

CHAPTER ONE – YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING

Monday morning. The first Monday of the year – and not only was it the start of a new school week, it was the start of a new semester. With eight-year-old Nathan still in the kitchen consuming his bowl of Sugar Pops, Paul proceeded toward his bedroom. Bus 39 would be pulling into the driveway in about twenty minutes, and this morning it was questionable if that amount of time would be sufficient for him to get ready.

“Paul,” eight-year-old Nathan said, minutes later when he rolled his wheelchair through the doorway of his older brother’s bedroom. “Are you about ready to?”

Instantly, his voice froze. “No. This can’t be.”

“What do you think?” Paul said, twisting his slender fourteen-year-old torso so he could catch a glimpse of his backside in the full-length mirror attached to his closet door. “It’s the latest style.”

“Well, I.”

“I know,” Paul replied, a smug grin on his face. “This outfit looks so good, it takes your breath away – doesn’t it?”

“Well, I.”

“You know, Nathan,” Paul continued, completely ignoring his brother’s shocked expression.

“The kids at school are bound to like me now.”

Nathan snorted. “Paul. Your friends at school already like you.”

“I know. But I’d like to have some friends besides the ones from the computer club. ... Don’t you think this outfit should do the trick?”

Nathan shook his head in disbelief.

Paul frowned. Even though his half brother was a few years younger, he respected the boy’s opinion. Ever since joining the Pontiac family just shortly before Christmas, Nathan had shown an unbelievable understanding of people – especially for someone his age.

“Tell me, Nathan,” Paul said, as he plopped down on the side of the bed. “Do you think I should wear my tennis shoes, or the matching boots I bought?”

Before his brother could respond, the sound of a bell started to chime. It was coming from the quad-core Dell computer on Paul's desk. Apparently his system had detected an incoming live video IM (Instant message). The flashing user-id belonged to his best friend and next-door neighbor, Tim Hegler.

"I'll have to get back to you," Paul told his younger brother. He then turned to the monitor and clicked his mouse. Tim's face came into view just as a creaking sound reverberated from the room's tongue-and-groove floor. Evidently, Nathan had decided to leave the room.

"Tim," Paul yelled into computer's microphone. "What's up, bro? You usually don't call this early in the morning?"

"I wanted to see if you had heard about the ..." Tim suddenly stopped mid-sentence. "Surely you're not going to be wearing that to school! Are you?"

"Don't you just love it?" Paul replied, doing a turn-around in front of this web cam. "It's the 'IN' thing this year."

Tim stared at his friend in total silence, his mouth froze in a wide-open position. "Paul," he then said, before pausing. "That outfit is so hideous – I'm surprised it didn't break your video cam."

Paul scowled. "Hey! It's not that bad."

"Oh yes it is! Your mom didn't get you that for Xmas, did she?"

"No," Paul replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Mom stopped by the Salvation Army yesterday and I found it on one of their clothes racks. These overalls were on sale for just a dollar, and I found this flannel shirt for fifty cents."

"I can understand why," Tim said, nodding. "It looks like something that a farmer in the 50's might wear."

"Fantastic!" Paul yelled as a wide smile spread across his face. "That's exactly the look I was aiming for."

Tim rolled his eyes and momentarily glanced toward the ceiling. "Paul. Do me a favor and ditch the outfit. ... You know today is going to be my first day at Gibsonville, and believe me, the last thing I need is for my best friend to be looking like a clown."

"Tim. It's really not all that b...."

To Paul's surprise, Tim unexpectedly looked away from camera. "I've got to go," he then said. "Mom's calling. ... I'll catch you on the bus. ... Now don't let me forget to tell you what happened at our school over Xmas, OK?"

"OK," Paul replied, though he wondered what his friend could be referring to.

The moment he was about to say "Good Bye", a flicker brightly flashed across the front of his monitor. Soon afterwards, it went blank. Seconds later, his animated 3-D screensaver appeared – already in motion.

I really do need to see what's causing my video card to do that, Paul thought, taking a seat on his bed so he could stick his feet in the maroon-colored cowboy boots he had purchased to complete his ensemble.

Moments later, he was out the door.