn't let any of the fellas help keep her warm while they were nude—though Jackson suspected she might have let him, naked or not, if he'd offered.

He just couldn't bring himself to give her the wrong impression.

Occasionally during the game, Meg had turned her eyes on Jackson's nude form and blushed furiously. Everyone had noticed it, to the point that Linc—whom Jackson had noticed turning his eyes more toward Meg in direct proportion to the amount of clothing she'd removed—had eventually asked her during a truth turn, "Who do ya want to take yer virginity?" And though she'd hardly touched her beer that night, she'd quickly reached for and tipped back a penalty shot of Jack, nearly choking on the burn of the whiskey, and then removed her skirt rather than answer that question.

Now that the game was over, Nash and Kristin picked up their clothes, and he chased her over to his truck. It was quite apparent to everyone they wouldn't make it farther than the cab before she would be hiding his (quite thick) salami. Jackson thought it was something of a miracle they hadn't started fucking in front of everyone before the game was even over. Kristin had been trying to get Nash to let her ride him just as soon as his prick had been uncovered, but apparently Nash had the patience of a saint when it came to her, because not only had he stalled her advances, but he had also avoided drinking heavily so he would be safe to drive them back to wherever they were going. Jackson thought Nash might actually be good for her, as thirsty as she was.

The rest of the group quickly robed themselves and made their good-nights. Meg looked over at Rusty and Gabby, who obviously wanted time alone together, but she had ridden with them to the site on Budd's family's ranch. She began to look toward Jackson for help, but it was Linc who smoothly sidled up next to her and offered his arm for her to take. Startled, Meg looked over to Gabby, who nodded at her and whispered, "Just don't let 'im drive tonight," before she turned to go with Rusty, leaving Meg to follow Linc to his car—which was thankfully an automatic, so she could drive it. Even as drunk as Linc

was, all of them knew he'd never try to force Meg to do something she wasn't ready for.

Jackson breathed a sigh of relief he wouldn't be saddled with taking Meg home, because he was too nice a guy to say no if she'd asked him, no matter how much he wanted to avoid the "confession" confrontation. *More power to him*, Jackson thought as he watched them walk off together, Linc stumbling just a touch.

Chet chuckled low in Jackson's ear as he leaned over his shoulder from behind. "Narrow escape, that one."

Jackson jumped slightly at Chet's proximity. He half turned and met Chet's soft brown gaze. Without the game to focus on as a buffer between them, the memory of that kiss came flooding back, and Jackson blushed hot enough to feel it against the chill wind. They were mostly alone now that Meg was driving away with Linc, Gabby and Rusty had already driven off, Budd had wandered over to his family's house, and Nash's truck was already steamed up to the point it was nearly impossible to see in or out of the windows.

Chet was too close—close enough to lean in and kiss Jackson again if he wanted.

Did Jackson want him to?

He swayed toward Chet just the tiniest bit at the thought.

Jesus H., he wanted Chet to kiss him again? Was that just the alcohol?

"Ready to head home?" Chet asked.

Jackson swallowed, but unable to dislodge the frog in his throat, he could only nod. He stumbled slowly to the passenger side of Chet's truck and hopped in, wishing desperately he'd brought his own car instead of riding with Chet tonight—not that he had had any reason before they left to think he wouldn't want to ride so close to Chet. He wasn't in any condition to drive now, anyway, if the way the road was spinning was any indication of his sobriety.

After Jackson fiddled ineffectually with the seat belt clasp a few times, Chet reached over to take the buckle and help him. Chet's thumb brushed the back of his hand, so brief that perhaps it really had been natural and not indicative of... something more. But Jackson was hyperaware of Chet's every move. Did it mean anything? What did it mean?

He set his hat on the dash and leaned his temple to the glass window, glad to be able to focus on the cool sensation on his skin.

“Lemme know if ya need to hurl an’ I’ll pull over right quick.”

“Sure,” Jackson rasped.

The truck moved forward—Jackson would have called it a lurch, though he wasn’t sure if Chet would have—and soon hit the gravel drive leading off the property. Jackson closed his eyes.

“Ya know,” Chet broke the silence, “I never got to ask ya... truth or dare?”

Jackson’s eyes popped open and his breath hitched. Oh, shit. What should he say? What would Chet ask? What would Chet dare him to do? Did Jackson trust him enough to say dare?

He barely breathed the whispered, “Truth.”

“Did ya enjoy it?”

Jackson didn’t try to play it off like he didn’t know what Chet meant; he didn’t think he could. He was too busy remembering the feel of those soft lips pressing hard, the slight scrape of Chet’s stubble as they’d swapped spit, and he started to get hard behind his fly, something he’d managed to avoid the entire time he was naked.

Not to mention the past eight years of playing the game together.

Fuck.

“Already answered that,” he hedged, closing his eyes again as his stomach turned itself inside-out and upside-down in a way that alcohol had never done to him.

“Mmmm, no, ya didn’. Ya took a penalty shot on that question ’stead of answerin’. Very unlike you.”

Jackson thought he could feel Chet’s gaze burning a hole through his jaw.

“Though I s’pose the penalty shot was answer enough in its own right,” Chet mused.

Jackson tried to lick his dry lips. Weren’t they back to the ranch yet? It wasn’t that far down the road from Budd’s. Shouldn’t the drive already be over?

“Answer me, Jacks. Or take the penalty.”

“I...” Jackson’s mind spun wildly at the possibilities: What penalty would Chet enforce on him? Would it be worth not answering to find out? Would he be able to do it? Willing to?

“Jacks—”

“Yes,” he blurted, not daring to look over at Chet, even from the corner of his eye. He didn't want to see Chet's reaction.

He was afraid to know.

“Yer turn, then.”

His turn? What was his—“Truth or dare?” Jackson guessed, voice pitched high with uncertainty, though steadier now that he wasn't under the gun any longer.

Chet slowed the truck to a stop. Jackson opened his eyes to see the familiar bunkhouse of his family's ranch in front of them. A few more seconds, and he could escape the narrow confines of the truck, because there just wasn't enough room for him, Chet, and the fucking elephant he didn't know how to discuss.

Chet released his seat belt and turned toward Jackson, but instead of releasing Jackson's buckle, he scooted closer along the bench. Jackson tried to get the button himself, but stopped when Chet placed a hand on his thigh and looked him straight in the eye.

“Dare me, Jacks,” he said quietly.

They sat there looking at one another in a way neither had previously dared. Jackson had no doubt in his mind that Chet wanted—expected—him to ask for another kiss, a kiss Jackson realized would devour his soul in a way nothing ever had before, because this was *Chet*, whom he knew better than anyone. Knew what he liked. Knew how he thought. Knew when to push and when to back off...

And he also knew without a doubt that Chet wouldn't lean in and take the decision out of his hands. The decision would be Jackson's, and his alone.

To kiss or not to kiss? Everything in Jackson's life narrowed to that single question and the fact his dick was stirring again. Drunk or not, he recognized the moment as one of the biggest crossroads he would ever face: Pursue his interest in Chet that had sprung up seemingly out of nowhere...

Or not.

The first kiss had been a surprise; it hadn't been premeditated. But this time... Jackson could choose this. If he wanted it.

As the enormity of the decision he faced struck him, the words “fuck me” slipped out of his mouth without conscious thought.

Chet's eyes widened at the words, and he leaned away, removing his hand from Jackson's thigh.

"I don't think that's what you meant to say..."

"What did I—" Jackson frowned slightly while his mind replayed the last several seconds in his head, along with his answer, and then shouted, "Oh, shit!"

He slapped both hands over his mouth to keep any more damning words from falling out, and squeezed his eyes shut tight. He could feel the heat rise from his cheeks, enough to cook an egg it felt like.

Chet chuckled at him softly. "It's okay. I don't do that on the first date, sweetheart."

A tiny whimper managed to escape from the back of Jackson's throat. He couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. He tilted his head down, but he knew the tips of his burning ears were still clearly visible.

Chet apparently took pity on Jackson and unbuckled him.

"Think about how ya really wanna respond. You know where to find me when yer ready." Chet scooted back behind the wheel. "Now, outta my truck before I do something I promised myself I wouldn't."

Jackson removed the seat belt and grabbed his hat from the dash. "What—"

"Out," Chet repeated.

Jackson opened the door, and a blast of cold air hit his superheated face. He shivered all the way across the yard to the house and the relative safety of his bedroom.

