

Chapter One

PAUL HAD NO INTENTION OF TELLING CHAD that he was gay. Not anytime soon. Not ever, if he could get away with it. Eight years as Chad's best friend told him Chad's reaction wouldn't be good. So why did he keep thinking about doing something he already knew was really, really stupid?

Paul glanced over at the fifteen-year-old sitting next to him. Pretty average looking. A bit shorter than Paul, even though he was several months older. Heavier, but only because Paul was so skinny. Dark-brown hair cut as long as his mom would let him, which wasn't very long. Uncombed as usual. Zit on his forehead, and another one coming up on his chin.

Face more familiar to Paul than his own. After all, he didn't really spend that much time each day looking in a mirror. Thirty seconds, maybe, to get his hair combed. More like fifteen. Not long at all.

Chad, concentrating on his video game, was oblivious to Paul's attention. *No surprises there.*

Paul thought back on their friendship. He'd been in third grade when he and his mom moved to Arcadia Heights, just a couple of months after she and his dad had separated in 1996. He hadn't liked this place. Western Oregon wasn't like Arizona, where they'd lived ever since he could remember. He hadn't *wanted* to like it.

And then that guy from their new church who kept coming over turned out to be the father of one of the biggest jerks in Paul's class at school. The first time Chad's dad brought him over for home teaching because his regular companion couldn't make it, the two boys wound up in a fistfight. Paul's mother and Chad's dad were both appalled. Chad seemed surprised that the geeky little kid had

actually hit back. But Paul was pretty fed up with the world right about then, and he wasn't in a mood to take anything from anyone. When Chad threw the first punch, Paul was more than ready to respond.

A week later, they were best friends.

Paul had absolutely no romantic feelings about Chad. None. It would be like . . . having a crush on his mom. The very thought made his stomach crawl.

But Chad was important to him. More important, maybe, than if Paul had been attracted to him that way. Being Chad's friend was part of how Paul defined who he was, even if Chad didn't know *all* of who he was.

One time back when Paul was thirteen, he dropped a rock on their glass-topped coffee table. He knew what would happen before he did it, but somehow he couldn't stop himself. It was like he'd been hypnotized by the thought of the breaking glass. When his mom asked why he'd done it, all he could say was "I don't know."

I've gotta be crazy for even thinking about telling Chad that I'm gay. But no matter how much he kept telling himself that, he knew that sometime soon he'd open his mouth and it would just come popping out, whether it was a good idea or not. Sometime *very* soon, he guessed from the way his stomach couldn't stop clenching.

I wonder if today's the day I lose my best friend.

"Prepare to die."

"Not a chance, doofus. Once I let go with this . . ." Chad fired. It missed. He bit back a swear word.

"Stupid!" Paul jeered, imitating the worms' high, thin voices. *It's kind of creepy just how well he does that,* Chad thought.

It was after school, May 2003. Chad and Paul were at Paul's house, playing *Worms Armageddon* on his game system.

"This game really sucks," Chad said a couple of minutes later, as Paul wiped out the last of his forces.

"You're just saying that 'cause you lost."

"We've been playing this stupid game since we were in sixth grade."

"True classics never get old."

"So, you wanna break out *Twisted Metal*?"

"I said *true* classics."

"*Twisted Metal*'s a classic!"

“Classic waste of time,” Paul said. As they talked, both boys were flipping through Paul’s collection of games.

“Hey, it’s all about smashing things. What could be better than that?”

“Sometimes I worry about you.”

Chad thought for a second. “Okay, then. How about *Gran Turismo 3*?”

“Fine.”

Paul dug it out while Chad vented. “So fifth period – you know, Mrs. Zeller’s class. I’m minding my own business when that ass – I mean, when that jerk Brett Davis trips me on my way to my seat. So I kick him, and then he calls me a fag. I would have punched him, except I saw Mrs. Zeller looking at me and I was pretty sure I’d get a detention. So instead I just said he was the faggot, not me, except real quiet so Zeller couldn’t hear. You should have seen the look on his face. It was sweet.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “He called you a name, so you called him a name back. Real mature.”

