

A NOVEL BY *FAITH ERIN HICKS*

COMICS
WILL BREAK
YOUR
HEART



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*For my parents, who always supported
my strange comic-making habit*

"Kid, comics will break your heart."

—Jack Kirby

CHAPTER ONE

Miriam rolled up the sleeves of her too-large work shirt and stood with her hands on her hips, staring at the towering bookshelf in front of her. Someone had been messing with her carefully alphabetized comic book display. Mir eyed the disaster before her: memoir comics by Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel shoved next to various X-Men trade collections, early volumes of *Naruto* carelessly shelved beside arty French comics. There was even a copy of a popular kids' graphic novel stuffed between two copies of *From Hell*, a bloody retelling of Jack the Ripper. With a sigh, Mir tugged the kids' comic off the shelf and stared at the cover. A round yellow smiley face stared back, grinning. *Smile*, said the comic's title. Mir frowned at it.

"Don't tell me to smile," Mir muttered. She placed the comic on a nearby shelf and started pulling out the other mis-shelved comics, stacking them in neat piles. Superhero comics to her right, science fiction and horror comics to her left, slice of life and memoir in the middle.

The bell above the Emporium of Wonders' front door jangled. Mir looked up, her hands full of the latest run of *Uncanny X-Men*. A teenage boy about her age was stepping through the door, looking around curiously. Mir beamed her best smile at him.

“Welcome to the Emporium of Wonders, Sandford's one-stop entertainment shopping spot! If you need help with anything—” Mir glanced down at the piles of comics surrounding her. She was practically walled in.

“Uh, well, just yell if you need help. My boss is in the back, he can give you a hand. Or I'll find a way, somehow,” she finished, gesturing at the stacks of books. The boy nodded, his gray eyes crinkling in amusement. He stood in the store's entrance, staring at the displays in front of him. Mir didn't recognize him, which meant he was probably a tourist. It was only the last weekend in April, early for tourists in Sandford, but Mir knew most of the locals her age. Sandford was a very small town.

“This place is . . . interesting,” the boy said. Mir followed his gaze around the store. The Emporium of Wonders was technically a bookstore, but recently its owner (and Mir's boss), Berg, had decided he wanted to sell toys and games alongside the books, so the inventory could most kindly be referred to as a mishmash. One half of the store was bright and gleaming, superhero action figures and limited-edition vinyl toys stacked neatly on clear glass displays. The book section was shabbier—Mir waging her personal war against improperly shelved books—and slightly dusty paintings of lighthouses and seascapes

hung along the back wall. The paintings were all by local Sandford artists, those who weren't quite good enough at painting lighthouses and seascapes to earn a spot at the small galleries down on the waterfront.

"Yep," said Mir cheerfully. "If there's a book or action figure or comic you want, we've probably got it. We have all kinds of things."

The boy took a step forward. Instead of heading into the shiny, toy-centric section, he walked toward the wall hung with local artwork. He stopped in front of a painting of a battered boat at sea and peered at it. The boy's back was to Mir, his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets. He was tall, and bent forward at the waist so he could better see the paintings. Curious, Mir stared at the back of his head. Paintings of artfully distressed maritime objects from the Canadian East Coast were popular among a certain kind of Sandford tourist, but this boy didn't look anything like that demographic.

The boy straightened and quickly stepped to his right, to study another painting. Mir blinked, then tore herself away from staring. These comics wouldn't alphabetize themselves.

Mir pulled the remaining mis-shelved comics from the bookcase, carefully slipping each book back in its appropriate spot. She lined up the cheerful, brightly colored spines of the kids' graphic novels, stacked the Hellboy collections in a neat row of black and red, and was just finishing sorting the superhero comics when the boy spoke behind her.

"Is this the TomorrowMen?"

Mir looked up. He was still bent forward, peering intently at a painting of two superheroes, a man and a woman, standing on the edge of a building. The man seemed to shine like a beacon in the painting. He was dressed in red and gold, and his red cape swirled around him, caught by an unseen breeze. His face was bare; he didn't hide his identity with a mask. The woman was painted with more subtle colors, her costume muted purples and golds. She wore a cat's-eye mask, and her dark hair swirled upward in a fantastic 1960s updo.

Mir's mother, Stella, had made the painting.

Mir stood up, rolled down the sleeves on her work shirt, and walked toward the boy.

"Yeah, it's Skylark and Skybound, the two most powerful TomorrowMen." Mir felt a twinge of annoyance at his interest in the painting. She remembered the fight she'd had with her mother over it, how she'd yelled that it didn't make sense for Stella to sell her artwork if she was going to charge so little. Stella could charge hundreds of dollars if she wanted to; she knew that there were TomorrowMen-mad collectors out there, eager to spend real money on original artwork of Skylark and Skybound. But Mir's mother had remained resolute, stubbornly devoted to her price no matter how much Mir yelled.

"You have a bunch of TomorrowMen stuff here," the boy said, his arm sweeping back to take in the shiny, toy-infested section of the Emporium of Wonders, "but I wasn't expecting original art. It's really cool."

"Yeah, it is," said Mir. She did think the painting was cool.

She loved how her mother painted, how she mixed her colors and used reds and browns and purples to blend the perfect skin tone. How she edged her figures with the tiniest bit of yellow, like they were radiating light. She wished she could stop fighting with her mother about her art.

“I like that they’re in their original costumes,” the boy said. He pointed at Skylark’s outfit, a snug bodysuit with tall boots and a waist-length cape. “They’ve had, what, like fifty costumes in the comics over the last forty years? But there’s something perfect about the original costumes. Definitely my favorite.”

“They’re pretty great,” agreed Mir.

The boy turned away from her, hands stuck back in his jacket pockets, and stared at the two figures in the painting.

“I wish they were using these costumes in the movie,” he said.