"Much as I 'preciate your thoroughness, Jackson, you've spent most of an hour on that one stall. There're others that need tendin' to."

Jackson whirled around at the voice of the stable manager unexpectedly breaking into his thoughts. Mr. Redding had tilted his hat back to scratch his forehead, a confused look on his face—no doubt because yesterday Jackson had mucked nearly half of their twelve stalls in an hour.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Mr. Redding, sir. I'll get a move on."

"I know your pa would skin you alive if he thought you weren't pitchin' in, even during your break, but you don't have to be here, son. If you've got

somethin' on your mind, then go hide in the hayloft for a spell. Your pa'll never know the difference. He hasn't come lookin' for you there in years." The stable manager smiled at him kindly and clapped him on the shoulder. "And call me Sutter, son. You've been a man for a while now. No more need for the formalities of childhood." He added with a hint of amusement, "Call me 'sir' again, and I might just take you over my knee like I did when you were a tike. I may look old, but I still rope calves with these arms."

Jackson smiled wanly at Mr. Redding—he would always be Mr. Redding, not Sutter, in Jackson's mind because that etiquette had been beaten into him by his father long, long ago—glad at least someone thought him a man. He wasn't so sure his father agreed with that thought. Heck, he wasn't so sure *he* did.

"Yessi—Mr. Redding."

"Sutter."

"I'll work on that one," Jackson responded.

Mr. Redding took off his hat and swatted at Jackson with it. "Go on now, get. You're welcome back when you can actually focus on the task at hand again."

Jackson nodded his appreciation and handed over the stall fork before finding the ladder to the loft. It was mostly dark up there, even with the barn doors open. Lying back across two hay bales, he tipped his hat over his face before resting his hands behind his head. He could hear someone mucking out one of the other stalls below him.

He was no closer to having an answer for Chet, though Jackson had been thinking about it all morning. The idea of kissing another guy, that sort of intimacy, hadn't ever really occurred to him before. Sure, he and Linc and Budd had all whacked their meat in front of each other—as soon as Budd had figured out what to do with his dick besides piss, he'd gone to share his newfound knowledge with them—but Jackson had never thought of those times as intimate; that was just guys being guys. The idea of kissing Linc or Budd made Jackson's nuts want to crawl up inside him, it was such an awful thought. Though, to be honest, the idea of kissing girls had never worked him up either.

But Chet... Chet had always been a different story. Jackson hadn't rushed to Chet to tell him what Budd had discovered and shared—mostly because Chet was three years older than they were, and Jackson had figured Chet probably would have laughed at him, but also because it just didn't seem right to do *that*

around him. Jackson had never before analyzed his instinct not to masturbate around Chet.

Chet was like an older brother. He was always the person Jackson sought advice from. The one Jackson truly laughed around. The one he trusted and confided in. Chet knew all his dirty secrets, what little there was to know. Chet was open and honest and generally content to follow the leader so long as no one was going to get thrown in jail for it.

Chet was his rock, had been since Jackson was seven and Chet was ten and teaching him how to ride a horse, and Jackson didn't want to damage that friendship by doing something so irrevocably stupid as daring the man to kiss him...

And then rub his cock until he busted a nut...

And then let Jackson do the same for him.

He found himself rock solid and randy at the thought of coming in Chet's large, work-roughened hands—which shook him to his core, because Jackson had never been interested in anyone sexually before. People just didn't turn him on. Ever.

But Chet did. Or at least *now* he did.

Jackson's questions began to pile up: Did that mean he was gay? Could he be gay only for Chet? Was there even such a thing as being gay for one person? Was it gay when he'd only ever found one person who made him raise his flag and salute?

Did any of that really matter?

If he and Chet started something, he would be seen by everyone as gay, regardless of anything else he said or did. But if he had Chet, did the whole truth matter so much?

He wanted Chet to be his truth.

Jackson put a hand to his crotch and pushed into it, indulging the fantasy.

"Jacks?" came Gabby's voice from below.

"Dammit," Jackson muttered, wanting to tell her to go away so he could finish rubbing one out but knowing from past experience it was pointless. "Up here," he said so she could hear him.

"Is it safe?" she called from the ladder.

“For the time bein’, though only just.” Memories of the times Gabby had wandered up to the loft and caught him dick in hand helped to bring his newly discovered libido back under control, but he didn’t try to hide it from her. He didn’t bother sitting up either.

“Oh, good,” she replied as she finished her ascent. He heard her walk over and felt her sit next to his legs on the hay bale. “So? *¿Cómo fue?*” she asked enthusiastically.

“How’d what go?” he asked from under the hat.

She swatted at his leg playfully. “You and Chet, *tonto*. Last night?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Nothing happe—” She took the Stetson from over his face and started beating on him with it. “*¡Estúpido!*”

Jackson heard her begin “*¿Qué te dije?*” before her Spanish became so rapid that it ran together in one long, incomprehensible rant. He brought his arms up to cover his face as she smacked him with his own hat over and over, gibbering the entire time. He caught a word he knew here or there, but not enough to make sense of what she was carrying on about.

Gabby finally tired of hitting him and set the hat down over his crotch, a minor courtesy on her part.

“*¿Qué te pasa?*”

“Nothin’s wrong.”

“Then why’re you up here?”

He didn’t answer.

“You mad at me?”

He looked at her confused. “What for?”

“For daring him to kiss you?”

He’d actually sort of forgotten it had all been Gabby’s fault to start with. But no, it was just a dare. They’d all done some fairly stupid things in the name of being dared to over the years—he winced briefly at the memory of allowing Budd to hogtie him (after Jackson had already lost all his clothes) just before a rattler interrupted their game—but this didn’t even compare to the worst of those. Most dares had some sort of consequence; this one had just been really unexpected.

“Naw. Ya didn’ do nothin’ wrong.”

She nodded then asked, “So you do like him?”

He rolled away from her to face the bale of hay that had been to his side. But he didn’t deny it.

“You know... I’m pretty sure he likes you too,” she said.

“What? He tell ya that?” He tried not to sound too interested.

“Well, no. It’s Chet. He wouldn’t ever say somethin’ like that, *especialmente* not to me. But, *es diferente contigo*. He’s different with you. You don’t see it, do you?”

He hadn’t the faintest idea what she was talking about.

“*Te mira*. He watches you,” she continued, “but not like an older brother, not looking out for his buddy, but... *con interés*... like any minute you’re going to do something amazing and he can’t turn away or he’ll miss it. I think maybe he’s been waiting for you to figure it out all this time.”

“All this time?”

“*Pues*, the first time I noticed it was shortly after Junior Prom,” she said.

So, that meant it was shortly after the fallout with Kristin—

“Jacks?” Gabby put a hand on his shoulder but didn’t try to force him to turn.

“Yeah?”—but was that purely coincidental, or was there some correlation between—

“You know I don’t care, right?”

“Care about what?”—the two? Had Chet figured out something he hadn’t even recognized in himself back then or—

“If you’re gay?”

Wait... what had she just said?

There it was: the assumption. He didn’t even know the truth for certain himself, but everyone else would want to stick a label on it and box it with a pretty ribbon and a balloon that read, “Congratulations! It’s a ‘gay’!”

He sighed. Gabby removed her hand.

“*Lo siento*. I’ll leave you alone.”

He felt her stand up, heard her boots clop along the wood to the ladder. When she started down, he rolled over just enough to see her watching her step.

“Gabby?”

She paused on the rung and turned to look at him.

“*Gracias.*”

“*De nada.*”

Jackson rolled back onto his shoulder and listened to her descend and greet the horses before she left. No longer in the mood to masturbate, he decided instead to take a nap. Bad situations always seemed better after he had slept some. It “cleared the cobwebs,” as his momma always said.

As he rolled onto his back and placed the hat over his face again, he prayed to God that the jumbled mess in his noggin would sort itself out by the time he woke up.

After waking, Jackson resolved himself to go back to the house to take a shower, change clothes, and then hunt down Chet so they could talk. He wasn't sure what he was going to say yet, but he needed to talk it out, and Chet had always been his sounding board.

He had accomplished the first two items on his list and was about to embark on the third when his father caught him on the way out the door.

“Jackson. A word please.” Not a question. A statement.

He stepped into his father's office. “Yessir?”

“Close the door.”