“Hey, I thought you’d be happy I didn’t get a detention for once.”

“Whatever. Pick your car.”

“Viper. Totally.” Chad paused, then noticed Paul’s choice. “Wait a minute. A Zonda? You’re picking a Zonda?”

“Some of us don’t like to pick the same car every time we play.”

“But a Zonda? I swear, Paul, you’re an alien.”

“Hey, it has a cool name.”

“Hopeless.”

They started the race. “So why’d you call Brett a faggot?” Paul’s voice sounded strange.

“He called me one first.”

“So you don’t think he really is gay?”

Chad snorted. “You gotta be kidding. Davis may be a jerk, but he isn’t a fag.”

“How do you know? You flash him in the locker room or something, see if he got excited?”

“Geez, Paul! It’s just obvious, okay? I mean, we’ve known the guy since sixth grade. Don’t you think we’d know by now if he was queer?”

“How do you think you’d know?” Paul persisted. “If Brett was a fag?”

Chad was starting to get annoyed. "Geez! I dunno! I mean, he doesn't act all faggy or anything. He plays soccer. He's a normal guy, you know? Not like Seth."

Seth Porter had gotten teased a lot in middle school for being a wimp and for liking drama and art instead of sports. Chad and Paul were both there one day in seventh grade when Seth actually started crying at lunchtime because everyone kept giving him a hard time. Chad remembered that Paul got really mad when Chad laughed about it.

"You know, Seth's dating Esther Watkins," Paul said. "So maybe your gay-o-meter is as lousy as the way you drive your Viper." He sounded ticked off.

For the next couple of minutes, they played in silence. Finally Chad asked, "So why're you all spazzing about who's gay and who's not? I mean, why do you care?"

There was a pause. Then Paul's voice quietly said, "I'm gay."

Startled, Chad looked over at Paul. He was staring straight ahead at the TV screen, fingers working busily at the controller. The tight set of his mouth was the only thing that suggested he'd just said anything out of the ordinary.

"What the fuh—"

Before Chad could even finish the word, Paul's fist shot out. Pain exploded in Chad's shoulder.

"Why the hell did you do that?"

"You know why." Paul still wasn't looking at him.

Chad's brain was still trying to catch up with what Paul had said. "You just told me you're a fag. My best friend is a *fag!*" Chad didn't realize how loud he'd gotten until he heard himself shouting the last word.

Paul was staring at him. "Look. Let's just pretend I didn't say anything. I mean—"

"Shut up, you faggot!" Chad roared. He knew his reaction was out of control, but he couldn't seem to do anything about it.

Paul's face tightened with anger. He threw down his controller. "All right. You can leave, asshole." He stood up, grabbed Chad's backpack, and threw it at him. Hard.

Chad sat there for several seconds, struggling to control his temper. He didn't want to make things worse by punching his best friend, even if Paul was a fag. The whole time, Paul was glaring at him. Finally, Chad got up and left.

• • •

Yeah. That went okay. Not.

Paul wiped his mouth. He'd just finished throwing up his lunch, plus the Doritos and root beer he and Chad had been snacking on after school. It got really old sometimes, having a stomach that decided to barf each time he got nervous.

Back when Paul first realized he was having feelings about boys that he was supposed to have about girls, his reaction had been sheer, petrifying terror — followed quickly by denial. He was a Mormon kid. He wasn't supposed to be that way. He was supposed to get married — to a woman. That was God's plan. It had been months before he'd been able to think about it for more than thirty seconds at a time without wanting to throw up. Like now.

A small, optimistic corner of Paul's brain reminded him that Chad always blew up like that when he got hit with something he wasn't expecting. Maybe things would be better once Chad cooled down.

Yeah. But he's never found out that his best friend's a fag before, either.

Paul stood and walked back to his bedroom, being careful not to close any doors in case he had to make another fast bathroom run.