Mir smiled, grateful. “I wish they were too,” she said. “Have you seen the latest stills from the movie? They got rid of Skybound’s cape.” Mir had seen every leaked image from the upcoming movie, every stolen shot of the actors filming on the streets of New York. She’d cringed at Skylark’s dull gray-and-black costume and Skybound’s cape-less shoulders. They hadn’t looked anything like the characters she knew, the comic-book weirdness and bright colors leached out of them.

“It’s a tragedy,” the boy said, solemnly shaking his head. “He just doesn’t look right without the cape.”

“He doesn’t,” Mir said.

“I keep hoping the filmmakers will change the costumes

before the movie comes out,” he said. “It’s not out until next year, so there’s still time.”

The boy smiled at her, and the hairs on the back of Mir’s neck stood up. His smile was wide and gorgeous, and the air around him seemed to brighten because of it.

“Maybe,” Mir said, feeling generous so close to this boy’s smile.

“I don’t normally care about comic book movies, I swear,” the boy laughed. “But I grew up with TomorrowMen comics. They deserve a good movie. Like, Sam Raimi *Spider-Man 2* good. Or *Superman II* good. Those are my favorites.”

“I like *Superman II*,” Mir agreed.

“Everyone likes *Superman II*.” Again the boy grinned, catching Mir in the brightness of his smile.

The boy turned back to the painting.

“How much is it?”

“I’m sorry?” Mir asked blankly.

“The painting,” said the boy, pointing up at it. “How much is it?”

Mir stared. “You want to buy it?”

The boy blinked, confused at Mir’s question.

“It’s not for sale?” he asked. “I just thought—y’know, it’s here with all these other paintings and they all seem to be for sale, so I thought maybe it was for sale too. I really like it.”

“It’s for sale,” Mir said, “but it’s not—” Suddenly she realized what she was going to say and got nervous. Who was this boy? She didn’t know anything about him.

“It’s—it’s an original painting, but it’s . . . unlicensed, I guess? It’s not from Warrick Studios, the TomorrowMen comics publisher . . .” She trailed off.

Mir and the boy stared at each other, and in a rush she noticed three things about him: one, he was at least four inches taller than her. Two, he had a slightly crooked nose that made him terribly cute; and three, he was dressed expensively. She hadn’t noticed his clothes at first, but now that she was really looking at him, trying to figure out if he was going to cause a problem for Stella, who almost exclusively painted (and sometimes sold) portraits of the TomorrowMen, she saw how well fitted his jacket and jeans were. How they had nice seams and were cut as though someone had made them specifically for his body.

“Hey, what’s your name?” said the boy.

“Mir,” she said.

“Meer?”

“Miriam. Mir for short.”

“Cool,” he said. “I’m Weldon, and I think that painting is awesome. Whoever painted it is really great at painting the TomorrowMen, and I’m not going to rat them out to Warrick Studios because something that awesome isn’t piracy, it’s art.”

“Okay, cool,” Mir said, relieved.

“Seriously, Mir,” said Weldon. “It’s completely amazing. You gonna tell me how much you want for it?”

Mir took a deep breath. *Here we go*, she thought.

“Twenty-eight dollars and seventy cents.”

Weldon’s eyebrows shot up.

“But it’s an original. I mean, whoever painted it must’ve spent hours—”

“Yeah, well.” Mir sighed. “My mo—the artist charges the exact amount of money they spent making the painting. So, canvas, sixteen dollars. Paints, eight dollars. And so on. Because, y’know, they think charging for art is . . . not cool, I guess.”

“Doing it for love, not money,” Weldon said, nodding seriously. “I admire that.” Mir felt a white-hot flash of annoyance. Of course the boy in the designer jeans would approve of Stella’s pricing system. People who had money always thought it was noble not to care about it.

She unhooked the painting from the wall, sneaking one last look at it as she rang up Weldon’s purchase and slipped the canvas into a paper bag. She’d miss it. It had been comforting to look up at Skylark and Skybound at the end of a long day and imagine there was something powerfully good in the world.

Mir watched Weldon leave the store, the painting tucked under his arm. The car he headed toward was a beat-up Hyundai, not a rich-kid car. Mir felt herself warming to him again when he opened the door to the Hyundai. Maybe she’d misjudged him. Maybe his parents bought his clothes, but he had to work for his car. She liked the idea of him toiling away somewhere to pay for gas, changing the oil on the Hyundai himself to save money.

Another car skidded into the parking lot, tires shrieking in protest. Everything happened very fast: three teenage boys slid

from the car, fists clenched, ready for violence. Mir recognized them from her high school, older boys known for getting into fights and cutting class. She'd always tried to avoid them, and eventually they'd stopped coming to school. Mir wasn't sure if they'd graduated or not. Now, Weldon turned toward the three boys, as though he'd been expecting them. He leaned Stella's painting against the car and walked straight at them, his step almost jaunty. They all came together in a furious clash.

Mir was already clawing her way over the store counter, screeching at Berg to call the police. This was a fight that meant business. She skidded through the front door and stopped short, trying to figure out what to do.

Weldon's hands blurred as he swung. Mir could tell he would lose; three to one wasn't a fair fight and the other boys were bigger than him. The group came in close, then went down in a pile of arms and legs. One of the boys ended up crouched on top of Weldon, pummeling him. Weldon twisted, his arms curled protectively over his face. It occurred to Mir as she scrambled toward the little utility shed next to the Emporium of Wonders that Weldon's nose might not have been originally so crooked, but had been smashed into its particular shape through violence.

Mir saw Weldon wiggle out from under his assailant and wrap his arms around the boy's torso, heaving him off the ground. The force of the lift propelled the pair onto the hood of the Hyundai. As the other two boys charged the car, Mir caught

them full in the face with a torrent of water from the garden hose. They staggered backward, hands held up against the water.

