

CHAPTER TWO – THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

“I still can’t believe you’re wearing that!” Tim exclaimed as bus 39 pulled next to Gibsonville’s gymnasium and came to a halt. “Just look at yourself. That outfit is absolutely hideous. Faded farmer Brown overalls. A red and white flannel shirt. Maroon-colored boots. And a bright green John Deere baseball cap? ... Paul, are you out of your mind? No one would ever wear anything like that - especially to school.”

“Yes they would,” Paul confidently replied as they slid into the center aisle. “Just look at what Butch McGuire is going to be wearing. It’s the retro look that makes him and his gang so popular.”

“Butch McGuire?” A puzzled expression appeared on Tim’s face. “Who is he?”

“Oh, believe me, Tim. You’ll soon find out. He and his gang worked hard last semester at making my life as difficult as possible. They love to pick on anyone they deem to be an outsider, especially if they can be labeled a computer geek.”

“Why? Most programmers aren't any different from anyone else.”

“I know,” Paul replied, stepping down onto the parking lot. “But you would never be able to convince them that.”

Seconds later.

“Good morning, handsome,” a blond female friend cheerfully said, donning her usual someday-you-are-going-to-be-mine smile and wink as the boys entered the school’s rear entranceway.

Then unexpectedly, a shocked expression flashed across her face. “What in the devil is that you’re wearing, Paul? ... It’s horrific!”

“What? – This outfit?” he replied, gazing downward. “It’s something I picked up over the holidays at the Salvation Army. ... Since the retro look works so well for Butch and his gang, I thought I’d give it a try.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Cathy said, now shaking her head. “It looks ridiculous. This is the twenty-first century, you know. Not the 1940s.”

Tim silently suppressed a small chuckle. “That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell him. The problem is – he refuses to listen.”

“He does?” Cathy said, pursing her lips. “Oh, well. At least you tried. ... By the way, who are you? I don’t believe I’ve seen you before.”

“Me?” Pointing his finger toward his chest, “I’m Tim Hegler,” Tim said, giving Cathy a smile. “This is my first day here.”

“Tim Hegler?” Cathy repeated, as she began to glance toward the ceiling. “Hmm. I’ve heard that name before.”

Then suddenly ...

“Oh, my gosh!” she screamed, as though a movie star had unexpectedly appeared.

“You’re not the Tim Hegler – the one who co-developed Clash of the BattleStars, are you?”

“That’s me,” Tim nodded.

“Oh, my gawd! I can’t believe you’re here – in Gibsonville,” Cathy exclaimed, now appearing to be so flustered that even the simple act of breathing was proving to be difficult. “My dad told me during Christmas break that a new freshman was joining our school. But I had no idea it was going to be you! I can’t wait until Daniel finds out. The kid’s going to freak.”

“Daniel?” Tim said, raising his eyebrow.

“Daniel E. Whitehouse – the Third,” Paul replied. “He’s the eleven year old computer genius I told you about.”

“Oh. ... Him.”

“It’s been good to meet you, Tim,” Cathy said, abruptly grabbing his hand and giving it a quick shake. “But if don’t mind – I’ve got to be going. ... I have to tell Daniel that you’re here. You will be joining our Computer Club, won’t you?”

Tim wanted to say, yes, but before he could – she was gone.

“Wow!” he then exclaimed, looking a bit bewildered as he turned to face his friend. “Are all your friends like that?”

Paul looked at him and grinned.

As soon as Tim and Paul entered Ms. Bass homeroom class, Paul cruised toward his assigned desk. Tim took an empty one behind him the moment the tardy bell clanged.

“Well. Well. Well,” Butch McGuire said, twisting himself around so he could address the new sight before him. “Look who’s back. My favorite computer geek. And I see that you brought a friend.”

Paul unconsciously gulped. This definitely wasn’t the way he wanted to start the Spring semester.

“Just leave us alone, Butch. OK?”

Butch smiled, a medieval smile. “Gee. What’s wrong, Paul?” he asked, using a high-pitched tone as if he was talking to a young adolescent. “Is the big bad bully disturbing the little computer geek? Maybe he needs to run down the hallway and report it to his mommy, the school’s Guidance Counselor. She might even be able to change your soiled diaper.”

“Just shut up, Butch!” Paul replied, as his fingers unconsciously tightened around the edge of his desk.

“You dare to tell me to shut up, geek?” Quickly snatching a wooden ruler from the side of his backpack, Butch began to slap it across his bare palm. “How would you like a nice smack across the forehead? Maybe it would knock some sense into you.”

Immediately jumping to his feet, Tim raised his fists. “I’d like to see you try, you super-size pile of crap! There is no way in hell I’m going to let you lay a hand on my friend.”

“Alright, you three!” Ms. Bass yelled, instantly intervening. “That’s enough of that. Fighting is definitely not allowed in my class. ... Tim Hegler ... and I presume that’s who you are since I haven’t seen you before. Take a seat. ... Paul and Butch ... Chill it. Now!”

The three briefly glanced at each other – then readily complied.

Moments later.

“Hey geek,” Butch began in a forceful whisper, the second Ms. Bass had completed taking attendance.