Walking home from Paul's house, Chad was still angry. Mostly, though, he felt confused.

Gay. He knew what the word meant. Thanks to his eighth-grade health unit — and the stuff he'd heard from other kids — he knew what gay guys did for sex, though he thought it was pretty gross. He'd seen gay couples when he went into downtown Portland to buy something. He really didn't want to think about Paul doing any of that stuff, walking around holding hands with another guy, making out —

And Mormon. How did that happen? Paul followed the rules. Better than Chad did, most of the time. Not like Tim Geary, who went to church just because his folks made him but who Chad was pretty sure smoked pot with his friends on the swim team. Paul was a teacher in the Aaronic Priesthood, just like Chad. He'd been ordained by Chad's dad a little over a year ago right after he turned fourteen, a couple of months before the end of eighth grade.

Chad had been jealous, actually. That had been a few months after Chad's dad was made bishop. Chad had been mad about that. After his dad's call, it seemed like Chad kept getting into trouble

because he couldn't follow all the rules that the church and his parents and the school and everybody expected him to follow. Watching Paul sitting there in his suit, with his dad's hands on his head, he'd thought how much easier it all was for Paul. He didn't have a dad for a bishop. He didn't have a bratty little sister who loved to get him in trouble and a little brother who pestered him all the time. His mom didn't have rules about things like not having a TV or computer in his bedroom.

It was just easier somehow for Paul to follow the rules, or that's the way it seemed to Chad. Paul didn't have a temper that got him into trouble with pretty much everyone. Adults *liked* Paul. It wasn't like that for Chad. Whenever he tried to tell his side of the story to his parents or teachers, it seemed like they just wound up getting mad. "I don't get why you don't keep your mouth shut and think a minute before saying stupid stuff," Paul had said to him one time, shaking his head.

Thinking back to what had happened later on the day Paul was ordained a teacher, Chad had to agree. That afternoon after church, he'd let go with one of his new cuss words in front of his mom, just to see how she'd react. She'd gone ballistic and sent him to his room, and then she sent his dad to talk to him when he got home.

That conversation hadn't gone the way he'd expected. His dad grounded him for a week, but then he spent more than an hour listening to Chad and asking him how things were going. It was the most time they'd spent talking, just the two of them without any interruptions, since his dad had become bishop.

At one point in the conversation, his dad had asked why he didn't spend as much time with Paul anymore. Chad muttered something about being interested in different things now and how he'd started spending more time with guys who weren't such science-fiction freaks. Even as he said it, though, he felt guilty. He knew that wasn't the reason they'd stopped hanging around so much. Mostly, Chad had realized later, it was just because he wanted to be around kids who weren't Mormons and didn't know how he was supposed to act, so he could pretend he wasn't Mormon for a while. It was a pretty lousy reason for ditching someone he'd been friends with since third grade. He didn't even like spending time with those other guys that much anyway.

He'd apologized to Paul a few days later. That was when they'd made a bargain about Paul slugging him whenever he cussed. He'd gone around with a sore arm for at least a month after that. He

hadn't realized how much he'd started using that kind of language until he tried to stop.

During that same conversation, Chad had admitted feeling like following the rules was so much easier for Paul and how he was a lot better of a Mormon than Chad was. Paul had laughed in a kind of strange way Chad hadn't known how to interpret. Then he said Chad didn't have any idea what he was talking about. Chad guessed he knew what Paul meant now.

Which didn't help him any in figuring out what to do.

Paul's a fag. My best friend's a faggot.

So what you gonna do about it?

Chad didn't know.

"You're late!" Chad's mom's words greeted him as he entered the house, kicking off his shoes just inside the entryway.

"What the—" He swallowed and bit back the words.

"It's a quarter after five. You know you're supposed to be here at five on school nights."