The boy on the hood of the Hyundai grabbed a fistful of Weldon's collar and bent his head back. Mir turned and hit both of them with the water from the hose, and they slid down the car, drenched. Weldon's attacker was on his feet first, face murderous. He wheeled toward Mir. Someone was screaming "Stopstopstopstopstop!!" and Mir realized with surprise that it was her.

The boy came at her. Mir saw his angry hands reaching for her—and he jerked up short as Weldon grabbed his legs from behind.

Sirens wailed in the distance, and the three boys' heads snapped up. The one snared by Weldon kicked backward and wrestled free. Another boy grabbed the car keys off the ground and swung into the Hyundai. The two cars peeled out of the Emporium of Wonders parking lot, tires blowing smoke. Stella's painting thumped softly on the pavement.

Mir shut off the hose. It suddenly seemed very quiet.

Weldon was still on the ground. He rolled onto his side and stared up at Mir. His eye was swelling, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. He grinned a shining, gorgeous smile.

"Thanks."

"The police—the police are coming," Mir said. Her hands, still clutching the hose, were shaking.

"Oh, that's not so good. I'm not really keen on talking to them," Weldon said.

Mir stared at him.

“Why?”

Still on the ground, Weldon stared dreamily toward where the two cars had sped off.

“Because I kind of stole that Hyundai.”

The police car skidded into the Emporium of Wonders’ parking lot, two officers hopping out of the vehicle with barely disguised glee. Not much happened in Sandford, and Mir could tell the officers were delighted at the chance to use their siren.

“You gonna tell the police?” said Weldon, pushing himself onto his hands and knees. Mir looked down at the back of his head. She remembered him wrapping his arms around the legs of the boy charging at her.

“They got their car back, didn’t they?” Mir said, nodding in the direction the three boys had driven off. She tossed the garden hose away, then bent and picked up her mother’s painting, inspecting it for damage. To her relief, Mir saw the brown paper she’d wrapped it in had protected it when it had hit the pavement. She tucked the painting under her arm and reached out her free hand to help Weldon up. He wobbled when he stood, his hand flailing briefly, then settling onto her shoulder for balance. She moved her hand under his elbow, ready to grab him if he fell. The hand on her shoulder was very warm, she noted absently.

“What happened here?”

One of the police officers was attempting to loom over them. He wasn’t particularly tall, which made the looming seem

more like rude crowding. Mir fought the urge to roll her eyes. She'd seen this officer before, napping in his cruiser on one of Sandford's sparsely traveled back roads. Now he looked as excited as a kid on his birthday. The other officer, a woman Mir didn't recognize, had her notepad out, pencil poised over a blank page.

"A fight," said Weldon. He wobbled again as he pointed toward the Emporium of Wonders. "I bought something in that store, and when I came out three guys pulled into the parking lot. We . . . exchanged some words."

Mir stood next to Weldon, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He looked directly at the police officers when he talked, his face open and earnest. Except for the occasional wobble, his hand tightening not-unpleasantly on Mir's shoulder, he seemed completely relaxed. She was amazed at his calm, as though he hadn't been nearly beaten to a pulp by three other boys and wasn't currently lying to the police.

When Weldon was done telling his story, the two cops turned to confer with each other. Weldon, no longer wobbling but still with his hand on Mir's shoulder, reached for the painting.

"Here," he said. "I'll hold it."

"I don't mind," said Mir, but handed the painting over anyway.

"Oh," said the male officer, looking flustered as he riffled through his notes, "we never got your name."

“Weldon Warrick,” said Weldon. The officer’s eyebrows climbed his forehead.

“Weldon . . . Warrick,” repeated the police officer. His partner glanced sideways at him, uncomprehending.

Mir froze. An icy hand didn’t so much clutch at her heart as punch it.

“Yeah,” said Weldon, half smiling. “That Warrick.”

Warrick Studios, thought Mir. *Publisher of the TomorrowMen comics. I just saved the ass of the TomorrowMen heir.*

CHAPTER TWO

Weldon continued his conversation with the police officer, but Mir couldn't make out the words. He suddenly seemed both very far away and much too close to her, the warmth of his hand on her shoulder dragging her downward. She took a single, deliberate step to her right, away from Weldon. He glanced in her direction as his hand slipped off her shoulder. Mir ignored him, crouching next to the discarded garden hose, winding it around her arm. She picked up the coiled plastic and walked toward the utility shed, throwing the hose inside.

Berg was standing at the Emporium of Wonders' front door, staring at the scene in the parking lot. Mir looked over at her boss, face turned away from Weldon.

"I was in the middle of calling the police when I heard the siren. They got here fast," Berg said, shading one hand over his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"I think so," Mir said, still carefully not looking in Weldon's

direction. She turned to squeeze past Berg and caught a glimpse of Weldon, standing in front of the cops as they scribbled furiously in their notepads. He was looking at her, one hand hanging limply by his side, her mother's painting tucked under his other arm. Their eyes met and he smiled, but his face had swollen and all he managed was a lopsided smirk. Mir ducked her head and stepped back inside the Emporium of Wonders. A queasy feeling was sliding around in the pit of her stomach.

Mir walked toward the bookshelf she'd been organizing and picked up the remaining stack of comics. The cover of *New TomorrowMen* volume six was on the top of the pile, Skybound locked in mortal combat with a villainous-looking character Mir didn't recognize. Mir stared at the cover, the queasiness in her stomach hardening into a clenched fist.

"Weldon Warrick of Warrick Studios," she whispered to the battling superheroes. "You've got to be kidding me."

That evening, Mir called her dad from the store.

"You don't have to pick me up from work; I'm going to walk home," she said.

"What is this?" Henry said. "My only daughter, my favorite daughter, who always begs for a ride to the place of her employment mere minutes from our home, voluntarily using her legs? I don't believe it."

"You're so funny," Mir said, sighing.

“I am,” said Henry. “I am very funny. When will you be home?”

“I’m leaving now, so half an hour.”

