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OPTIMISTS DIE FIRST

Written by Susin Nielsen

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OPTIMISTS DIE FIRST

A NOVEL BY SUSIN NIELSEN

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To all the other crazy cat people.
You know who you are.

ONE

The first time I saw the Bionic Man I was covered in sparkles.

It was a typical Friday afternoon at Youth Art Therapy, YART for short. I was trying to help Ivan the Terrible with our latest, lamest project. As per usual, Ivan refused to focus. Instead he tipped a tube of rainbow glitter onto my head, all over my cat hat and all over me. Alonzo tutted sympathetically. Koula snorted with laughter. Another sunny day in paradise.

We were sitting in the common area of the counselling suite. It was always either Antarctica cold or Saudi Arabia hot. Even though it was early January, I'd stripped down to my tie-dyed tank top. Ivan started punching my bare arm with the very fingers that had, moments ago, been wedged

up his nose. I reached into my tote bag for my bottle of hand sanitiser, just as one of the counsellors' doors opened.

Ivan glanced up. 'Petula, look,' he said. 'A giant.'

The Bionic Man was not a giant. But he was well over six feet. Everything about him was supersized. A bright orange parka was slung over one arm, which was major overkill for a Vancouver winter. He looked about my age, with a mass of curly brown hair and big brown eyes that were red from crying.

The Bionic Man had stepped out of Carol Polachuk's office. I'd sat in that soulless space many times myself, forced to talk to she of the UP WITH LIFE! T-shirts, bulgy eyes, and condescending attitude. Carol was very good at one thing, and that was making you feel worse. So I wasn't surprised that the Bionic Man looked disorientated. And angry. And deeply, terribly sad.

I recognised those looks. The Bionic Man hadn't been in there for a chat about career options. You didn't see Carol Polachuk for the small stuff. He was one of us.

For a brief moment, our eyes locked.

Then he made a beeline for the doors.

And he immediately left my brainpan as I started slathering myself in hand sanitiser.

The end.

Except it wasn't.

Two

On Monday afternoon I saw him again.

I stood at the front of history class in my presentation outfit: plain white top with purple crocheted vest, my favourite peasant skirt, and purple rubber boots that hid my lucky striped socks. I was midway through my talk. The assignment: discuss a historical event that has ripple effects to this day.

I'd chosen September 11, 2001. Nine-eleven, the day two planes, hijacked by terrorists, flew into the north and south towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. I meant to talk about the political aftermath, and the many ways it changed how we view personal safety.

But I never made it that far.

A lot of people on the floors below the point of impact were able to escape down stairwells before the towers fell. But the people above the impact must have understood that they were doomed, that no one was coming to rescue them because, well, how could they? Those towers practically rose into the stratosphere.

I thought about those people a lot. How their days started out so normal. How they were average, regular humans; just like me, just like Mom and Dad, just like anyone. I pictured a guy wondering if it was too early to dig into his lunch, because even though it was only just past nine, he was already hungry. I imagined a woman who couldn't stop worrying about her son because he'd cried that morning when she dropped him off at day care.

They were expecting a day like any other.

That part of my presentation was supposed to be brief, just laying out the facts so I could get to the ripple effects.

But I could not shake the thought of all the innocent victims. Or the people they left behind, the children, spouses, parents, and friends whose loved ones were not coming home from work that day, or any day. Their lives from that moment forward would never be the same.

My heart started to race. My breath came in short bursts. I opened my mouth but no words came out. My classmates looked alarmed.

That's when I spotted him, sitting at a desk in the back corner.

The last thought I had was *Oh God I'm wearing my old granny pants oh God please don't let my skirt ride up—*

Then all five feet eleven inches of me crumpled to the floor.

An hour later I was sitting across from Mr Watley in my favourite chair, the one with the nubby multicoloured fabric. I'd sat in it so often in the past two years, its grooves had moulded perfectly to my bum.

It was my favourite because it was the farthest from his bookshelves, which were not secured to the wall in any way. Believe me, I'd checked. So if there was an earthquake – and in Vancouver they say it's a matter of *when,* not *if* – I could be badly injured by falling hardcovers. (I tried not to think about the building itself, which would collapse like a pile of Jenga blocks in any quake over five point zero on the Richter scale. If I thought about that, I would have to leave school, and Vancouver, and live alone in a cave somewhere, which would crush my parents. Plus I would be a sitting duck for any psychopathic serial killer who happened past. And/or I would contract a respiratory illness because of

the damp and die a slow, painful death. At least death by earthquake was more likely to be instantaneous.)