Chad looked over at the clock. Sure enough, it was 5:15. He still sometimes forgot that his mom had reset it ten minutes fast "to make sure we get ready for things on time" after that one Sunday a couple of months ago when they hadn't gotten to church until the sacrament hymn was playing. It was embarrassing, she said, for the bishop's family to arrive late to meetings. When Chad complained that it messed up his schedule, she suggested that he reset his own watch to match the living-room clock. He didn't say anything about it after that. Instead, he just tried to remember that their house now ran on Mortensen Family Time, which was just a little different from everywhere else in the known universe.

"Go get started on your homework. I'd like it if you were done by 6:30. That's when we're having dinner tonight."

"I thought I was supposed to mow the lawn today."

"It's drizzling. Tomorrow, maybe. Or Saturday."

"But Dad—"

"I'll tell him I talked to you. Okay?" She smiled at him.

He smiled back a little cautiously, wondering if he ought to be nervous. *Parents smile like that when they want you to do something.* As soon as she turned away, he ran upstairs toward the relative safety of his bedroom.

• • •

Homework went slow. Chad had a paragraph to write for English and a set of problems for algebra, together with a chapter to read for social studies. He did his best to concentrate, but his thoughts kept drifting.

Paul. Gay. The more time he had for it to sink in, the more confused he got. It was just . . . something he couldn't really believe. Paul didn't act like a fag. How could he be a fag?

By dinnertime, Chad still had half a chapter to finish reading. Thankfully, his mom was too busy telling his dad, who'd just gotten home from a two-day trip, about all the chores that needed doing to ask Chad about the state of his homework.

"What are we having for dinner?" his dad asked, ruffling nine-year-old Emily's hair as he passed her on the way to the table. "I'm sure it's great, just like usual." Chad's dad was a sales manager for a company that manufactured computer components. He'd heard his dad say that each time you talked to someone, you should include a compliment. Unfortunately, that meant his dad's compliments didn't always mean much.

"Pork chops," his mother responded. Chad was pleased. He liked pork chops. "And green beans, applesauce, and potatoes and gravy."

His dad shook his head. "Why people think applesauce goes with pork is beyond me."

"You don't have to have any." She was grinning.

"I'll just save it for dessert." His dad grinned back, in kind of a . . . Were Chad's mom and dad flirting with each other? Chad closed his eyes.

"Can we eat already?" he muttered.

"Yeah!" shouted seven-year-old Jeffrey, already bouncing up and down in his chair even though he'd been sitting for only about thirty seconds.

"Someone needs to feed that kid some Ritalin," grumbled Chad.

"Let's have dinner," his dad interrupted. "Is it all right if I say the prayer?"

Why does he always ask that? wondered Chad. It's not like we're gonna say he can't.

His mom nodded, and they all bowed their heads.

"Dear Heavenly Father. We thank thee for the many blessings you've given us this day . . ."

Chad tuned out what his dad was saying, noticing only when

he slipped from the *thees* and *thous* to *you* and *your*. His dad hadn't become Mormon until he was seventeen, and the church he'd attended before then didn't use *thees* and *thous* when they were praying. His dad had even found an old article from the *Ensign* about the language of prayer and turned it into flash cards to practice with, but he still couldn't get it right.

"Amen."

"Amen," answered Chad automatically, together with Emily and — after a warning look from his mom — Jeffrey.

"I'm sorry it's been such a stressful time at work," his mom commented as they started eating. For a minute, Chad felt guilty. Had his dad said something about work during the prayer? Then he shook it off.

"I almost got in trouble today, except it wasn't really my fault — it was Eric's fault," announced Emily. Eric was a boy who sat near her in class and always seemed to be causing trouble for Emily and her friends. If they were older, Chad would have suspected that maybe Eric had a crush on some of the girls. Thank goodness they were only in third grade.

A couple of minutes later, Emily was still talking.

"— and then Rita went and got the teacher, but the teacher hadn't seen Eric do it, so she said we had to go and sit at another table, but that was okay because I didn't want to sit next to Eric anyway —"

Jeffrey had pretty much finished his pork chop and was now busy building a fort out of his mashed potatoes and gravy, supported on two sides by the bone from the pork chop, with green beans stuck around the top like a picket fence. "Eat it, don't play with it," Chad hissed, then glared when his brother grinned mischievously back.

