



THE DARK CLONE

Carol Matas

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*For my nephews
Michael, Mark and Jesse,
my best readers — each one a
wonderful and talented young man;
and especially for my nephew Eli,
because he loves this series
and has encouraged me to keep
telling tales about Miranda.*

Chapter 1

“Will Miranda Martin please come to the office?”

I look up in surprise. Me? I’m never called to the office. I’m never in trouble. I’m little Miss Perfect. In more ways than one.

“Miranda?” Mr. Edgers prompts me. “Are you going?”

I look at Emma. She shrugs, like, Don’t look at me, I have no clue.

Slowly I gather my books, grab my knapsack and head for the door. I can’t imagine what they might want me for. Maybe someone’s hurt — like Ariel. That gets me moving, and I reach the office in a minute. The secretary nods when she sees me and motions me toward Mrs. Dean’s office. The principal. That can’t be good. I peek in the door.

Mrs. Dean notices me and waves her arm, calling me into the room and then pointing me into a seat.

"Is Ariel okay?" I ask, not able to wait for her to speak. I am clutching my knapsack as if it'll keep her from saying something I don't want to hear.

"Ariel is fine," she replies.

"My parents?"

"As far as I know, they're fine."

I am at a loss.

Mrs. Dean clears her throat. "Miranda," she says.

"Yes?"

"I really never thought I would need to have a conversation like this with you." She waits.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Come with me," she says and suddenly gets up. This is getting stranger and stranger. "Just leave your gear here."

I put my books and knapsack on the floor and follow her down the hallway — silent except for the sound of her high heels clicking on the floor. We get to the end of the hall at the back of the school and she opens the door to the outside. I am now completely

mystified. She walks a short way down the path then turns back toward the building. Sprayed on the yellow stucco is large red writing: *Desert High Sucks!*

"Not very original," I comment.

"No," she agrees.

"I don't know who did it," I offer, "if that's what this is about."

"That's not what this is about, Miranda. We know who did it."

I stare at her. Why on earth involve me? I wonder.

"See the camera there?" She points up to a spot on the building where a small camera is located.

"So whoever did it is stupid, as well as unoriginal," I say.

"Miranda, please stop this."

"Stop what?"

She puts her hands on her hips. "We know it was you. We have the tape."

"What?"

"You heard me, Miranda."

"That's impossible! I didn't do it! Why would I?"

"I don't know why," she says, staring evenly at me. "You had to realize you'd be caught."

You certainly aren't stupid."

"But I didn't!" I repeat. "How could you think for one minute I would ever do such a thing?" I pause, at a loss for words. "It's so, so . . . childish!"

"We can certainly agree on that," Mrs. Dean says. She pauses for a moment and then says, "Miranda, if you have a problem you can tell me. Often these incidents are a simple cry for help. I know it must be hard for you — having your cousin come to live with your family."

"Well, that's true," I agree. "Ariel can be pretty annoying. But I'm okay. I even kinda am sorta fond of her now."

Mrs. Dean raises her eyebrows.

"Well, just because I don't express myself well while talking about her doesn't mean I don't like her. I do."

"You can't deny the evidence of the tape."

"May I see it, please?" I ask.

"Of course."

We take the same silent trip back to the office. I stand as Mrs. Dean puts in the tape, then plays it. The girl looks like me, all right. Almost exactly. She is spraying the wall, quickly, efficiently, seemingly with no nerv-

ousness at all. My heart sinks. “When was this taken?”

“This morning, around six o’clock.”

“I was home, in bed.”

“Can anyone vouch for you?”

“No, they were asleep.”

“Miranda, it couldn’t be anyone but you.”
She pauses. “Or Ariel.”

Ariel has sprouted up over the summer. When she first came to live with us it was obvious she was younger than me. And it’s still obvious because she hasn’t developed any, shall we say, curves. She looks like she’s eleven. But the girl in the video is wearing a loose sweatshirt and an Angels baseball cap on her head, hair tucked into it. Ariel had her hair cut over the summer, and she wears it in a really cute bob, unlike mine, which is long and straight. But what with the hat it’s impossible to tell anything that way. Still, to me, whoever that is looks like Ariel in age, like me in appearance. So what could that mean?

My mind starts racing, searching for an answer. Those clothes? I don’t recognize them. It couldn’t be Ariel. I’d know if she were up to something — wouldn’t I? But if

not me, or Ariel . . . Eve? But Eve is with Dr. Mullen . . .