“Enjoy your walk,” said Henry. “I will remember this moment. The Moment Miriam Decided to Use Her Own Legs. It will become legend.”

“Ugh,” Mir said, hanging up. She rolled her eyes at Berg, who was locking up the store. “Dads.”

“Dads indeed,” said Berg absently.

Mir had known Berg since she was six years old. Ten years ago, he had long curly hair and grew organic vegetables, which meant when he gave her a carrot from his garden, it didn’t quite look the same as the ones from the grocery store. Five years ago, he cut his hair and decided to open the Emporium of Wonders, where Miriam had worked for the past year.

“Weird day, huh?” Mir said, waiting for Berg to finish locking the outer door.

“Lots of excitement,” Berg agreed. “Um . . .” He paused like he was going to tell her something. Mir waited. Despite the professional haircut, Berg would always look like he should be farming organic carrots, not managing an entertainment store. He still had dreamy hippie eyes and a fumbling way of talking. He always looked out of place amid the filing cabinets and stacks of order forms in the small office at the back of the store. Secretly, Mir worried about him. He’d never seemed like a proper adult to her, even when she was six years old.

That’s not fair to Berg, Mir chided herself. He might make you

wear a work shirt with too-long sleeves, but it's because of him that your bank account has more than babysitting money in it. So be nice.

“Never mind. It’s nothing,” Berg said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He had wanted to tell her something, Mir realized, but couldn’t bring himself to do it yet. Berg was kind of a chicken sometimes.

The Emporium of Wonders was perched at the edge of Sanford’s tiny downtown. Over the last two years, a Starbucks and a high-end sporting apparel store had sprung up nearby, replacing the old hardware store and a convenience store where Miriam had bought candy as a kid. The sporting apparel store sold designer yoga pants and had a window display that exhorted passersby to sweat every day, accompanied by an eight-foot-tall poster of a meditating woman who looked like she’d never sweated in her life. The sports apparel store and its pushy display bugged Mir, but she didn’t mind the Starbucks. Sometimes she and her best friend, Raleigh, would go in and get the cheapest thing possible, a cup of hot water with a tea bag in it, and sit for hours on the creaky faux-leather couches at the back of the café, watching coffee drinkers come and go. The rest of downtown was a mixture of touristy souvenir shops, make-your-own-pottery studios, and local businesses slowly sliding into disrepair.

As she walked past the apparel store, Mir looked apprehensively at the distance between it and the Emporium of Wonders. Sometimes it felt like the gap between the two stores was narrowing, the yoga pants store intent on conquering the space

occupied by its neighbor. Mir frowned at the towering display of the meditating woman and silently vowed to defend her workplace with everything she had. The Emporium of Wonders was a weird retail mishmash, but working there was easy and uncomplicated. Her job was the one thing in Mir's life that didn't feel like it was about to shift unexpectedly under her feet, dumping her to the ground.

Mir gave the yoga pants store one last pointed look and turned down a side street, toward home. Unbidden, Weldon Warrick popped into her head: his crooked nose and gorgeous grin, the way he'd looked at her, baffled but still smiling, as she stepped emphatically away from him in the parking lot.

"Of all the comic book stores in all the world, Weldon Warrick walks into mine," Mir muttered. She glanced up hurriedly, almost expecting a smirking Weldon to appear behind her, as though she'd said his name three times in a mirror. She wasn't sure if the cops had arrested him. She didn't think so. The three boys who'd nearly pummeled him into applesauce had their car back, so they weren't complaining. She was probably the only one who knew what he'd done, and she'd chosen not to tell.

I wish I'd taken my mom's painting back from him, Mir thought. *It deserves better than to be owned by a thief, even one with a gorgeous smile.* She shook her head, attempting to clear it of Weldon Warrick.

Mir's house was a half hour walk from Sandford's tiny downtown, at the dead end of a street that declined in niceness the farther she walked down it. The houses at the beginning of the

road were brightly painted Nova Scotian historical homes, slowly becoming more and more ramshackle until the road dead-ended on Miriam's house, the most ramshackle of them all.

Mir loved her house. She loved the sloping roof and the faded orange paint that her mother liked to touch up with different shades of orange or yellow. She loved the windows with their ancient wooden shutters, the overgrown garden that kept her family in vegetables throughout the summer and autumn, and the wide front porch with its double columns supporting the jutting overhang that always seemed on the verge of collapsing. Mir had lived in the house since she was five years old and could barely remember living anywhere else.

The floorboards creaked under Mir's feet as she walked across the porch and slouched into one of the battered wicker chairs by the front door. Sandford's skyline stretched in front of her, stark against the brightness of the setting sun. The shape of the town was so familiar to Mir: the stubby square buildings, the arch of the bridge over the river that wound into the ocean. A knot of worry started to twist in the pit of Mir's stomach.

The front door banged open and Stella stuck her head around the door.

"Oh," she said, "you're here! Your father said you were walking home, even though he'd offered you a ride. I said we should check and make sure you hadn't been replaced by a pod person."

Miriam made a face at her mother.

"I just wanted to walk—"

"You never walk," said Stella.

“I’ll never walk home again if it means you’ll stop picking on me,” Mir said. “You’re mean. Dad’s mean.”

Stella smiled. Her clothes were splattered with bright paint. She’d wrapped a bandana, also splattered with paint, around her closely shaved head. When Mir was a little girl she would rub her palms wonderingly against the clipped stubble of her mother’s head, and think about how different Stella was from her friends’ mothers.

“How was today? How is Berg?”

“Berg’s okay; today was okay,” Mir said, pulling herself out of the chair. She brushed off the butt of her jeans; the porch chairs were always dusty.

“Tell Berg we miss him. He hasn’t come to visit in so long.”

“I’ll tell him,” Mir said. “He’s really busy with the store, that’s probably why he hasn’t come by.”

Stella swept an arm out for Mir, drawing her into a hug.