From the other end of the table, Chad's mom gave him a look that he knew meant it was his job to keep his little brother under control. He clenched his fists. *Why is it always me that gets stuck with the brat?* Looking at his mom, though, he knew that if he objected, he'd be in trouble. Turning to Jeffrey, he said, "You wanna play on my GameCube after dinner?"

"Yeah!"

"Then eat your food."

"Aww." But Jeffrey stopped playing and started eating, though he still had to be talked into each bite. Thankfully, after six bites Chad's mom nodded permission for Jeffrey to leave, and he was off like a shot.

"He's a menace," Chad said the minute Jeffrey was out of sight.

It had taken all his self-control not to yell at the kid when he took almost five minutes on the last two bites.

"You were worse," his mom responded. Privately, Chad doubted this, but he didn't argue the point.

"We appreciate your patience, son," his dad added. Behind his back, Emily stuck out her tongue at Chad.

"Richard, I was wondering if you could help Emily with her math this evening. The teacher sent a note home saying she needs more work on carrying in subtraction."

"I need to go up to the church for a while this evening."

Chad's mom lost her smile. "That's the third time this week."

"I'll be back in about an hour."

"Well." She paused. "If you have to go up to the church, then I suppose you'd better take off, so you can get back more quickly." She swept out of the room and into the kitchen.

"I guess I'd best get going," Chad's dad replied in a gruff tone. It was another minute before he stood up and headed off.

Chad wound up playing *Super Smash Brothers Melee* with Jeffrey for about a half-hour in the downstairs TV room, until it was Jeffrey's story time. Then Chad went upstairs to finish up the rest of his homework. Emily, he guessed, was off playing in her room. He put on his headphones and started on his homework.

He'd just gotten done and was putting his books away in his backpack when the door to his room opened and his dad's head poked in. Chad glanced over at the clock. It was a little after nine.

"How you doing? Finished with homework?"

"Yeah." He scowled. "You said you'd knock before you come in my room."

"I did," his dad said calmly, sitting on Chad's bed. "You didn't hear." He poked a thumb at Chad's CD player. "What are you listening to?"

"Some stuff Tony at school copied for me."

His dad raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that illegal?"

Chad felt a sudden, sharp spike of anger. With difficulty, he controlled it. "It was a present," he said. "Some songs he thought I'd like."

"But copied. Not bought."

Chad clenched his fists and swallowed. "Look, it's just one CD."

"It's not the size, it's the principle of the thing. You're just as

much a thief if you steal only one CD as if you steal a million dollars."

"So you're saying I'm a thief."

"That's not what I'm saying." Chad could tell that his dad was starting to get ticked off. "But you *are* the one who's listening to it. And even if everyone is doing it, you need to set a better example."

"I'm sick and tired of being an example! Just because you're the bishop—"

"Chad!" His dad took a deep breath, then continued. "You're a priesthood holder, and it's your responsibility to act like one." He paused. "Clearly this isn't a good time to have this conversation. We'll talk about it later, after you've had a chance to think it over."

The two of them stared at each other. After a few seconds, Chad felt his pulse start to calm down. Then to his own surprise, Chad heard himself ask, "What makes people fags?"

His dad looked surprised. "Where did that come from?"

Chad shook his head. His dad gave him a serious look. "Is there something you need to talk to me about as the bishop?"

"No!" The very idea horrified him. "Never mind. Just—forget about it, okay?"

His dad just kept looking at him. After a minute, Chad reluctantly continued. "Just, some guys at school, you know? Nobody I know really well. Everyone says they're fags."

"I'd rather you didn't use that word."

"Fag?"

"Yes."

"It's what all the guys at school call them."

"I'm sure. Regardless, that's not a word I think you should use." He paused. "You sure you don't have anything to tell me?"

Chad's temper flared again. "I'm not a fag, so you can just stop it with the accusations!" he snarled.

