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AMERICAN chillers



16: Alien Androids Assault Arizona

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1

“Arielle!” I shouted, waving my hand in the air. “Over here!”

From across the lunchroom, Arielle Watkins saw me and started walking toward the table I was sitting at. Arielle moved here last year, and we’ve become pretty good friends. She’s tall for her age, with long, dark brown hair.

Directly across from me sat Joey Romaniello. Joey lives on the same block that I do, and I’ve known him ever since he moved to Scottsdale a couple of years ago. He said that he used to live in Minnesota, but he likes Arizona better because it’s warmer, and we don’t get any snow.

And he’s sure right about that! Scottsdale can get pretty hot in the summertime, that’s for sure.

“Hi Shelby,” Arielle said to me. “Did you get your math homework done?” She sat down next to me and placed her sack lunch on the table.

“Yeah,” I replied, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“That was the hardest homework assignment I think I’ve ever had!” she said. “I never thought fifth grade math would be so difficult. I just know that I’m going to get most of the answers wrong.”

“I didn’t think it was that hard,” Joey said. “I finished it last night and still had time to go to the arcade before it got dark.”

“Yeah, but you’re good at math,” I said. “I thought that the problems were pretty hard. Sometimes Mrs. Rodriguez gives us way too much homework. Every time she gives us a homework assignment, I’m terrified.”

“You’ve got that right,” Arielle said.

Joey finished chewing his sandwich. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small, gold-colored pendant. It was about the size of a quarter.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, I won it last night at the arcade. At first, I thought it was gold . . . but it’s only cheap plastic.”

He flipped the pendant into the air and it fell onto the table. I snapped it up and looked at it.

“Yeah, it would be cool if it was real gold,” I said. “But it’s still kind of neat looking.”

“You can have it if you want,” Joey said, unwrapping a candy bar.

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“It would make a cool necklace,” I said. “I’ll make a necklace out of it, and it can be my good luck charm.”

And when I went home from school, that's exactly what I did. I have a thin gold chain that I got for my birthday last year, and I looped it through the pendant. Then I put the necklace on.

It actually looked pretty cool. I know that the pendant was only cheap plastic, but from a few feet away, it looked real.

"There," I said aloud as I looked into the mirror. "Now I have my good luck charm. I wonder what kind of good luck it will bring me."

As it turned out, I was going to need all of the good luck I could get . . . because the very next day, I was going to find out something horrifying about my very own teacher, Mrs. Rodriguez.

And it would have nothing to do with homework!

2

Wednesday started off normal. I got up, dressed, ate a bowl of cereal, and walked to school. Same old routine that I do every weekday. I ate lunch in the cafeteria with Joey and Arielle . . . just like always.

And when the bell rang and it was time to go home, I stuffed all my books into my backpack and left the classroom.

Joey stopped me in the hall.

“Do you want to go for a bike ride later?” he asked.

“I would, but I’m supposed to go with my mom and dad to some dinner. Dad’s on a bowling league, and tonight is some kind of awards banquet.”

“*That* sounds like fun,” Joey smirked, rolling his eyes.

I shook my head. “Yeah, it’ll probably be pretty boring. Maybe we’ll go for a bike ride tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Joey said, and he walked off.

I turned and began walking down the hall. Then I suddenly realized that I had left my favorite pen on my desk.

I turned around and headed back to the classroom, waving goodbye to some of my classmates. When I got back to Mrs. Rodriguez's room, I stopped at the door.

And stared.

Mrs. Rodriguez had her back to me. She was the only one in the room, and she was staring straight at the wall . . . *talking into her watch!*

But there was more to it than that. Sure, talking into a watch was strange, but it was how she was speaking that was really weird.

Mrs. Rodriguez sounded like a robot!

Her voice was mechanical and very monotone, and she didn't sound at all like she normally sounded. From where I stood in the hall, I couldn't quite make out what she was saying. She sure sounded odd, though, and I wasn't going to interrupt her. I could see my pen on my desk, and I decided that I would just leave it until tomorrow.

Without warning, Mrs. Rodriguez turned and looked at me. She lowered her wrist and stopped speaking. Her eyes had a glazed, cold look. She looked creepy.

And suddenly, she smiled.

"Hello Shelby," she said sweetly, in a perfectly normal voice. "Can I help you?"

"Uh, um," I stammered. "I, uh . . . I forgot my pen."

She looked at my desk, then walked to it and picked up my pen. "This one?" she asked.

I nodded, and Mrs. Rodriguez brought the pen to me. “Here you are, dear,” she said. “And don’t forget that your book report is due tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I replied, taking the pen from her. “I’m almost finished.”

“Good. I’ll see you in class tomorrow.”

“See you,” I said, and I turned and walked down the hall.

That was weird. I mean . . . Mrs. Rodriguez has always been very nice, but I’ve never seen her talking into her watch before.

When I got outside, I saw Arielle on the playground. She was talking to some friends. When she saw me, she left the group and walked up to me.