“Come inside. I bet you’re hungry.”

The kitchen was like the outside of Mir’s parents’ house: slowly sliding toward disrepair, painted with cheerful colors that didn’t quite match. Stella pulled a Saran-wrapped plate of food out of the fridge, placing it on the kitchen table in front of Mir.

“Want it heated up?”

“It’s fine,” said Mir, pulling the plastic off the plate. “It still tastes good cold.”

Stella sat down beside Miriam, leaning forward on the table to watch her daughter eat.

“You sure you’re okay? You seem a little distant.”

“I’m sitting right here next to you,” said Mir, around a mouthful of chicken.

“You know what I mean. Did anything happen at the store today?”

“No,” Mir lied. “Oh, wait, yes. I sold your painting, the one of Skylark and Skybound standing on that building.”

Stella looked impressed.

“Did you? That’s fantastic, thank you.”

Mir shoved her hand into her jeans pocket and pulled out Weldon Warrick’s money. She dropped the various bills and coins onto the table. They sat there between her and Stella.

“I’m so glad that one sold. I’m almost out of burnt umber gouache. I can buy a new tube with this,” Stella said, sorting the small pile of cash.

Mir looked down at her plate. It was one of the half dozen mismatched plates Stella had found at the local Goodwill. This one had small blue, green, and brown foxes running an endless loop around the edge of the plate. There were six foxes, but a crack in the plate had cut one of them in half, the fault line snaking through his fox body.

“I wish you’d charge more for your paintings,” Mir said softly. Stella’s hand stilled over the small pile of coins she was sorting.

“Are we going to fight again?” Stella said.

Mir could remember being very small and sitting on the floor of the studio where Stella painted. The studio was really just the garage in her parents’ backyard, the door wedged shut

against winter weather. Stella was kneeling beside her. The two of them were moving paintbrushes in unison across the canvas surface. Their brushstrokes scored a red path across the whiteness of the canvas. Stella was smiling as she painted beside Mir. There were no figures on the canvas, just colors. The painting still hung in Stella's studio, a remnant of a time when art felt much less complicated to Mir.

Stella reached out and put her hand on Mir's. Her fingers were cool against Mir's wrist. Mir let her; she didn't really want to fight. She'd been angry all week, but today's violence at the Emporium of Wonders had made her tired instead. She shook her head.

"I just want you to know—"

"I do know," said Stella. "I don't want to abandon material things and go back to living in the woods. I think indoor plumbing is a very fine thing. But we have enough that I don't have to charge more for my paintings. I can keep the art I make just art, rather than something I need to sell to support our family."

"Then why sell them at all?" Mir said, annoyed at the whine in her voice.

"Because art supplies cost, Miriam, and we have enough, but not quite enough."

"No, not quite enough," Mir echoed. Stella's face tensed, and Mir felt that tension in her mother's hand.

"What would be enough for you, Miriam?"

Mir stared hard at the fragmented fox running around the plate on the table in front of her. Poor fox; he didn't know his

hind end was in the process of being separated from his shoulders. He ran on and on, completely oblivious.

Mir thought of Weldon Warrick's smile. *He's the heir to the TomorrowMen fortune. What's that worth? Royalties from comics and toys and animated shows and bedsheets and a TomorrowMen movie with a two-hundred-million-dollar budget coming out next year. He's gotta be getting a few bucks from that.* Weldon Warrick's future was paved smooth and endless, no potholes, no bumps in the road. If anyone had enough, it was him.

"The guy who bought your painting recognized that Skylark and Skybound were wearing their original costumes. He said they were his favorite."

Mir felt relief ease Stella's fingers. Stella knew an olive branch when she saw one.

"Was he one of those old-school comic collectors? He wasn't horrible, was he? I respect having an obsessive passion, but collectors can be so nitpicky. You remember that one from a few years ago who had a tantrum because I painted Skylark's belt purple instead of blue—"

"No," Mir interrupted. "It was someone my age."

Stella's elegantly arched eyebrows shot up.

"Interesting. Who was he?"

Mir picked up her fork, scraping a few grains of brown rice across her plate.

"Just some rich kid," she lied. "I think he was a tourist, maybe off a cruise ship. We talked a bit about the TomorrowMen movie. He said he grew up reading the comics."

“Was he cute?” Stella asked, smiling.

Mir saw Weldon walk jauntily across the Emporium of Wonders’ parking lot, ready for violence. She saw his smile slide across his face. It didn’t quite touch his eyes. The thought of the car-stealing heir to the Warrick Comics empire taking Stella’s meticulously detailed painting of Skylark and Skybound back to his castle was almost unbearable. *I should have offered him a refund, done something to try to get him to return it*, Mir thought. *That painting deserves a better home than what he could give it.*

“Not really my type.” Mir stood up from the table and took her plate to the kitchen sink. “I think he was just passing through town, anyway. I don’t think I’ll see him again.” *I hope I’ll never see him again*, Mir thought uneasily. *Whatever reason he’s in Sandford, it’d better not keep him here longer than the weekend.*

“What an unusual encounter,” said Stella, her nose crinkling as she smiled. The setting sun was shining red through the kitchen window, lighting the soft curve of her head. “If you do see this young man again, sell him another painting. He seems to have good taste.”

There was a clatter on the porch outside, and Mir’s father and younger brother, Nate, charged through the door. Stella grabbed Nate and kissed him on the top of his head before he had the chance to wriggle free of her grasp. Annoyed, he stomped through the kitchen and into the living room. At twelve, Nate considered himself much too old for mothering.

“Hi,” said Henry to Stella, and they tangled together affectionately. Stella was a head shorter than Henry, and he wrapped

his arms around her, resting his bearded chin on top of her shaved head. At the sink, Mir watched her parents out of the corner of her eye: their embrace fit them perfectly into each other like puzzle pieces.

Arm in arm, Henry and Stella turned toward her, and Miriam looked up at them.