He did as asked and stood patiently as his father finished typing something.

Jackson waited for it.

“Do you have plans yet for what you'll do after graduation?”

“I've been accepted into the Professional DVM program.”

“I want ya to give up this foolishness about being a veterinarian and come work on the ranch. I knew I should have forced ya to take those business courses instead of all that other nonsense. They would have been much more useful to you.”

“But I—”

“Ya know your way around most of the physical duties on the ranch, but Garcia has agreed to show ya what all he does on the business side so you can become his assistant. He’ll start ya off fairly easy—”

“No.”

His father startled and fell silent at the interruption, but surprise soon gave way to a thundercloud of anger on his father’s face.

“Come again, boy?”

Jackson heard the dark undercurrent to his father’s words, but he kept going because this confrontation had been a long time coming, and he was stressed enough without having to deal with his father’s bullshit any longer.

“Ya heard me. I ain’t interested. Never have been, never will be. Workin’ this ranch was yer dream, not mine. And I ain’t gonna change my mind, so you can just stop askin’.”

“You watch your mouth, boy. I don’t appreciate that tone. And I’m not asking you, I’m *telling* you—”

“Naw, sir, *I’m* telling *you*. I don’t appreciate you tryin’ to control my life anymore. I *will* be a veterinarian. I will *not* work for you.”

With that, Jackson turned on his heel and left the office posthaste. He saw his momma standing in the hallway with a hand over her mouth, her eyes glistening in the corners. She reached out to him, but as much as he wanted to be the little boy who had always thrown himself into his momma’s arms, he needed to speak to Chet more. Ignoring his momma’s upset and his father’s yells of “You get back in here, boy! I’m not done talking at you!” he left the house.

He hightailed it across the yard to the bunkhouse and ducked inside, flattening himself against the inner wall, causing his Stetson to pop off of his head slightly.

“Again?” the familiar voice asked.

He fixed his hat and looked over at Chet, who appeared to have just finished working—he’d taken off his shirt and jeans and was picking up his toiletry bag and towel. Chet’s muscular hirsute torso glistened slightly, treasure trail leading into his damp gray boxer-briefs, which hugged his butt and thighs. Jackson turned away from the tempting view to look across the room at something else, anything else. It took a moment for his mouth to work.

“Yeah. I’s on my way over to ask if we could take off, an’ he ambushed me.” Jackson frowned. “Only this time I actually let him have it.”

“Ya did? Hallelujah. It’s about time ya told the ol’ man to take his job and shove it.”

Jackson smiled faintly at the praise and the Johnny Paycheck reference. “He’s madder than a hornet now, though, so we gotta get.”

“Be right back and we can head out.”

Jackson cleared his throat and hummed in acknowledgment, doing his best not to stare at Chet’s ass as he turned the corner to the showers. Instead, he peeked through the window and saw his father barreling toward the bunkhouse.

“Shit!” he barely breathed as he realized he was trapped. He wouldn’t be able to make it out to Chet’s truck to hide without his father seeing him, and there was no other exit to the bunkhouse. The bunks themselves offered no protection, which left only the cement shower stalls Chet had just entered.

Jackson booked it toward the back of the house, ducked around the corner, and practically dove into the stall with Chet. The hot water began to soak him through as he tucked himself behind the cinder block wall where he wouldn’t be visible unless his father walked around to the stall entrance, which he likely wouldn’t do with Chet standing there showering...

Naked...

As the water fell across his hat like rain, Jackson looked up hesitantly from his crouch. The whole world slowed to a crawl as he scanned past Chet’s hairy legs to his limp cock—there was no way not to look at it when it was right in front of his nose—to his soaped-up chest, finally landing on his amused face. The brim of Jackson’s hat kept the water from hitting his deer-in-the-headlights eyes. He stared up at Chet and swallowed hard but couldn’t say anything.

Chet got it. He smiled down at him, shaking his head in a “you gotta be kidding me” way, but he didn’t seem upset. And then he went back to soaping himself as if he wasn’t sharing the stall with a complete disaster.

Jackson quickly lowered his head and perched over his boots, trying to keep them mostly dry by using his body as a shield. He didn’t hear his father enter the bath area over the thumping of the water against his Stetson, but he did hear the man’s voice when he asked, “Chester, you seen my good-for-nothin’ son in here?”

“Ya don’t have a good-for-nothin’ son, sir, and the one ya do have ain’t standing here in the shower with me.” Chet had the audacity to make a show of picking up his feet like he was checking to be certain he hadn’t stepped on something, just to prove the point Jackson wasn’t hiding there. The man was smarter than a whip in Jackson’s estimation. “Haven’t seen him all day, in fact. If’n ya find him, tell him I’m lookin’ for him?” Chet lied smoothly, like he’d done dozens of times in the past when the boys had gotten into trouble.

If there was more to the conversation, Jackson didn’t hear it. With his head ducked he could see only the shadows on Chet’s legs and the water trailing off his hands, indicating the man was soaping his nethers. Jackson longed to lift his eyes—and brim of his hat—upward a smidge as Chet bowed his knees apart.

Was Chet hard? Cleaning his ass? Would he finger himself? Stroke himself?

But Jackson couldn’t bring himself to peep, and the moment passed. He watched as Chet’s hands ran the soap down his legs, white foam sticking to the dark hair before the water washed it away.

The water stopped. Jackson started to look up but abruptly stopped the movement, embarrassingly close to getting an eyeful of Chet yet again. He felt his cheeks and the tips of his ears heat up at the thought, and his jeans were becoming increasingly tight.

Chet backed out of the stall, and Jackson heard more than saw him grab the towel to begin drying himself.

Jackson stood, still keeping his chin ducked and his hat lowered, and the water that had soaked into his shirt and jeans began running down his body alarmingly fast. He scrambled to remove his boots before they, too, became waterlogged, tossing them out of the shower stall. His shirt clung to him like a second skin, and his jeans still dripped a steady stream of water to the floor.

He scrubbed a wet hand over his down-turned face as he sighed.

“Ya know, if’n there’s a next time, ya might wanna jump into the empty stall instead of the one in use. Not that I’m complainin’, mind ya.”

Jackson glanced up at Chet—who had the decency to have the towel wrapped around his waist, thank goodness—and then huffed a deprecating laugh at his own stupidity before looking at the cement floor again and nodding appropriately.

“Strip down. I’ll bring ya somethin’ to wear.”

Chet left the showers, and Jackson did as he was told, removing his shirt, jeans, socks, and boxers. As he wrung the clothing out and laid each item on the cinder blocks, he thought about Chet being naked before him just moments before. Though the air drying his skin felt cold, his cock still filled slowly, already semi-hard from his earlier lewd thoughts.

As Jackson pulled his cock once, Chet returned, fully clothed and bearing another towel and more clothing, all of which he set atop the cinder block wall. Fortunately, he and Chet were roughly the same size, though Chet offered him boxer-briefs instead of Jackson's preference of boxers.

"No way. If I didn't get to crank one out, you don't get to either. Suffer like the rest of us." Chet smirked.

Jackson did his best not to blush again as he grabbed the towel and dried off in a hurry. While dressing, Jackson had the odd stray thought that it was sexy to wear Chet's clothing, particularly the boxer-briefs—they hugged his bits so much more snugly than boxers—knowing they normally hugged Chet's bits.

Once dressed, they made a beeline for Chet's truck. Not once did Chet speak about the shower incident, much to Jackson's enormous relief.

The Watering Hole, or the Hole as most people shortened it to, looked like a dive bar from the outside, but the inside was actually a nice wood interior with TVs everywhere, like one might expect of a sports bar. The bartenders knew all of the local regulars by name and typical drink.

They arrived in the middle of happy hour, and Chet steered them toward a booth near the back, away from the main bar area where they usually sat. It was a little quieter back there, which was the point. Usually at least three or four different games were showing during peak hours, though the sound was only up for one or two of them. The crowd made up the rest of the background noise.

Jackson settled onto the bench. Instead of sitting across from him, Chet slid in next to him, then immediately kicked back into the cushion and lifted his arm to rest across the top of the bench, behind Jackson's neck. Chet then placed one foot on the seat opposite them and waved two fingers to the waitress headed their direction. She nodded and turned back to the bar to get their drinks.

With Chet beside him and that arm directly behind him, Jackson sat rigidly forward with his forearms resting on the table. His insides felt like they could churn milk to butter in record time.