“I thought you’d be gone by now,” she said.

I held up my pen. “I forgot this,” I said. “Say . . . have you ever seen Mrs. Rodriguez acting weird?”

“What do you mean by ‘weird?’” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Like . . . speaking in a strange voice?”

“You mean a different language? Sure. She speaks Spanish, and I think—”

“No, not another language,” I said. “Just . . . in a weird voice. And talking into her watch.”

Arielle gave me her own weird look. “Talking into her watch? I think you’ve been watching too much television.”

“I’m serious!” I said. “I just saw her talking into her watch. She sounded like a robot.”

“You’re imagining things,” Arielle replied. “There’s nothing wrong with Mrs. Rodriguez.”

Maybe Arielle was right. Maybe I just *imagined* that I heard my teacher acting strange.

But I didn’t think so. I *know* what I saw. I *know* what I *heard*.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” Arielle said. “I have to finish my book report.”

“Yeah, me, too,” I replied. “See you tomorrow.”

And as she walked off, I hoped that she didn’t think I was acting silly. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything about Mrs. Rodriguez.

But the very next day, Arielle came running up to me at lunchtime. The cafeteria was packed, and she hustled up to the table where Joey and I were sitting.

“*Shelby!*” Arielle whispered loudly. Her eyes were wide with excitement. “*You’re right! I just came from Mrs. Rodriguez’s room . . . and you won’t believe what I saw!*”

3

Arielle sat next to me.

“What?!?!” I exclaimed. “What did you see?!?!”

“Well, I was walking by our classroom,” Arielle replied, “and when I looked inside, Mrs. Rodriguez . . . was eating a sandwich! It was horrifying!” Arielle placed her hands to her cheeks and gasped like she was scared out of her wits.

She was making fun of me!

Joey started to laugh, and then Arielle started laughing, too.

“Funny,” I snapped. “Real funny.”

“Come on,” Arielle said as she opened her lunch bag. “I was only kidding.”

“I’m telling you Mrs. Rodriguez was acting strange,” I said.

“So?” Arielle said. She pulled out a wrapped sandwich and placed it on the table. “Lots of people act strange. You can’t go to jail for acting weird.”

She had a point. But I was still convinced that something funny was going on.

I just didn’t know what.

“Did you get your book report finished?” Joey asked.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a bite of my sandwich. “I finished it last night.”

“What book did you read, Shelby?” Arielle asked. She had unwrapped her sandwich, and after she spoke she took a bite.

“*The Incredible Journey*,” I replied. “It was really good.”

Joey looked at my neck. “Hey,” he said. “You really *did* make a necklace out of that thing.”

I reached up and held the small plastic pendant between my fingers. “Yeah. If you’re not real close, it looks like real gold. It’s my new good luck charm.”

“Has it brought you any good luck?” Arielle asked.

“Not yet,” I replied.

“I read *Hatchet*,” Joey said, returning the subject of discussion to our book reports. “It was really good, too.”

“I’m going to write my own story,” I said. “It’s going to be about a teacher that isn’t really a teacher, but a robot.”

Arielle laughed. “Do you still think that Mrs. Rodriguez is up to something strange?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, taking another bite of my sandwich. “But I know what I saw and heard yesterday.”

“She seemed pretty normal this morning,” Joey said.

“You guys can say what you want,” I said, after I gulped down another bite. “But she was acting weird yesterday. I guess it doesn’t mean anything, but I’m going to be watching to see if she does it again.”

We finished our lunches and trudged back to the classroom. Mrs. Rodriguez was already at her desk, going over our book reports.

And the rest of the afternoon we did the same things we usually do. We read silently for a while, then we studied state history, which was actually kind of fun. I found out a lot about Arizona that I hadn’t known. Arizona is famous for the Grand Canyon, which most people know. But I didn’t know that the word ‘Arizona’ is from the Aztec Indian word *arizuma*. It means ‘silver-bearing’.

The bell rang, and it was time to go home. I got up to leave.

“Shelby?” Mrs. Rodriguez said.

I turned.

“Yes?” I replied.

“May I see you for a moment after class?”

Gulp.

“Um . . . okay,” I said. My classmates had started to file out of the room. Soon, everyone was gone.

Mrs. Rodriguez looked at me sternly. “This matter is very important,” she said.

My mouth suddenly went dry, and I swallowed hard. Whatever was going to happen next, I knew that it wasn’t going to be good.

4

“Really, Mrs. Rodriguez,” I suddenly blurted out. “I won’t tell anyone that you’re a robot! Really I won’t!”

Suddenly, Mrs. Rodriguez smiled. “Oh Shelby,” she said with a chuckle. “Don’t be silly. I’m not a robot.”

Relief fell over me like a bucket of water.

“I did want to see you, though,” she said. She turned to her desk and picked up a paper. “This is yours.”

She handed the paper to me. It was my book report. At the top was an A+.