“Hey, you made it home on your own two legs,” said Henry, smiling. Mir let annoyance and frustration slide off her, and grinned at her father.

“I know, it’s like some kind of miracle.”

CHAPTER THREE

Weldon stood in his aunt and uncle's guest bathroom, staring at his face in the mirror. His eye was nearly swollen shut, the bruise around it beginning to change from angry red to purple. There was a cut on his chin he didn't even remember getting and his ribs felt like someone was leaning a booted foot against his side. It hurt to take more than a shallow breath.

"Weldon Warrick," he said to his reflection in the mirror, "I, David Warrick, your long-suffering father, would like to know: Why do you keep getting yourself into this kind of shit?"

It wasn't a great imitation of his dad. Despite spending the past thirty years in California, David Warrick still had a hint of an East Coast Canadian accent, which became more pronounced the angrier he got. Weldon was used to that accent battering furiously at him whenever he screwed up.

"Don't you know what I'm dealing with this week?" Weldon said. "Licensing and movie budgets and filming schedules

and aliens taking over the world. Don't you know how much I have on my plate, Weldon?"

Weldon frowned at the mirror.

"I, David Warrick, god-king of the TomorrowMen empire, have ten million things to deal with right now, so if you could just sit down and not move or speak or breathe, I'd appreciate that, Weldon."

Weldon looked away from his reflection. He stared down at his bare feet, half disappearing into the plush bathroom mat. He looked back up at the mirror, and flashed a slightly crooked but passable version of his usual smile at his reflection. The smile would be back to normal in a few days. It would be like the fight never happened.

Weldon walked out of the bathroom, into the guest bedroom. His suitcase was shoved in a corner, half open, his clothes strewn around it. Tilted against the wall was the painting he'd bought from that girl in the sad little geek store in Sandford's meager downtown. The painting was still wrapped in paper and leaning against the guest bed, where he'd left it the night before.

The girl's face came to him: skeptical brown eyes, freckles dotting her cheeks, and a halo of dark curly hair that spiraled out from her head like her thoughts were exploding outward. He remembered her skinny elbow sticking out of the sleeve of her too-large work shirt as she handed him the change for the painting. He also remembered the way she'd bolted into the parking lot, garden hose held in front of her like she was an

action hero in a movie, mowing down the boys he'd stolen that car from. Her hand on his arm, steadying him as he wobbled after the fight. The look of strange animosity creeping across her face as she stepped away from him.

"Weldon! Breakfast!" his aunt yelled from downstairs.

"Coming!" he yelled back.

He hadn't brought many clothes. The trip had been hastily arranged—not so much a "trip," more a "dumping." Two weeks ago, his dad had decided that having Weldon in Los Angeles the summer before the *TomorrowMen* movie came out was a risk he wasn't willing to take, especially after Weldon was suspended from school for stealing the groundskeeper's truck and driving it through the football field. The punishment seemed like an overreaction to Weldon. He hadn't even gotten off the school campus.

I've done worse things that didn't get me shipped off to the ass-end of Canada, Weldon thought, pulling a T-shirt over his head. *It was just a suspension.*

But this summer was different. This was the summer the hype machine for the *TomorrowMen* movie kicked into gear. This was the summer the movie trailer premiered at San Diego Comic-Con, to the orgasmic excitement of every geek with a keyboard.

"I, David Warrick, overlord of the *TomorrowMen* comic empire, have my entire future riding on this film," muttered Weldon. "If it makes north of five hundred million domestically, I will finally have legitimacy. No more scraping by with comic

books and animated TV shows. This movie hits big, and I'll be the one talked about in hushed tones at every industry party."

Weldon pulled a green T-shirt from his small pile of clothes, grimacing. His father had put everything into the movie—all of Warrick Studios' resources, millions in financing. David Warrick was finally going to realize his dream of bringing his father's greatest comic book creations, the superheroic Skybound and Skylark, to life.

So it had been decided: Weldon would be shipped off to his father's boyhood town, to live with his aunt and uncle. He would finish off the school year online, since it was too late to look into transferring to a school in Sandford. And if Weldon ever wanted to return to Los Angeles, ever wanted to look upon the hallowed halls of Warrick Studios and take a selfie with the life-sized statue of Skybound outside the studio's main building, if he ever wanted to sleep in his own bed again, he would be good for the summer. He wouldn't steal cars. He wouldn't get into fights. He would write passable essays on his laptop and email them to his internet teacher on time. He would be good. And then maybe David Warrick would let him come home.

"So, thanks, Grampa Warrick," Weldon muttered, trotting downstairs. "You just had to create the comic that got me banished to the far corner of this Canadian wasteland."

The kitchen smelled good.

"Hi," Weldon said, walking over to the pink table tucked neatly in a corner of the kitchen. Wide bay windows looked out over a neatly tended front lawn. Weldon's aunt and uncle had

no children, so he guessed the lawn was kind of like their kid. He figured they'd gotten a better deal than his parents: lawns didn't steal cars or get suspended from school.

"Every time I look at that eye of yours, I cringe," said Aunt Kay, reaching up to touch his cheek. He smiled at her. She'd always been soft on him. "Are you sure you don't want a nice cold steak for it? Bag of frozen peas? Aspirin? Anything?"

"It's good," Weldon said. "Doesn't hurt much."

"This town is changing for the worse," said Uncle Alex, sitting at the kitchen table. "When your father and I were kids here, the crime rate was minuscule. A chief of police and a deputy—that was all this town needed. Now, there's too much nonsense."

Weldon nodded solemnly, giving his uncle as much eye contact as he could manage, to show how seriously he was taking the lecture. His uncle continued.

"Nowadays a young man can be walking down the street and just be attacked. It's appalling. I really wish you'd been able to identify who did it, so those kids could be brought to justice. But you did the best you could under the circumstances."