“Relax, Jacks. I ain’t gonna molest ya. If I were, I’d’ve much rather done so in the shower where the soap and conditioner were available.”

Jackson rolled his shoulders a bit as he chuckled quietly, the tension immediately gone. He crossed his arms on the table and laid his head on them.

“You talk when you’re ready. I’ll just be sittin’ here ’til then.”

Jackson exhaled. Chet wasn’t going to pressure him. Jackson’s mind was still awirl with possibilities and “what ifs,” and he didn’t really know what he wanted to say yet.

When the waitress had come with their beers and gone, Chet pushed one of them toward Jackson’s nearer hand. “Liquid courage?”

Jackson lifted his head and blinked, trying to focus on the sweating glass in front of him. He considered the idea that maybe if he drank enough, his mind might slow down to a speed where he could grasp a thought and hold on to it. He reached for the glass and tipped it up, chugging at least half his beer. Before he finished it, Chet put a hand on his arm and gently pushed it down to get the glass away from his mouth.

“Hey, whoa, slow down. Ya haven’t eaten anythin’. You’re gonna be three sheets to the wind before dark if ya keep goin’ like that, Jacks.”

“So order us dinner. I need this,” Jackson said as he tossed back the rest of the beer.

“Need? What good’s it gonna do ya?”

“Slow everythin’ down. So I can figure shit out.”

“What’s to figger out?”

Jackson couldn’t bring himself to say the truth to Chet just yet, so he ended up saying, “Everythin’.”

Chet let the conversation drop at that point. He did order their burgers for dinner, and he also kept the beers coming, though Jackson thought his supply was being moderated more than necessary based on the lack of glasses on the table. Jackson ate his burger slowly, but the first two beers had hit him faster than he’d expected, so he was already quite tipsy.

“I think I’m broken,” Jackson eventually said while staring straight ahead. Chet only hummed at him around a mouthful of giant breaded onion ring. “I... I...” He wondered why he had thought beer would help him think. “I feel broken.”

Chet was unsettlingly quiet. He was listening, but he wasn't offering the platitudes Jackson had hoped he would. He sat there picking at what was left of his dinner instead. Finally Jackson had to fill the silence.

"I..." He tried again. "You kissed me."

"On a dare," Chet said. "What makes this one different from all the rest?"

"You kissed me," was all Jackson could say. Didn't that explain everything?

"I know that weren't yer first kiss."

Jackson wrinkled his nose at the thought of his first kiss, with Gabby, a few years ago. He liked Gabby, but he'd realized after that kiss he didn't really *like* Gabby, much to her dismay. She hadn't spoken to him for weeks after he'd said he didn't want to kiss or date anymore, though he'd been nice about it to begin with, and he'd apologized. Chet had heard an earful from Jackson about how irrationally Gabby had been behaving. Chet had listened patiently then as well.

Jackson looked around the rest of the bar. All heads were turned toward the televisions or whichever friends they were sitting with. No one was looking at them when he said with a low voice, "First with a guy."

"Is that all it was?"

He knew Chet, and Chet knew him, and he knew Chet was giving him an opening. Chet knew.

But which one did Chet know? Both?

"And I... I..."

"You liked it."

Jackson could feel Chet's eyes on him. He just nodded.

"And you feel broken?"

Jackson thought he heard a touch of hurt in Chet's voice, but he couldn't bring himself to look at his face just yet to verify. He needed to get this out first, and he couldn't look at Chet and still say it.

"Something inside me broke open, and I don't know what to do with it. I don't know what to say if people ask me about it. I don't know who I am anymore."

"You're Jacks," Chet replied simply.

"But who is that?" Jackson turned his head but still didn't meet Chet's eyes.

Chet lifted his beer and took a swig before replying, “The six-year-old kid whose horse took off an’ stumbled—breakin’ its leg an’ yer forearm in the fall—who cried when his daddy put the horse down. The eight-year-old who tried to swear off meat when he found out what happened to the cattle an’ pigs after they were sold, but who lasted all of three weeks before cavin’ an’ havin’ another burger. The twelve-year-old who got his ma to pull the car over to check on a dog that’d been hit, take it to the vet, an’ then bring it home—yer daddy never did like that dog because it made you wanna become a veterinarian... And you’re the seventeen-year-old who did *not* lose his virginity on the night of his Junior Prom—particularly not with a vamp like Kristin.”

Jackson inhaled sharply; had he been drinking at that exact moment, he would’ve choked on his beer. He met Chet’s eyes finally, and the man looked back at him unflinchingly, sincerely.

Chet knew him so well, and that wasn’t a bad thing, or even a scary one. That wasn’t exactly what had Jackson’s stomach tied in knots. All of the things Chet had said were true, but they hadn’t really answered the question Jackson needed to understand.

“Am I gay?” This time Jackson kept eye contact with Chet, because this was what he needed to pinpoint most. “I... I don’t *feel* gay. Or bi. I don’t like other guys. I don’t like other girls. I...” Jackson wondered if he could say this now. He looked down again. “It’s only... it’s only you.”

He glanced up again. Chet looked... stunned.

He shouldn’t have said anything. He should have kept it in his head until he had everything figured out. He shouldn’t have hoped Chet would have the answer. He should have—

“It don’t matter,” Chet said. Then, frowning, he hurried to add, “Gay, bi, pan, demi, pomo... It don’t matter what ya are—the label. Does it?”

“I don’t even know half of what you just said. But it matters to me. I... want to at least understand myself, even if no one else does. I don’t care what anyone else labels me, but who am *I*?”

“Ya want a word for it?” Chet asked. Jackson nodded to him. “Ya wanna label yerself,” Chet muttered, chiefly to himself it seemed, as he scrubbed a hand over his face and nodded. “Kay then. This’ll be easier with an Internet connection so I don’t get things wrong, but I left my tablet in the truck. You wanna have this conversation here or somewhere else?”

"I... Not here," Jackson decided. "But we can't go back to the ranch either." And he knew their town was too damn small to get a motel room together.

"A lotta businesses have free Wi-Fi now. We'll go sit in the lot of one."

Jackson nodded. He itched to jump out of the booth and run to the truck to get started, but instead he headed to the urinal to relieve himself while Chet called over the waitress to get their bill. When he returned from the restroom, Chet was signing the slip. He stood up and nodded to the exit. Jackson smiled brightly and turned eagerly to walk out to Chet's truck.

They were going to figure it out. Together. Chet was going to help him find the right words to describe how he felt inside. Jackson was incredibly relieved he didn't have to try to discover this all on his own. At the truck, he hopped enthusiastically into the seat and buckled in quickly, feeling much more like a kid about to go to a theme park than a twenty-something on the verge of an identity crisis.

Chet didn't drive very far before pulling into the lot of a local coffee shop that boasted free Wi-Fi. He turned off the engine and grabbed his tablet, adjusting the settings before going to the browser to pull up a web page.

Chet handed the device to him, saying, "You read through these, and then we'll talk some more, 'kay? I'm gonna go get a coffee. You want anythin'?"

Jackson shook his head, already too excited to see what Chet had found. He barely registered the sound of the truck door opening and closing as he began looking at words like "antithaemosexuality," "gerontosexuality," and "skoliosexuality."

Having no idea where to start, he went to the top of the list—androsexuality—and clicked the link to read more.

After he'd read through the whole list of non-standard sexualities, Jackson went back to reread the two he'd most resonated with when he first read them.

A demisexual is generally attracted to someone's personality. Their attraction is based on an emotional connection, not on physical looks or builds.

Gray-A (or gray ace) is a gray area between sexuality and asexuality. Someone identifying as a gray asexual may not experience normal sexual attraction or drive, but sometimes they will. They also may not care to act on those experiences they do have. They often prefer to say they are asexual rather than trying to explain themselves to someone else.

“Did that help any?”

Jackson jumped at the sound of Chet's voice, his hat bumping the roof of the truck and pushing down over his eyes.

Chet chuckled as Jackson fixed his Stetson. “Sorry. I didn’ mean to startle ya. Here.” Chet handed him a lidded, steaming cup.

Jackson took a sip and sighed happily. “Hot chocolate with whipped cream and cinnamon.”

“It was that or hot apple cider.”

“Either works.” Jackson took another sip. “Chet, have ya ever been attracted to anyone?”