"Whoa!" His dad stared at him. "I wasn't accusing you of anything. You need to get a better handle on that temper of yours."

There was an awkward silence before his dad continued. "Anyway, getting back to the question you were asking. I don't know why some people turn out gay." He looked at Chad again. "You really want to hear what I think about this?"

Chad nodded.

"A lot of gays say they're born that way. I don't know. I can't believe God would create someone gay. But then, I can't believe that God would create someone handicapped or psychopathic, either."

He shook his head. "I'm not even sure it's something I think can be labeled all that easily. I think it's not really uncommon for boys to sometimes have crushes on other boys when they're young. Sometimes it may not even have anything to do with sex. Just a kind of hero worship."

Chad snorted, thinking about the way Colin Creevey followed Harry around all the time in the Harry Potter books. *Hero worship. That sounds about right.*

His dad continued. "Maybe it's partly genetics. Maybe it's how someone is raised. Back when I was younger, they used to say that growing up without a strong father could make people homosexual. I don't think they're saying that anymore." He paused. "I think the church has materials for helping people who struggle with homosexuality. I haven't really had to look at them yet. I suppose I should."

Yeah, well, you might need them sooner than you think, Chad thought.

"Even if homosexuality isn't something people choose, I do know that homosexuality isn't a lifestyle that can bring happiness to people. Not real, eternal happiness. That's what the gospel teaches. From the church's perspective, the really important thing is how you choose to live. Satan tries to tell us that just because we feel something, we have to act on it. The gospel is all about self-control—doing things in God's own time and in the way God wants us to do them. Even if people have those kinds of feelings, they don't have to act on them."

Chad recognized a favorite theme of his dad's. He was really big on self-control, especially since he'd been made a bishop.

"Anyway, that's what I think about it. Sorry if that doesn't answer your question."

Chad shrugged.

"So, about that music CD."

Chad tensed up again. He'd almost forgotten about that.

"I'll make you a deal, okay? Pick one of the songs you especially like, and I'll see if we can get you a legal copy. Just don't tell Emily about it, or she'll want another Britney Spears CD."

Chad swallowed and nodded. He supposed it was better than nothing.

"I'm glad you're doing the right thing."

Not like you gave me any choice, Chad thought. *Why does doing the right thing always have to suck?*

“Take care, tiger.” Chad’s dad smiled and gave him a quick hug—which Chad did his best not to return—and then left.

Down in the family room, the smile melted off Richard’s face as he settled onto the couch and closed his eyes.

I remember back when Chad was this easy kid to listen to and understand. Now he’s like a stone. An angry, sullen stone. Half the time we talk, it seems like it turns into another argument. And then he comes out with this gay question—

Richard wasn’t a fool. His time as bishop had taught him a lot about young men and what they would and wouldn’t talk about to someone they saw as an adult authority. He thought about his son, with his shuttered face and eyes, and knew he’d reached the age where he’d hang onto his privacy with every bit of determination a sullen teenager could muster.

Someday maybe he’d find out what had been behind Chad’s question tonight. He just hoped it wouldn’t be one of those conversations parents have nightmares about. “Dad, I’m gay.” “Dad, I got a girl pregnant.” “Dad, I blew up the school.” He shook his head. There were just too many horrible options to choose from, teenagers being as young and stupid as they were. He’d been that stupid himself.

At least his son had good friends.

Back at the beginning of third grade, Chad had been running wild, without any friends Richard and Sandy could feel good about. Getting a head start on teenage anger and sullenness, and at only nine, too. Then he started spending time with Paul, and their cheerful, sometimes wacky, headstrong, active, but mostly well-meaning son had been back.

Chad was a happier person when Paul was around, more the kind of person Richard hoped he might grow up to be once the teenage morass was past. Richard hadn’t realized how much of a difference it made until that time about a year ago when Chad had been hanging out with those stoners-in-training. Thank God that stage was over and Chad was spending more time again with Paul and his other church friends. Their family’s life had truly changed for the better when Paul and his mother moved to Arcadia Heights.