LIGHT IN THE CANYON

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A Novel

Darren Cools

With illustrations by the author

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In memory of my Grandparents, Donald and Maxine.
It was your science and fiction stories, your farmhouse
in the canyon, and your light that breathed life into this book.

For small creatures such as we the vastness
is bearable only through love.

—*Carl Sagan*



Prologue

IF JAMIE HAD known about Gill's machine before it all began, about what would happen the night of his thirteenth birthday and in the days following, he might've decided to skip the burger and the library. He definitely should've said no to a walk in the dark.

But then he would never have met Halley or the others. He would never have jumped from a moving truck or thrown that table through the third floor window. He would never have found out what it was like to be a girl.

People usually say they'd do it all over again if they had the choice, whatever they went through. Even if it was difficult and painful. Even if it changed the course of their lives, altered their perspective forever. Even, sometimes, when it was heartbreaking.

Jamie supposed he agreed, in spite of everything. He wasn't the same as before, never would be again. None of them were. Was this what it felt like to grow up? Still, if he had any idea at the time what was coming or how hard it would be, for all of them, he would've hesitated. The burger wasn't *that* good and he never finished reading the book Ms. James suggested. If he'd known, he probably would've stayed home that night.

He was glad he never had the choice.

PART I

Mutation





ONE

I DON'T WANT to go.

Halley slammed the cheap eyeliner pencil she'd been spinning in her fingers down on the scratched metal desk.

She didn't want to go. Didn't want to see them, any of them. Didn't want to *be seen* by them. *No more murmured sympathies or timid questions, please.* It had been nearly a year since the funeral. *Stop worrying about me already. Just leave me alone.*

Scattered over the bed beside her were pieces of the best costume she'd ever assembled. A long red wig and a mostly finished patchwork dress in yellow and purple and pink, with thick stitches holding it together.

Whatever. Her mind was made up. *I'm not going.*

In the mirror above her desk, dark eyes with heavy under-lids that pushed upward almost comically into her lower irises frowned back at her from behind the lenses of oversized glasses. Mom used to tease that the shape of her eyes made it look as if she was always about to sneeze.

"Halley?" Dad was in the doorway.

She flicked the eyeliner pencil across the desk with her middle finger. It struck a little tray of rings and bracelets before spinning off the edge of the desk to hit the floor with a clatter. She glared at her reflection. "I'm not going," she said under her breath.

"Halley?" Calvin Štuka pronounced his daughter's name *Hay-lee*. The spelling was the same as the famous

comet that passed close by the earth in the 1980s, and most people agreed that the name should rhyme with *valley*. But her parents had always called both their daughter and the comet *Hay-lee*. Whenever she asked they protested that, no, she was not named after a cosmic ball of dust, ice, and gas hurtling through outer space. She suspected they were just too embarrassed to admit they'd been young nerds when she was born and hadn't even gotten their favorite night-light's pronunciation right.

"Halley."

She didn't turn around. A faint aroma of garlic and onions had entered the room. Clearly he was making lentil soup, *again*.

"I know what you're thinking," he said.

She snorted.

"No one will say anything. Not this time."

Halley stared down at her desk, her back still to him. "I don't want to talk about it." Her dark, choppy hair fell forward around her ears and chin and tickled her cheeks.

"I think we should go," Dad said. "Really, I do."

"I said I'm not going."

He sighed.

She wanted to go. Of course she did. Aunt Laura was young and unmarried and relaxed about everything. A Halloween party at her house meant lots of weird wonderful people would show up and Halley would get to hang out with cousins from her mother's side of the family (the wild side). Some of her cousins' friends would be there too. Her cousins had interesting friends. They had undercuts and unusual clothes and liked board games instead of Fortnite, or were passionate about playing the trumpet or making soap or something else equally weird. And there would also be plenty

of candy and decorations that were actually kind of scary and gory horror movies playing in the background.

Two years ago Mom had been there too, dressed up as Morticia Addams. She looked so creepy and happy and pretty that night. Last year they stayed home. By then they were spending nearly all of their time at the hospital. When they did leave, she had to use a wheelchair. That was a guaranteed party pooper.

She wanted to go to Aunt Laura's party—really, she did. But even if she tried to forget the past it wouldn't be the same. Not without Mom's elaborate costumes and dark, flashing eyes, or her slow, gentle laugh that held them all together even as her own body fell apart, all the way to the very end. She couldn't do it without her. Not the party, not people, relatives or otherwise. *Nothing's the same without you, Mom.*

Halley swallowed down the familiar knot rising in her throat. In spite of everything, it would be hard not to be drawn into the warmth of Aunt Laura's cluttered house, filled to overflowing with smiling, laughing people. Maybe she could lose herself in the music. Raid the card tables piled high with chips and cookies and candy. There would be food that was good for you too, like vegetables from the farmer's market and homemade hummus (that would be Dad), and Aunt Laura's bread, fresh from the oven.

"I hate to pressure you," said Dad from the doorway, hesitant, still trying. "But do you think you might reconsider? It would be good for both of us to get out of the house. To be around other people."

It had all unraveled so quickly. Mom feeling strange for days and finally hurrying off to the doctor one damp gray afternoon. Just a quick checkup after breakfast to make sure everything was fine. Because everything was always fine. But then, in a wildly accelerating blur of new appointments and

pills and chemical treatments, she was getting weaker and thinner and started losing her hair. Her lovely black hair, always so long and glossy. The hospital stays got longer and longer, and before Halley had a chance to process any of it, or even catch her breath, they were planning a funeral.

Aunt Laura and the rest of the family kept talking about it as if still trying to work out exactly what had happened. She was sick of their stories, their memories, the repeated words of concern, tracks on repeat. Hardest of all were the things no one could bear to say aloud. Like the rush of sobbing goodbyes in the final days. Or Halley's own banshee wail across the top of the casket as it hung above the black hole in the earth, her ragged cry echoing against the trees and silent figures huddled around the gravesite.

"What's this?" Her father crossed the room and lifted the dress and wig from the bed. "It looks spooky."

Halley hunched deeper into her chair. "I was going to be Sally," she mumbled. "From *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. But like I said, I'm not going."

"That weird movie from the nineties?" Dad said. "It always made me feel kind of sick. Maybe it's the Claymation. Anyway, I hate scary movies."

She risked a glance and caught his reflection in the mirror. He was studying her costume, and his eyebrows had shot up.

"Well, *I* like it," she mumbled.

"What's Sally like? It's been too long. Remind me."

"I don't know. Just a girl."

"Is she brave?"

"I guess."

"Cool and pretty, like you?"

"She's *dead*."

"But she's strong and smart and saves everyone in the end, right?" He was trying not to smile. It wasn't really working.

Halley knew what he was doing, and she let him do it, wanted him to do it. She already knew she would let him coax her out of the dark, private space she was folded within, away from the solitude she kept telling herself was all she wanted.

"I worked really hard on that dress," she said finally.

"I know you did. It's beautiful. Everyone's going to love it."

She squeezed her eyes shut so she wouldn't have to see the uncertain, earnest look on his face she knew so well. She had no defense against that look. Her frustration was ebbing even as she tried to hang on to it.

Pushing the heavy black frames of her glasses back up her nose, she reached for the patchwork dress swinging from her father's fingers. He placed it in her outstretched hand. At last she turned to face him, clutching the dress to her chest. She scowled half-heartedly.

Relief smoothed the lines between Dad's eyebrows. "You'll look fantastic, especially with the awesome wig. Nice work on the stitching, too."

Her scowl relaxed a little.

"Dinner is almost done. Downstairs in ten?"