“Duh?” Chet stared at him with a “you really have to ask?” look on his face.

“Kay, fine. So what’re you?”

“If’n I have to pick: pomosexual. It’s really fuckin’ ironic though.”

Jackson frowned in thought. “That means ya don’t care ’bout labels, right? Think they’re stupid?” At Chet’s nod, Jackson added, “It’s kinda funny they have a label for the people who don’t like the labels—” Jackson facepalmed “—and that’s why ya said it was ironic.”

Chet grinned at him and took a sip from his own steaming cup. “So, did ya find anythin’ that spoke to ya?”

“Demisexual or gray ace. Or maybe just asexual.”

Chet nodded, looking thoughtful. “I could see any of those as a possibility for ya, sure.”

“Whaddaya think it is?” Jackson asked hopefully as he set the tablet aside.

“Ya know I can’t answer that for ya, Jacks. *You* have to decide what matches with how ya feel. And just ’cause ya settle on a term now don’t mean ya can’t change it later on if somethin’ else suits ya better later based on new experiences.”

Jackson nodded. He realized that, and though he appreciated Chet saying it anyway, he was still disappointed Chet wouldn’t give his opinion. Even so, just knowing words existed to label how he experienced things differently made him feel like maybe he wasn’t alone in the world, less of a freak. After all, if there was already a label for it, it must mean that it described someone else before him.

"I don't really know. They both sound like me in some ways. But, I think... I think I'm gray ace. For now."

"Good to know." Chet smiled and leaned back in his seat. "So, now what?"

Jackson shrugged. "I don't rightly know. I feel like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders. But I don't know what's next."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

Chet grinned, his eyes sparkling with mischief as he set his coffee in the cup holder, put the truck in drive, laid his arm across the back of the seats, and turned to look over his shoulder to back out of the lot.

Chet didn't say anything, but it didn't take Jackson long to figure out they were headed in the direction of Budd's ranch, probably to their usual game spot. Jackson started fidgeting with the cup still in his hands.

When Chet stopped the truck not too far from the ring of logs around the campfire, Jackson knew what was coming as Chet turned to face him.

Chet smiled. It was more playful than predatory, but it raised Jackson's heart rate.

"Dare me, Jacks."

Even knowing it was coming, Jackson froze. Chet unbuckled his seat belt and scooted across the bench again, moving the tablet to the dash and being careful not to knock over his coffee. He removed his hat and then unfastened Jackson's seat belt and cupped his far cheek to get him to turn sideways. Jackson twisted himself and leaned into that touch.

"Jackson..."

Jackson saw Chet, no hat, yearning—and maybe a touch of desperation—shining through his eyes, and Jackson's questions about himself vanished. Whether or not he was ever attracted to anyone else didn't matter; he *was* attracted to Chet.

At least, he thought he was.

"Kis—"

In a single motion, Chet tossed Jackson's hat to the side while leaning forward, pushing him into the corner. He cushioned Jackson's head from banging hard against the cab as he pulled their lips together with a bruising hold, stealing Jackson's breath. His tongue thrust inside Jackson's mouth.

Jackson hesitated before moving his hands to run them along Chet's sides, over his shirt, feeling the hard muscle hiding beneath. He kissed back and felt the vibrations as the man groaned low in his throat. The knowledge that Jackson had caused that reaction made him want to cause more like it.

Was this a real kiss? Was this what it was supposed to have been like with Gabby? Was this what some of the guys meant when bragging about how good a kisser their girls were?

He finally understood.

He felt his body respond to Chet again, only this time his reaction was truly visceral as his cock swiftly hardened behind his fly. Jackson closed his eyes and stopped thinking about everything except the body hovering over him and how desired he felt as Chet took possession of him. He suddenly wanted Chet to touch him. Everywhere. All at once. He broke the kiss just long enough to say, "I want more."

Chet made a brief, pained sound. "I wanna give ya so much more, but I won't do it here. Not in the cab of my truck. I wanna do this right."

"Then let's go somewhere. Right now."

"It's almost time for everyone to show."

"Chet..." he pleaded, and Chet growled—actually physically growled—before kissing him again, Jackson's head trapped between both large hands. His body temperature rose, and the pressure behind his fly became painful.

Chet jerked himself away from Jackson, both of them panting heavily as Chet settled behind the wheel and grabbed his hat and tablet from the dash.

Jackson noticed early traces of fogginess on the windshield, slightly amazed that he'd been part of the cause of it. He never had before; he'd just witnessed it in other cars.

"Where're we gonna go?" Chet asked. "Yer room and the bunkhouse at the ranch are outta the question. So's any motel in town. Yer dorm is nearly an hour away. Conroe?"

"Nothin' closer?"

"Not 'less ya wanna get caught by someone who knows us. Conroe might be a problem for us, as is."

"Kay then."

It was only a twenty-minute trip, and Chet drove it in fifteen, but the drive seemed to take forever—certainly long enough for Jackson to get in his own head about what he thought they were fixing to do.

Jackson had only the vaguest ideas of the mechanics of sex. He'd never felt the need to watch porn, even when the guys in his dorm had dragged him along with them. Sure, he had played along, but he'd never felt anything akin to arousal from what he'd seen, while the other guys had rubbed the bulges in their jeans, or outright stroked themselves, as they catcalled at the videos. Of course, those videos had all been men fucking women, or sometimes one man and two women. (Not that it would've made a difference to Jackson even if it *had* been gay porn.)

Jackson had masturbated for pleasure often, but no one else had ever touched him the way Chet was going to. The idea of Chet handling his cock kept him hard, but he wasn't sure what else they might try together. Or what preparations they might need. What would happen if he did something Chet didn't like? Or if he didn't like what Chet wanted to do to him? What about if Chet didn't want to deal with his eccentricities? What if—

Chet's gentle touch to his ear caused him to jump, nearly banging his head again.

"Hey. Stop it," Chet said.

"Stop what?"

"I can hear those gears grindin'," Chet replied as he rapped his knuckles lightly against Jackson's head. "I know you're working yerself up with questions. Stop worryin' and lemme take care of things." Chet reached down to take Jackson's hand in his and began to rub tiny circles against his skin. "We're almost there, but I gotta make a stop first."

Chet pulled the truck to the side of a convenience store and put it in park, though he left it running.

"Sit tight."

Jackson nodded and watched mindlessly as Chet hopped out of the truck. He caught himself checking out Chet's ass as he walked away and wondered why he'd never paid more attention to Chet's body, particularly whenever they played "Truth or Dare?", because from what he'd seen in the shower earlier, Chet had a smoking hot body.

Then again, Jackson had never thought *anyone* had a hot body until now.

Jackson closed his eyes and called up his memories of Chet in the shower. Earlier he had tried not to stare at Chet's body, but now he lingered upon the details he could remember: Chet's hairy toes and legs, his muscular thighs, the cut cock and furred sac that lay between them, his grooved abs, his athletic pecs and pebbled nipples, and the rakish grin that made Jackson's cock throb in memory of it being turned on him.

At the sound of the truck door opening, Jackson's head snapped sideways, eyes opening in surprise. He quickly removed his hand from his crotch, which he'd been massaging subconsciously, leaving visible the outline of his rigid dick.

"Startin' without me?" Chet asked with some amusement.

Jackson felt his cheeks flush with guilt as Chet climbed into the truck and set a brown paper sack on the bench between them. Jackson reached to look inside the bag when Chet smacked his hand away.

"Nuh uh. You stay outta that bag."

Jackson stuffed his hands between his legs, biting back the groan because of how tight Chet's borrowed jeans were against his swollen dick.

The drive to the motel was only a few blocks. Again, Chet made sure to park away from the front doors. Before he hopped out of the cab, Chet made a point of reminding Jackson, "No peeking."

Jackson pondered the possible contents of the bag. Perhaps it was condoms. Was there something else Chet didn't want him to see? Jackson couldn't imagine finding any of the few sex toys he'd seen in the videos in such a small-town convenience store, which left him clueless and a touch anxious. His erection waned.

He had just about talked himself into taking a peek inside the bag when Chet walked around the corner of the building toward the truck. With a room key in his hand. He opened Jackson's door and leaned across him to grab the bag.

The contact this time was definitely not incidental as Chet leaned back slowly, his face close to Jackson's as he said, "Let's go."