Alex Warrick didn't look much like his brother, David. Weldon had seen photos of them together as teenagers, both of them trim and tan, arms looped around each other's shoulders. David Warrick had kept the tan and the trimness, but between him and Alex, Alex looked younger. David Warrick looked like he hadn't had a good night's sleep in years, the stress

of transforming Warrick Studios from mere comic publisher to a movie industry titan pushing him to the breaking point.

Aunt Kay piled eggs and bacon on Weldon's plate.

"We need to talk about the summer," she said. "Your father was very concerned we keep you busy, so I've been looking into various programs you can join."

Are they going to ship me off to summer camp? thought Weldon, dismayed. *I really like showering in a normal bathroom. I like drinking things that don't exclusively come in toxic shades of orange.*

"Your father said you like to run," his aunt continued. "I know there's a cross-country running club at that exercise store downtown, the one that sells those famous yoga pants. It's called the Running Realm, I think."

Relief washed over Weldon. He dug his fork into the small mountain of scrambled eggs in front of him and beamed at his aunt.

"That sounds fantastic, Aunt Kay."

"Sandford is a good place to live," his aunt said, and Weldon saw real concern on her face. He was amused she'd taken his alleged assault so personally. "It's not normally filled with awful people. I've lived here my whole life and I've never seen or experienced anything like what happened to you yesterday. Please don't judge Sandford by what happened. I really want you to have a good summer."

"I do too," Weldon said. He liked his aunt and uncle, but they had been a little too eager to accept his made-up story about

the fight yesterday. David Warrick would've pried the truth out of Weldon using the vowels in his East Coast accent. *Someday I'll tell my dad something and he'll actually believe me*, Weldon thought, spooning eggs into his mouth. *Maybe it'll be the truth, maybe it'll be something I made up, but I'll tell him and he'll believe me.*

"Are you all right, dear?" his aunt said. Weldon looked up at her, aware he hadn't been paying attention. "You had the oddest look on your face."

Weldon beamed his smile at her.

"I'm great, Aunt Kay."

After his aunt and uncle left for work, Weldon laced up his running shoes and walked down their long driveway, heading downtown. The asphalt was wet, and water splashed over his shoes as he stretched into a loping run. The air still smelled like spring here. Los Angeles had been hot and hazy when he'd left, eternally summer. *Bring jackets*, his aunt had said when it was decided he would move in with them for the summer. *Jackets, jeans, and rain boots. Not sure what the weather's like in Los Angeles, but here we get four seasons, three of them winter.*

Weldon lifted his head and sucked in a breath. His ribs throbbed, and it occurred to him that going for a run the day after he'd been pounded into applesauce was probably a stupid idea. He took another breath and kept going.

He always ran too fast at the beginning. He'd gotten better at it recently, learning to pace himself for longer distances, but the beginning of a run felt so good. Nervous energy bubbled in

his chest, spurring him to run faster. He allowed himself to stretch out, feeling the ground churn under his feet.

There were no sidewalks in his aunt and uncle's part of town, just the road and large houses alongside it. *The rich part of town*, he thought. Funny how similar the rich part of any town looked: carefully groomed lawns, tidy gardens, sleek cars with less than ten thousand miles on the odometer. Weldon eyed a mint-green BMW as he jogged past, wondering if it was unlocked.

I'm going to be good this summer, he reminded himself. *Aunt Kay and Uncle Alex don't need that damage. And I want to go back to LA. The only reason I took that Hyundai is because the driver was an idiot and left the keys in it. That won't happen again.*

Weldon followed the road as it curved away from the houses. In the distance was the bridge into downtown Sandford. He jogged across the bridge, looking down at the wide, slowly moving river below. There was some kind of history to the river, something to do with the fur trade hundreds of years ago, beaver-hat-wearing trappers paddling down it in bark canoes. Weldon couldn't remember the exact story. Canada's history was completely mysterious to him. Did they fight any wars for their independence? *Were* they independent? They had the queen on their money, so maybe not. Weldon jogged off the bridge and onto a sidewalk, mentally making a note to look up Canadian history on Wikipedia.

Weldon turned onto a street, missing a step as he recognized where he was. It was the only street in Sandford that had much

of anything: a Starbucks, a couple of tourist-trap shops, and the exercise store his aunt had mentioned. There were a few shabby local businesses clinging to the street too. Weldon wondered how Sandford locals felt about their gentrifying downtown: Did they like the Starbucks, or did they prefer whatever it had replaced, some broken-down diner that only served black coffee for a dollar a cup?

Down the street, he saw the run-down geek store, the one he'd stopped into yesterday. He always liked seeing Tomorrow-Men merchandise in the wild, and the large poster of Skybound in the store window had attracted his attention as he drove the stolen Hyundai through town. Weldon remembered the painting he'd bought, wrapped carefully in brown paper by that girl. She'd looked a little sad when she'd sold it to him.

I wonder why she didn't tell the cops I stole that car, Weldon thought. He remembered the way the girl had stepped away from him as he'd been interviewed by the police. She hadn't seemed bothered by his confession that he'd stolen the Hyundai, but something had changed in the minutes that followed, something he didn't understand.

Weldon turned and walked across the street and into the Running Realm. A girl behind the counter, her body burned lean from long-distance running, looked up when he entered. He smiled at her, hoping the smile would make up for his eye. From the approving way she smirked back at him, her eyes sliding down his body just a bit, the smile was working.

"Hi," he said. "I heard you had a cross-country club."

“You heard right,” said the girl. Her eyes were slightly hooded. Weldon wasn’t sure if that made her look predatory or sleepy, but either way, he liked it. “We run twice a week, mostly in the park down the road. It has lots of trails and you get to run beside the river. We do a 5K and a 10K. Sound like something you’re up for?”

“Most definitely,” Weldon said, crossing his arms and leaning on the counter. The girl with the hooded eyes smiled and pushed a clipboard toward him.