I realize I need to say something to Mrs. D. "Mrs. Dean, I'll pay for you to get it fixed."

"Thank you, Miranda. Of course, your parents will be called."

"Of course."

"And I want you to see the school counselor. I've made an appointment for one o'clock today. Don't miss it."

"I won't."

She waits.

"You aren't ill again, are you?" she asks.

I immediately think back to the illness that almost killed me — and would have, without Ariel's sacrifice. Unconsciously I touch the place where the scar still remains from my liver transplant. But what if there *is* something else wrong with me now — like something wrong with my brain?

I gulp and answer, "Not as far as I know." *Could* I have done it without realizing? Surely not! I woke up as usual in my bed only a few hours ago. Unless . . . now my head starts to spin. Unless I did it and managed to then get myself back home. Or maybe it *was* Ariel . . . I realize that Mrs. D. is staring at

me and that, again, I need to say *something*.

"I'll do everything you say," I answer weakly.

"Fine. Go back to your class."

The lunch bell rings just as I reach class. I almost bump into Emma rushing out the door, no doubt coming to find me.

"So?" she asks.

"You won't believe it. Come with me, we need to talk."

We throw our books into our lockers, grab the brown bags we both brought today and head outside. When it's 115 degrees, not too many kids sit outside, so we have the table at the back of the school to ourselves. We can see the graffiti from where we sit.

"Not too original," Emma comments.

"Exactly what I told Mrs. Dean."

"Mrs. Dean showed it to you?"

"That's not all she showed me. She played me a tape of me doing it."

"What?"

"Exactly my reaction." I grimace. "Sometimes I wonder if it's you that's my clone, not Ariel."

"But Miranda, what does that mean?"

"A variety of not especially attractive

answers come to mind," I reply.

"Let's list them," Emma says, ever practical, as she takes a swig of water from her bottle. Only a minute out in the sun and we can both feel all the water from our bodies evaporating.

"Fine," I say with a sigh. "Option one: It was me and I was under some kind of spell."

"Or you are sick and don't know what you are doing," Emma says quietly, not looking at me.

"But I have no other symptoms — no headaches, no blurry vision, nothing. I feel totally normal."

"Well, that's something," Emma says. "So I doubt it's that. Let's move on. Option two?" Neither of us wanted to dwell long on option one.

"Option two: It was Ariel and she is either sick or gone crazy."

"Don't like that one," Emma grimaces.

"Option three," I continue. "It's Eve."

We both fall silent for a moment thinking about Eve. I managed to rescue Ariel and bring her to live with me, but Eve, our third clone . . . I couldn't save her.

"That's pretty unlikely," Emma says final-

ly, "since Dr. Mullen has taken her away, and the chances of her escaping from him are close to nil. And why would she want to? He might be the only hope to cure her brain tumour! I mean, when she called you last she said Dr. Mullen had done something to help her and that she was getting better, right?"

"Which brings us to option four," I say. "There's a fourth clone."

"But surely we would have found out about a fourth clone by now?" Emma objects.

"Why?" I counter. "Mullen could have hidden one somewhere and as she was growing up kept her a secret. Now she's either escaped from him or is doing his bidding."

"And his bidding is what?" asks Emma. "To write graffiti on the school walls?"

"It does sound kind of stupid," I say. "But I did get in trouble. And maybe that's the motive."

"But why would anyone want to get you in trouble?" Emma demands.

This stymies both of us so we resort to the next logical thing to do. Eat. Maybe it'll stimulate our brains.

Emma and I gave up on school lunches ages ago and now always bring our own.

Lorna has made me roast turkey with cranberry sauce on whole grain bread. This is one of my all-time favourite sandwiches, but today I can hardly taste it. I gulp my water. "Maybe Dr. Mullen is still mad at me for rescuing Ariel."

"That could be it," Emma agrees. "Remember, he did want Ariel for his disgusting scheme."

"Oh, I remember," I say. "Using her perfect DNA to make perfect babies, so he could sell them to the highest bidder. Who could forget?"

"So we agree it's *likely* this is happening in order to get you in trouble," Emma reiterates, as she munches on her sandwich.

"Yes."

"And getting you in trouble means your reputation is damaged, even though we don't know why he would want that."

"Maybe he's planning something."

"Maybe," Emma agrees. "What worries me is what else he might do."

"I hadn't thought of that," I say. "You think I'm in for more trouble?"

Emma looks at me. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm in for more trouble," I sigh.