Jackson hopped out and followed Chet to room 116. Once inside, he didn't know what to do with himself, so he stood in the middle of the room trying not to fidget. He watched as Chet set the bag and his hat on the desk, and then pulled off his boots. After that, Chet pulled the curtains closed and sat on the

edge of the king-sized bed with his long legs spread invitingly wide. Jackson took the hint and moved to stand in between them.

“Take off yer boots and stay awhile, Jacks.”

Jackson nodded and held on to Chet's shoulder while he removed his boots one at a time and tossed them aside. Once finished, he returned to standing upright and waited for more instructions.

“Truth or dare, Jacks?”

Jackson couldn't help widening his eyes at the unexpected question, and then he laughed at it and relaxed. He hadn't even realized he'd tensed up so much, but Chet had understood exactly how to make the situation less stressful by using the familiar scenario. Chet smiled up at him, and Jacks remembered who he was with and why he wanted to be here.

“Truth, I guess?”

“Wouldn't want ya to break yer streak, now would we?” Chet's eyes twinkled, making Jackson think Chet was up to something sneaky. “You still comfortable with this? With us bein' here?”

Jackson nodded. “Yeah, think so.”

“Good. Ya feel uncomfortable with anythin', ya lemme know, yeah?”

“Sure.”

“And lose my shirt, Jacks.”

Jackson huffed at Chet's enactment of the standard too-much-truth house rule, but he started unbuttoning the borrowed shirt. When he'd finished and the shirt had hit the floor, Chet hooked his thumbs through Jackson's belt loops and pulled him closer, so his face was right in front of Jackson's fly. If Jackson were naked, Chet could easily take Jackson's cock into his mouth from this position, and the fantasy of watching Chet's head bobbing slowly on him brought his erection back to life.

“Yer turn.”

Jackson blinked. Chet's grinning face gave Jackson the impression Chet knew exactly what he'd been thinking.

“Truth or dare?”

Chet's grin turned positively wicked. “Truth, Jacks.”

Jackson frowned—he'd expected Chet to say dare—and tried to think of a question to ask. "Um, have you..." He wanted to know if Chet had had sex with a guy before, but it didn't feel right to him to ask such a forward question. He changed tack and asked instead, "Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

Chet stopped smiling to answer Jackson seriously. "No, no boyfriend. But I have been with a guy before."

It figured Chet could guess what Jackson had truly wanted to ask, even though he hadn't. Jackson nodded and tried to assimilate this information into what he knew of Chet.

"Truth or dare, Jacks?"

"Truth."

Chet smiled again and wiggled Jackson's hips by the belt loops. "Would you like me to suck your cock?"

An image of Chet's lips surrounding his jutting dick flashed before Jackson's eyes, and he said a breathless "yes" before he had the wherewithal to be embarrassed by his response. When the flash vanished, the predatory look had returned in Chet's eyes as they gazed up at Jackson.

Chet wiggled Jackson's hips again. "Lose my jeans."

"What if I wanna lose yer socks instead?"

Chet shrugged his shoulders and smiled as if it didn't matter to him in the slightest that Jackson's erection was becoming truly painful. "Whatever floats yer boat plum tickles me to death."

Jackson narrowed his eyes at Chet's quip, but he stripped out of the tight jeans. His slightly tight boxer-briefs tried to tent, almost but not quite touching Chet's lips once he stood back up.

Chet licked his tongue across those enticing lips, leaving them shiny with saliva, but he made no move toward the dick that was slowly creating a damp circle in the cotton containing it.

Without the belt loops to grab a hold of, Chet instead slid his hands up inside the legs of the underwear to fondle Jackson's ass. Jackson made a rather unmanly whimper as Chet's fingers ran lightly over the hairs. He wondered how much longer the game would go on before they finally gave up the pretense.

"Yer turn again," Chet chuckled.

“Why’m I the only one mostly nekkid?” Jackson tried not to whine but failed.

“I’m just playin’ the game like it’s s’posed to be played. If’n ya don’t like it, do somethin’ ’bout it.”

Chet continued to smile up at him pleasantly while not quite fingering Jackson’s ass. Jackson smelled a trap.

“Truth or dare?” Jackson asked.

“Truth.”

Chet’s grin had turned wicked once more, and that’s when it dawned on Jackson what Chet was up to.

“Chester Montgomery, do you keep saying truth to make me say dare?”

Eyes filled with intent, Chet replied with, “Truth or dare, Jacks?” instead of answering properly. Jackson thought about calling him out on it now, but he had more important things to get to.

“Dare, Chet. Fucking dare me.”

“Get us nekkid. Now.”

Jackson didn’t need to be asked twice. He removed the socks and underwear first. When Chet started to reach for Jackson’s cock, Jackson swatted his hand away.

“You wait ’til I can play with you, too,” Jackson said, making quick work of the buttons on Chet’s shirt, and then his fly. Chet lifted his hips off the bed, and Jackson stripped Chet’s jeans and underwear off in one smooth movement that looked like he’d been practicing it for years. Chet scrabbled back until his body was entirely on the bed.

“Truth or dare, Chet?” Jackson asked while removing Chet’s socks. Chet watched him as he crawled onto the bed between Chet’s spread legs and hovered there, waiting for the answer.

“Dare.”

Jackson thought Chet’s voice had wavered just a tad, and that knowledge made him confident.

“Suck my cock, Chet.”

“Gladly.”

How Chet could flip him over so easily, like a roped calf, Jackson would never know. Within seconds he found himself on his back. Then Jackson's mind disengaged as Chet began slurping greedily on his cock.

"Oh, God, Chet, yes."

The feel of Chet's mouth was nothing like using his own hand. The wet, the heat, the feel of his tongue, and the noises Chet made wound Jackson up so tight he couldn't stop. He wanted—tried—to rein it in, but he didn't even have time to tap Chet on the head before he yelled his ecstasy and gushed inside Chet's talented mouth.

Chet continued slurping until Jackson couldn't stand it and pushed Chet's head away with both hands.

"Fuckin' quit." Jackson's entire body jerked as Chet sucked a tight seal around his dick until he pulled off with a small *pop*. Jackson panted and shivered, waiting for his mind to catch up to his body. He felt like one gigantic nerve, because even the slightest puff of air past his dick made him want to whimper, he was so sensitive. He felt wrung out—exhausted from every nerve singing the Hallelujah chorus simultaneously.

Jackson knew his hand would never be enough to achieve that level of mind bending. He couldn't even begin to fathom what else Chet would do to him.

Once he could focus on something other than his body's sensitivity, Jackson recalled busting his nut way too early, and suddenly he could feel the shame rising from his neck to the top of his head. "Aww, goddammit."

Chet had moved up beside Jackson at some point. His hard cock pressed into Jackson's thigh—a unique and very pleasant sensation against his flesh—and his hand cupped Jackson's head, forcing him to look at Chet.

"No regrets, 'cause that was the best goddamn cum I ever tasted," Chet said.

"But I shot too fast," Jackson complained.

"Ya don't think we're done, do ya?" To emphasize his point, Chet pressed his own hardness into Jackson's thigh as a reminder. "I plan on makin' ya come at least twice more tonight."

"Jeezus." Jackson had masturbated multiple times in a single day—once getting up to five orgasms before he called it quits—but he had never felt as wrung out that day after five as he did now after just one.

Chet leaned down and licked the nipple closest to him while pinching the one farther away, and Jackson's body came alive as if he'd been jump-started.

He puzzled over when his nipples had become directly connected to his dick, because surely this was new to him.

Chet chuckled and sat up suddenly. He rolled off of the bed and went to grab the paper sack, bringing it back with him to the bed. When he dumped the contents out, Jackson was surprised to see only a single tube of lube.

“That’s it?” Jackson asked, disappointment edging his voice at the lack of condoms. Though he already felt ridden hard and put away wet, he was sure the reality of riding Chet’s cock would be even better than this, once they progressed to that point.

“It’s enough for tonight. There ain’t no need to rush things. I ain’t goin’ anywhere. And I plan to spoil ya ’til ya can’t get enough of me.”

“Not an issue,” Jackson replied without giving it a thought. When his declaration engendered a huge smile across Chet’s features, Jackson grew shy in the face of Chet’s elation.

Chet reached for Jackson’s far hand and pulled it across his body, causing Jackson to roll onto his side. When his hand was flat, Chet opened the tube of lube and squirted a good amount onto it. Putting the closed tube of lube between them, Chet then rolled onto his back and said, “You mind givin’ me a hand?”