In spite of the bookshelves, I liked being in the principal's office. It was a surprisingly warm and cosy space, lit by floor lamps instead of overhead fluorescents. And Mr Watley still had the mason jar snow globe that I'd made for him in the ninth grade on his desk. I picked it up and gave it a good shake, and snow cascaded down onto a little Lego building, which had PRINCESS MARGARET SECONDARY written on it.

Mr Watley gazed at me with his big, watery eyes. He looked a lot like a Saint Bernard. 'Feeling better, Petula?'

'Much. The school nurse gave me a good once-over. Deemed me fit for release.'

'You've been making progress. I was hoping we'd moved past these episodes.'

'Me too.' My last full-blown panic attack had been at least three months earlier, in biology. The topic was infectious diseases. I'd talked about the Ebola virus, which is transmitted through bodily fluids and leads to a truly horrible death. I'd crumpled when I mentioned how easily it could become a worldwide plague.

'At least they're fewer and farther between,' Mr Watley said. He smoothed his hair. I wished his wife would tell him that his comb-over fooled no one. Then again, I'd

studied the family photo that sat beside my snow globe many times. It showed a grinning Mr and Mrs Watley and their pug. The dog was far and away the most attractive thing in the picture. My theory was that they had a reciprocal arrangement: Mrs Watley ignored Mr Watley's comb-over, and he ignored the giant mole on her chin. 'Nonetheless, Petula, we've talked about trying to stay away from trigger topics.'

'Yes.'

'You didn't need to talk about the victims at all.'

I glanced out his window at the rain coming down in sheets. 'It was just a small part. If I'd been able to finish, I had some valid points.'

He tented his fingers under his chin. 'Like what?'

'Like that nine-eleven was a game changer. Like we now live in a world where another terrorist attack is a constant threat.'

'I thought we were trying to avoid that kind of negative thinking.'

'Sir, this isn't negative. It's *practical*. My point was, nine-eleven taught us that we all need to be more vigilant. Forewarned is forearmed.'

'I understand that the world doesn't always feel safe. But we live in Vancouver. In Canada. It's—'

'Don't say it, sir. Nowhere is safe.'

'OK, even if we disagree on that point, we still need to keep living our lives, don't we? We can't live in constant fear. We can't look up at every plane that passes, wondering if it's been hijacked. We can't look at every single person we pass in the street, wondering if they're carrying a dirty bomb.'

I can, I thought. *I can be on high alert for the rest of you ignoramuses.* 'No, but it doesn't mean we should bury our heads in the sand. Metaphorically speaking, of course. If you actually buried your head in the sand you would suffocate.'

Mr Watley thought for a moment. Then he pointed at a mug on his desk. 'Look at that and tell me what you see.'

'A half-empty mug of coffee.'

'I see a *half-full* mug of coffee.' He smiled triumphantly, like he'd just said something profound.

'And that's why you'll die before I do.'

He blinked a few times. 'Well, I hope so. I'm fifty-two, after all, and you're only fifteen—'

'Sixteen as of last week. But age aside, studies show that in general, optimists die ten years earlier than pessimists.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

'Of course you do, you're an optimist. You have a

misguided belief that things will go your way. You don't see the dangers till it's too late. Pessimists are more realistic. They take more precautions.'

'That seems like a sad way to govern your life.'

'It's a safe way to govern your life.'

Mr Watley exhaled. He rubbed his watery eyes.

'That's a sure-fire way to get pinkeye.'

He lowered his hand and gazed at me, his expression full of sympathy, which I half hated and half appreciated. 'How's YART going?'

'You know how I feel about that.'

'Yes, and I keep hoping you'll change your mind.' He glanced at the clock. 'OK. Go back to class.'

With only ten minutes left till dismissal I had no intention of going back to class. 'Sure thing.' I stood up and gave a little bow in lieu of a germ-sharing handshake.

I walked out of Mr Watley's office, turned left—

And ploughed right into the Bionic Man.