“Yeah?”

“You know that we’re not done yet. ... Before this day is over, I’m going to stomp that scrawny tail of yours so bad – they’ll have to carry you out on a stretcher.”

Paul’s mouth instantly dropped. “What’s your problem, Butc...?” However, before he could finish, the first period class bell began to clang. And by the time it had stopped, his nemesis was nowhere to be found.

“What’s with the moron?” Tim asked, as the two of them left the classroom.

“Well - if you really must know.” Paul said, before taking a deep breath. “He can’t stand the fact that I wasn’t born around here, and two - he,,,”

While Paul continued to recite the multitude of reasons that Butch and his gang didn’t like him, a nearby high-pitched squeal started to resound.

“Oh my gosh! Cathy was right. It’s him!” Daniel proclaimed, running down the crowded hallway toward them. Within milliseconds, he had abruptly grabbed Tim’s waist and was giving him a hug.

“My gawd, Paul!” Tim proclaimed at the sight before him. “Who is this?”

Paul chuckled, as he watched the eleven-year-old give Tim a quivering smile.

“Tim,” he then said. “Meet ...”

“Daniel E. Whitehouse, the Third,” the boy completed while releasing him. “And you’re Tim Hegler. Cathy just told me that you were here. ... Did Paul already tell you that just like him, you’re my hero!”

“Your hero?” Tim replied, giving Paul a puzzled look.

Daniel repeatedly nodded.

Paul was about to explain to Tim Daniel's unusual behavior when suddenly ...

"Well. Isn't this interesting?" Stan, one of Butch's gang members said as he walked up to where the three of them were standing.

"What do you want, Stan?" Paul asked.

"I'd like to know why your boy was hugging this newbie in my hallway? ... Did the little faggot get tired of you, Paul?"

"Faggot?" Tim repeated.

"Just ignore him, Tim," Paul replied. "Stan," he then said, turning to face him. "You already know that none of us are gay. So why do you always keep..."

"Oh really?" Stan interrupted. "Then answer this. Why was your boy's arms wrapped around the kid's waist? ... Disgusting acts like that shouldn't be done where people can see them."

"I don't care what you saw," Daniel forcefully replied, as a tear started to well in one of his eyes. "I'm not gay, and you and the rest of Butch's gang know that. I just happen to love Tim and Paul 'cause they're my heroes ... which is something, mostly likely, you never have."

"Your heroes, huh," Stan repeated, placing his hands on the side of his hips. "What have these two ever done to be considered heroes?"

"Are you familiar with the game, Clash Of The BattleStars?" Daniel asked, in a slightly clearer voice. "It's been a best seller the past two months."

"Yeah. I know the game," Stan replied. "I got it for Christmas."

"OK. Well, if that's so. Haven't you ever read its label?"

"No, I can't say I have," Stan replied, glancing downward. "Why should I, anyhow?"

"So you could see who developed it."

"Why should I care about who developed it?" Stan said, now looking a bit irritated. "You don't buy a game so you can sit and read the box. You buy it so you can play it."

"I care about who developed the games I play," Daniel proclaimed. "And I think that you should, too."

“Why?”

“Because if you had bothered to see who co-developed Clash Of The BattleStars, you’d discover Paul’s and Tim’s name.”

Stan hesitated. “Is that right, Paul?”

“Daniel’s right,” Tim replied. “It’s written on the printed insert located inside the CD case.”

“I still think the three of you are a bunch of faggots,” Stan asserted.

“Oh?” Paul replied, giving Tim a knowing wink. “If that’s true, then you must be one, too.”

“No way!” Stan said, aggressively taking a step towards him. “I’m a woman’s man.”

“Is that so?” Paul sarcastically replied. “Then explain how come you’ve never been out on a date – with a real woman? I know for a fact that only person anyone has ever seen you with, has been Butch.”

Stan snorted. “I ain’t got time for this kind of nonsense, Paul. I’ve got to head to class.”

Paul chuckled, in reply.

Soon afterwards, the three of them entered their Algebra class.

“So what happened during Christmas?” he asked hours later, while tossing his empty tray into the dishwashing slot at the end of their lunch period. “With all the fun we’ve had this morning, you never got around to telling me.”

“I think it would be easier to show you,” Tim replied, as they started to exit the cafeteria.

“It’ll only take a minute.”

Instead of turning right as they normally would do in order to return to their classrooms, the boys continued straight. Minutes later, after turning into the hallway that led to the Administration building’s front entrance. Tim motioned for them to stop.

“So why did you bring me here?” Paul asked. “I’ve seen our trophy case at least a half dozen times.”

“I’m sure you have,” Tim replied, as he tapped on the top right corner of the aluminum trimmed, glass case. “But check it out now. I’m sure you’ll notice something’s different.”

Paul took a quick look.

“Are you sure something’s changed?” he then asked, while still staring at each of the three shelves in front of him.

“According to what my Dad told me, there is,” Tim said. “Didn’t the Yellow Jackets win the football regionals this year?”

“They sure did.” Paul nodded.

He then took a second look.

“Hey! The trophy’s not here!”