Jackson’s grin spread slowly across his face at the thought of finally touching Chet’s rod and tackle. Careful not to spill the lube, Jackson closed a fist around Chet’s cock, taking in the feel of it in his hand. It felt... right. He moved his slick hand up to the flared head, feeling the ridge pop through the ring of his fingers just a bit, and heard Chet say, “Oh, yeah,” quietly.

Jackson pumped his fist a couple of times.

“Just a bit tighter ’n’ faster, Jacks, and I might go off as quick as you did.”

Jackson was careful to keep his fist looser and slower than Chet desired.

“Ya know,” Jackson said after another slow pump of Chet’s cock, “ya didn’t answer one of my questions earlier.”

“What?” Chet looked like he was rapidly losing his ability to think and speak as Jackson gripped him, speeding up a fraction.

“I asked ya if you were tryin’ to make me say dare, and ya didn’t answer me. Ya asked me ‘truth or dare?’ instead.”

Chet’s eyes—which had drifted closed—opened in surprise, and he lifted his head to look at Jackson, who chose that moment to tighten his grip and

pump even faster. Chet thumped his head back on the pillow, groaning and closing his eyes once more.

Jackson felt powerful and in control as he removed his hand from Chet's cock to play with his balls instead, getting lube all over Chet's pubic hair. He rolled Chet's balls around, becoming accustomed to their size and shape and weight, and the hair.

“That deserves a penalty, dontcha think?”

Jackson smiled when Chet, eyes now open again, bit his lip and nodded. Jackson reached for the tube of lube and squirted more on his hand, only this time he slicked up his own dick, which had begun to stiffen again upon hearing Chet's sex noises.

Jackson had never tried using lube on himself before, and he quickly made a mental note to buy his own tube because the wetness was completely worth it. He tugged at his slick flesh until his cock was hard again.

Chet avidly watched him masturbate, licking his lips. “What's my penalty?”

Jackson smiled slowly, feeling a little bit of his own predator coming out to play. Bracing himself on one hand, he moved to settle between Chet's legs again, nestling their cocks together, sliding smoothly against the hot flesh until Chet moaned in need. Taking advantage of the opening, Jackson slid his tongue into Chet's mouth.

Chet immediately pulled Jackson closer, one hand cradling the back of his head—the sense of being possessed was both overwhelming and exciting—and the other hand grabbing his ass and guiding Jackson to rub their dicks against each other. Chet rocked into Jackson faster and faster, the sensation of spiraling need building within Jackson until it began to block out anything other than the desire to climax again. The kiss ended as they began to pant.

Chet moved his hand from Jackson's ass, working it between their bodies to grip both of their cocks, and suddenly Jackson couldn't feel anything but impending orgasm. He had intended to tell Chet his penalty was not to come until Jackson had again, but he didn't actually give a damn about the penalty.

What he really needed was to feel Chet come undone with him, to know Chet couldn't stop this from happening any more than he could.

“Oh, God, Chet. I'm gonna come. I wanna feel you come. I wanna hear you say my name.” Jackson babbled, increasing need overriding any speech filters. “Say my name, Chet. Come. Come. I'm gonna—”

“Jacks.”

Jackson felt the pulse of Chet's cock against his own as Chet uttered his name hoarsely. Then he felt Chet's hand and torso become slipperier, and that did it. Knowing Chet had spilled between them, Jackson's second orgasm rolled through him, and he groaned heavily in Chet's ear as he shot his load over Chet's hand and smeared it between their stomachs.

Chet eventually stopped thrusting and released them, smoothing his hand along Jackson's flank instead. Jackson rested his head against Chet's shoulder, steadying his pulse and breathing. And his legs. His legs felt like jelly, like he'd been riding a horse at full gallop all day.

As soon as Jackson got his panted breathing under control, he sought Chet's mouth with his own.

Chet obliged him in a slow, reassuring and yet still mind-blowing kiss, wrapping Jackson in his arms and rolling them both to their sides. He hitched his leg over Jackson's hip, keeping them nestled as close as possible.

Jackson thought he could have continued kissing Chet forever, but Chet pulled back a fraction, enough to cause Jackson to open his eyes.

“Jacks?”

“Yeah?” Jackson could feel Chet's lips moving against his own as he spoke. It was oddly erotic.

Jackson finally understood erotic.

“I waited five years for that. Can we call me square on the penalty?”

It took Jackson a moment to parse the question, and once he had, his initial inclination was to give a flippant answer, but he stopped himself. He did his best to look Chet in the eye, though Chet was much too close for his eyes to focus. “Really?”

Chet leaned in for another, more thoroughly possessive kiss. Jackson closed his eyes and kissed back enthusiastically, sharing his own intense and growing affection for Chet. When Chet finally pulled away, he stroked Jackson's head before holding him still by the neck and staring directly into his eyes, completely in focus.

“Really.”

Jackson bounced around the barn like a ping-pong ball, taking care of the morning's chores. Though he and Chet hadn't slept more than a couple of hours during the night before getting up to sneak home, Jackson had an abundance of energy. He felt *alive*. He couldn't wait to see Chet again, and his enthusiasm was only slightly dampened because it would be their last night before Jackson had to return to his final semester at college.

"You seem in good spirits, son."

Jackson turned to smile at Mr. Redding and nodded.

"I see you're back to your shinin' self. Things a mite better than yesterday?"

"Yessir."

"Glad to hear it. You don't look like yourself when you're wearin' a frown. 'Bout done?"

"Yessir. This here's my last one."

"Good, good. You get out of here when you're finished. You done helped me out enough. Enjoy the rest of your break."

"Thank ya, Mr. Redding."

"Knock off that 'mister' horseshit."

"Old habits die hard, Sutter, sir. It's gonna take me some time to get used to thinkin' of ya that way."

Sutter nodded and settled his hat, apparently pleased with Jackson's reply. He patted Jackson on the shoulder a couple of times before he wandered into his office.

Jackson returned to mucking his last stall. He was just finishing it when Chet entered the barn. He couldn't keep the smile from blooming on his face at the sight of Chet sauntering over. The man looked extra sexy today in the red-and-white gingham shirt and jeans, though maybe that was only because Jackson couldn't wait to get him out of them later.

"Lookin' good, Good-lookin'. How ya doin'? Tired?" Chet asked.

Jackson shook his head. "Fine. I'm just finishin' up here. What about you?"

Chet smiled and rubbed the back of his neck, looking down to the ground a bit sheepishly. "I just wanted to see ya a bit 'fore I head out on Rosalinda to check fences."

Jackson hadn't thought his smile could get wider, but his cheeks began to hurt with the stretch. "Yeah?"

Chet closed the little distance between them. "Yeah."

The sweet kiss reaffirmed in the light of day the promises they had made to one another the night before. Jackson reveled in the feel of Chet's dexterous tongue as Chet stole another piece of his heart.

"What in the Sam Hill is this bullshit?"

Jackson and Chet both turned to look at Jackson's father. Jackson tensed for the fight. Chet squeezed Jackson's shoulder gently before sliding that hand down his back to take his hand.

"I'm kissin' my boyfriend," Jackson replied coolly. He'd expected to have more time to work up to telling his parents, but the cat was out of the bag now.

"Well, I'll be damned. Don't that beat all!"

The group turned to see Sutter walking out of his office, followed by Jackson's momma, who was smiling wide at Jackson and Chet. Jackson hadn't even known she was in the barn.

"Honey, I'm just so plum happy for you! I wasn't sure you would ever find someone who turned yer crank, though I suspected if anyone would, it might be Chet."

Jackson and his father both turned to stare at his momma after her outburst. Chet looked down, not quite hiding a smile. Sutter coughed into his hand, which covered the smile he was trying to fight.

"What're you going on about, woman?"

"Yer son has fallen in love. Can't you tell, Hollis?"

"Don't be stupid, Edith. He can't be in love with Chester."

"He most certainly can and is. You should be happy for him."

"Whatever for? Damn distraction and waste of time if ya ask me. He should be learning how to ranch, not off cavorting with his *friends*." The emphasis on the word "friends" and pointed glance at Chet left Jackson no doubt exactly which friend his father had an issue with.