“Congratulations,” she said. “That is one of the finest book reports I have ever read. You should be very proud.”

I couldn’t believe it! I had never received an A+ for anything in my life!

Mrs. Rodriguez spent a few minutes explaining why she thought my report was so good. I was really glad, of

course, because I'd worked hard on it. But I didn't expect to get an A+!

Then Mrs. Rodriguez changed the subject.

"There are a few rumors going around that I am a robot," she said. "Have you heard them?"

"Uh . . . um," I stuttered. "Uh . . . yeah."

"Do you know how they may have started?" she asked. Her blue eyes had gone cold, and a chill swept over me.

"Well, uh, no," I replied.

"Do you think I'm a robot?" she asked icily. Her eyes never left mine.

"Um . . . no, I, I guess not."

"You *guess* not?" she replied.

"I mean . . . I mean, no, you're not," I said.

And suddenly I felt very silly. Here I was, still afraid that my own teacher might be a robot. It was ridiculous, and I felt very foolish.

"Then it's settled. Run along, and I'll see you tomorrow. And congratulations again on an excellent book report!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Rodriguez," I said. I turned and walked out of the room.

When I reached the main doors, I felt foolish for the second time that day. In my rush to leave the classroom, I had left my book report on my desk! Mom and Dad would want to see it for sure, especially since I got an A+.

I turned around and hurried back to Mrs. Rodriguez's class . . . but before I went in, I heard a strange voice.

It was the same voice I'd heard the day before!

I slowly stretched out my neck and stuck my head into the door, just far enough to see.

What I saw was scary . . . and the words I heard were chilling.

“No, she doesn’t suspect anything,” Mrs. Rodriguez was saying in that weird, robotic voice. *“I talked to her about it, and she doesn’t suspect a thing anymore.”*

I was *right!* Mrs. Rodriguez was a robot!

But what’s so bad about a robot teacher?

Lots . . . as I was about to find out.

5

As you can imagine, I was freaked out. I turned and ran down the hall and outside, forgetting all about my book report. When I remembered it on the way home, there was no way that I was going to go back for it.

But what would I do in the morning? I would have to face Mrs. Rodriguez again . . . only now, I was sure that she was some sort of robot.

And that night, I had some really horrible nightmares. I dreamed that Mrs. Rodriguez was a robot and she malfunctioned, giving everyone in the class weeks and weeks worth of homework.

Now, that might not be scary to *you*, but it sure was to *me*.

In another dream, Mrs. Rodriguez was chasing after me. There were wires coming out of her ears, and

electricity shot from her fingers. It was such a bad nightmare that it woke me up.

The next morning, I was terrified to go to school. I told my mom that I was sick and should stay home, but she said that I looked fine and that I wasn't running a temperature, and that I'd have to go.

Rats.

As soon as I got to school, I searched until I found Joey. He was standing with some of his friends near the cafeteria. When he saw me, I waved him over.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Everything!" I exclaimed. "I was right! Mrs. Rodriguez is a robot!"

"Get real!" he said, shaking his head. "You tried that on me yesterday!"

"She really is!" I insisted.

Just then, Arielle walked up to us. Her backpack was slung over her shoulder, and she let it slip to the floor.

"Shelby is back on her robot kick," Joey smirked.

"Oh yeah?" Arielle said with a sly smile.

"I'm really serious you guys," I said. "I saw her again last night. After school. She was talking in that same voice that I told you about before. Only now, she was talking to someone about *me!*"

"About *you?!?!?*" Arielle said. "Now I've heard everything!"

"She was!" I exclaimed. "She didn't know I was listening. She was talking into her watch, telling someone

how I didn't suspect anything anymore. I'm telling you . . . there's something going on!"

"Well, let's go ask her," Joey said.

"Are you kidding?!?!" I replied. "She'll deny it. She doesn't want anyone to know she's a robot!"

"You seem to know a lot about something you don't know much about," Arielle said.

"I know one thing for sure: our teacher is a robot, and that's a fact."

"All right," Joey said. "Let's go to class. She's probably there right now."

"No!" I said.

"Why not?" Arielle asked. "I mean . . . she's been here for a few years and she's never hurt anyone. What do we have to worry about?"

She had a point. Even if Mrs. Rodriguez *did* turn out to be a robot, she hasn't ever hurt anyone.

And so, the three of us decided to go to class early. I would ask Mrs. Rodriguez about her strange behavior. Maybe there really *was* a logical explanation as to what was going on.

And besides . . . it was the right thing to do. If Mrs. Rodriguez *wasn't* a robot, it wouldn't be fair to say things about her behind her back.

"You're wrong, you know," Joey said as we made our way toward the classroom. "Mrs. Rodriguez isn't a robot."

In a way, he was right.

Mrs. Rodriguez *wasn't* a robot.

But she wasn't human, either.

She was worse—a lot worse . . . and that's where my life changed. I was about to know horror . . . real, deep, tangible horror . . . like I had never known before in my life.

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