His mother's gaze turned frosty, and she planted her hands on her hips. "Now you listen to me, mister. I've been watchin' you run our boy down ever since he decided he didn't want to follow yer path, and I'm sick 'n' tired of it.

He's a grown man, Hollis, and ain't nothin' you can do about it. He's about to graduate from college with a biomedical science degree, and he's been accepted into one of the most prestigious veterinary programs in the U.S. of A. You should be proud of yer son for who he is, not badgering him for who he ain't." His father looked like he was about to speak when she continued, "And you can get it outta yer head, right now, that our boy is ever gonna run this here ranch. It's not what he wants to do with his life, and you're gonna respect that, Hollis Earl Conroy."

The barn was silent after his momma finished her proclamation, and it took several seconds for his father to recover enough to retort.

"And what about *this*?" Hollis waved a hand in the general direction of Jackson and Chet.

"What about it, Hollis? They're in love. That don't keep 'em from doin' whatever else they're gonna do with their lives." His momma leaned in and poked Chet in his midsection, and he smiled at her goofily.

Jackson smiled at the interaction, recalling Chet had always gotten along well with his momma, not so well with his father.

"What if I don't approve, Edith?" His father frowned further.

"Well, I have one husband and one son. If they can't get along, one of 'em's gonna have to leave my ranch. And it ain't gonna be my son."

Jackson raised his eyebrows and stared at his momma, dumbfounded. He knew the ranch had been part of her inheritance, but working the ranch meant everything to his father; it was his life. Jackson had never known her to pull the "my ranch" card on his father before because she knew that.

"Them's fightin' words, Edith."

"Them's facts, Hollis. You have an issue with our son, you learn to deal with it or pack some bags."

Chet squeezed Jackson's hand, reminding him he was there. Jackson looked around and suddenly noticed they had more of an audience than just Sutter. Several of the other hands had filtered into the barn to see what the raised voices were all about.

"Momma. Pa." Jackson indicated their audience.

His momma stared down every hand in the barn, which was impressive given her short stature.

“That goes for anyone else workin’ here who’s got a problem with m’boy or Chet. You don’t like it, I’ll cut yer last paycheck right now. We all clear, boys?”

But for Jackson and his father, nearly every head nodded—even Chet’s and Sutter’s. But Lon, one of his father’s favorite ranch hands, looked at Jackson and Chet with disgust before he spat on the ground and then glowered back at Jackson’s momma. “I’ll be takin’ that paycheck, ma’am,” he said.

“Lon—” his father started.

“No, sir, I don’t abide working alongside *faggots*.” Lon spat again, as if the word itself would contaminate him with “the gay,” even though that’s not what Jackson was. Or what Chet was.

Yes, Jackson happened to ultimately like a man, but he still didn’t think of himself as gay. Not that he cared to explain himself to an asshole like Lon.

Jackson felt more than he saw Chet stiffen beside him, so it was his turn to squeeze Chet’s hand in support. But his focus was on the set of his father’s jaw and the flint in his eyes at the word “faggots.” He had no idea if that was a good reaction from his father, or a bad one.

“That’s just as well, then. I don’t abide bigots,” his momma shot back. “Pick up yer paycheck in twenty-five minutes. Be off my property in thirty. Anyone else?”

As Lon walked out, Merv—who’d arrived with Lon, so his leaving with him wasn’t a surprise in the least—tipped his hat at Jackson’s momma and turned to go as well.

“Good riddance. Now all y’all get back to work. Ranch don’t run itself.” His momma turned to his father. “You included, Hollis.”

Jackson’s father pointed a finger at his momma’s face like he was about to have more words with her, but then he withdrew it, turned on his heel, and exited the barn without another word.

His momma looked pointedly at Chet. “You, too, young man.”

Chet wiped the smile off his face and tipped his hat. “Yes’m.”

She turned finally to Jackson and wrapped him in a big hug around his ribs, which was as high as she came to on him. He leaned over and hugged her back.

“Thank you, Momma,” he whispered.

“Nonsense, no thanks needed. You’re my baby and I love ya.”

"I love you too, Momma."

"Now, you gonna go with your man and help, or what?"

Jackson got a strange tingly feeling in his tummy when his momma called Chet "his man." It hadn't exactly dawned on Jackson in so many words that Chet really was his man now.

He looked at Chet, who shook his head.

"I don't need the distraction, to be honest, Jacks."

Jackson nodded. "Guess I'm all yers then, Momma."

"Good. Let me go get Garcia to cut a coupla paychecks, and then come set with me a spell 'til yer man here gets done. Chet, you mosey on up to the house when you're finished. You're havin' dinner with us tonight."

Jackson knew he smiled and blushed at her words, but it was okay, because Chet did too.

"Hey, Jacks—" Budd started.

Jackson waited for it.

"—truth or dare?"

"Dare." Jackson smirked at him.

Linc did a spit take, not quite snorting the beer he was drinking out of his nose, and after that, the group was silent, the only sound the crackling of the campfire. Budd blinked rapidly like he'd heard Jackson wrong. Kristin's mouth dropped open. Gabby continued to grin at him like she'd been doing all night. Meg—who Jackson noticed was sitting very close to Linc tonight—Rusty, and Nash looked mildly confused at the others' reactions. Chet just smiled as he took a pull off his beer.

"Ho-ly fuck," Budd finally said, looking at Jackson as though he'd grown another head. He turned slowly to look at Linc, blinking owlishly. "I... don't know what the fuck to dare him to do."

"Whatever the hell ya want, right?" Linc said, shaking beer off his hand and then wiping it on his jeans.

"Kristin?" Budd asked.

Kristin recovered from the initial shock and looked at Budd. "Sure, I got an idea."

She leaned over toward him to whisper in his ear. Budd shrugged, not looking particularly impressed.

“Really?” He sounded skeptical.

“Sure.” She nodded to him and then pointed a go-on gesture toward Jackson.

“Kay,” Budd said, shrugging once again. “Jacks. Go French Kristin.”

Jackson furrowed his brows and glanced over at Kristin. She was smiling, but it wasn't predatory or hateful. It wasn't even mischievous. If he had to put a word on it, he would've called it sweet. She *never* smiled sweetly at him.

“If I didn't do it five years ago, what in the Sam Hill makes ya think I'm gonna do it now?”

She smiled at him again, no hint of ill will or malicious intent whatsoever. But the most telling fact was that, for once, she didn't contradict him either. “Just checkin'.”

Jackson didn't know at first what to make of that. He looked at her, not saying a word, and she looked back at him, not offering any further explanation.

And then he laughed and shook his head at her audacity—five years of animosity washed away like nothing. Jackson looked over to Chet to see how he felt about it, but he needn't have worried. Chet tipped his beer bottle in her direction as if to say, “Get a move on; it's just a dare.”

Jackson stood up and crossed the ring to stand in front of Kristin. He offered her a hand up, which she took, and looked down at her awkwardly as she stood in front of him. Tilting her chin up gently, he leaned forward and kissed her, sliding his tongue into her mouth to complete the dare. Budd hadn't set a time limit, but Jackson wouldn't have them calling him a pussy again for backing off too soon.

There were no fireworks. His dick didn't even register the act was happening; it was strictly mechanical, not magical.

The magic only happened with Chet.

The group catcalled and hollered through the whole ordeal. When Jackson ended the kiss, he tilted Kristin's head back down to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“And for the record,” Jackson said, “that was numbers one and two.”

"It sure was." Kristin smiled at him and then sat back down across Nash's lap, hugging him close.

Jackson tipped his hat to Nash before he sat back down next to Chet.

"Take yer shirt off, Jacks," Chet said.

"Fuck you. I said dare this time, so I get to keep my goddamned shirt longer for once, 'cause it's still fuckin' cold out here."

Chet reached over and rubbed one of Jackson's pebbled nipples through his shirt. Jackson fought a blush and the stirring of his dick, and he elbowed Chet's arm to shake him off. "Quit it, dickhead."

"I'll keep ya warm, sweetheart." Chet wagged his eyebrows and patted the front of the log where he sat.

"Asshole. Hey, Rusty, truth or dare?"

The End

Author Bio

Adara O'Hare is a good ol' Southern geek in writer's clothing—a mild-mannered website designer by day, and a wife, mother, reader, and sometimes writer by night. Adara is an avid reader who writes on occasion, mostly for her own enjoyment. (We'll just not mention the otome games she's become addicted to in the last few months...)

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