“Sign up here. My name’s Ellie, by the way.”

Weldon smiled back.

“I’m Weldon Warrick. Very nice to meet you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

From the rocky beach beside Sandford's only lake, Mir and Raleigh watched as their friend Evan cannon-balled into the water, sending up a massive splash. He bobbed to the surface, howling, "IT'S COLD!!!"

"His body hair will prevent him from freezing," Raleigh said. Mir nodded.

"Boys have an extra layer of insulation," Mir said. "It's not fat, it's like an extra layer of boy. It's why I'm always cold and Evan never is. He's got an extra layer of boyness."

In the lake, Evan flailed melodramatically, wailing about the water's temperature.

"He seems kinda cold now," Raleigh said.

"He's faking for attention," Mir said, and Raleigh laughed.

The lake was a small horseshoe-shaped body of water lined with evergreen trees, its southeast edge giving way to a tiny, sandy beach where Mir and Raleigh were sitting. A rickety dock

extended out from the beach. Just moments ago, Evan had pounded down the length of the dock and launched himself into the water.

“I’m glad you came out today,” Raleigh said.

“Yeah, I’m glad too. It’s been so long since we hung out.”

“You’re so busy,” said Raleigh. “You have, like, all the jobs.”

“Just the one,” said Mir.

“Well, you work a lot of hours at the one job. And you have all the homework since you’re in all the advanced classes. And then you help your parents grow all the things in your garden on the weekend. My mom says thanks for the squash, by the way. I’m not going to say thanks, because now I have to eat squash for dinner all next week.”

Mir giggled. Raleigh glanced over at Mir and they grinned at each other.

“It’s the price of being friends with me: you risk my parents gifting you a metric ton of vegetables,” said Mir.

“Why doesn’t pizza grow on trees? I would love a metric ton of pizza.”

“Pizza tree,” Mir said. “I bet my mom can grow that. She’s a plant wizard.”

“Tell her to grow a money tree too,” Raleigh said. “Then you won’t have to work and can just be lazy your entire life. And also buy your awesome friend Raleigh an iPad.”

Evan emerged from the lake like a triumphant Wookiee, water streaming from his swim trunks. He struck a heroic pose

on the tiny beach, fists on his hips, head thrown back. Water dripped from his hair and beard. *I swear he's had that beard since sixth grade*, Miriam thought.

“Ladies!” said Evan, waggling an eyebrow at Mir and Raleigh. “Tremble at the sight of the wild Nova Scotian man in his native element! Behold my pristine majesty!”

Evan flexed his arms mightily. What skin wasn't covered with hair blazed white in the sun. Mir and Raleigh burst out laughing. In sixth grade, Raleigh and Mir had gotten over their childhood suspicion of boys and agreed they'd be his friend for one simple reason: Evan was the best.

Raleigh held her hands over her eyes, blocking Evan from view.

“Too much sexy, Evan,” she laughed. “I admit to being weak in the knees. You win.”

Mir watched her two friends, smiling. For as long as Mir could remember, Raleigh had been beside her, her stride matching Mir's as they went out in search of adventure. They had been locked in friendship, needing only each other until they discovered Evan.

“Am I too late for the Evan show?” said Jamie, Raleigh's boyfriend. He was walking around the bend in the trail that led to the tiny beach, backpack slung over one shoulder. Raleigh squealed when she saw him, leaping to her feet to fling her freckled arms around his neck. Encouraged, Evan also squealed and lumbered toward Jamie, intent on wrapping him in a wet hug.

“Hey, Mir,” said Jamie, managing to kiss Raleigh hello and fend off Evan’s attempt to hug him. “It’s been, like, years since I saw you.”

“Years and years,” Mir said, smiling, ignoring the tiny twist of guilt in her gut. If Jamie had noticed her absence, then it really had been ages since she’d seen her friends. Jamie and Mir’s friendship was one of proximity: she knew he was friends with her only because she was his girlfriend’s best friend. Jamie and Raleigh had been together for a year, and Mir was still trying to adjust to his presence. She always felt a little uneasy when he was around. Jamie had sharp edges, and sometimes Mir seemed to catch on them.

Jamie linked hands with Raleigh, and the two of them sat on the sand next to Miriam. Evan sat on Mir’s other side, still glistening from the lake water.

“It’s too cold for swimming, Evan,” said Jamie. “You’ll freeze your tiny brain.”

“Brains are like fleshy computers,” Evan said. “And computers work best in a cold environment. Therefore, my brain will be improved by the coldness of the water.”

“If you talked smart like that to the teachers at school they’d stop trying to put you in the special class,” Jamie said.

Evan grinned and looked out over the lake, resting his forearms on his knees. He always deflected Jamie’s needling that way: get in, make a quick joke, then smile and retreat. And Jamie would let him be, which from Jamie was a sign of friendship.

“Why aren’t you working, Mir? It’s Wednesday. You always

work on Wednesday,” Jamie said. Raleigh had her arm draped over him, comfortable and adorable.

“Berg gave me the afternoon off,” Mir said. Berg had actually given her the whole week off, stopping her as she stepped into the maintenance closet to change into her work uniform. He had seemed distracted, like something was bothering him but he couldn’t bring himself to say out loud what it was.

“Do you want—um . . .” Berg had trailed off. Mir waited, one hand on the closet doorknob, the other clutching her thread-bare Emporium of Wonders T-shirt.

“It’s nice out today,” Berg continued. “I don’t think the store will be busy. Why don’t you take the afternoon off? You can go do something with your friends. Enjoy the spring weather.”

Lately the Emporium of Wonders had been quiet, even for the lull before the beginning of tourism season. All week, only a handful of customers had wandered into the store, and most hadn’t bought anything.

“Is everything okay?” Mir asked Berg. There was something upsetting in the way he wouldn’t quite look at her.

“Everything will be fine,” Berg said. He smiled. “Things are just slow now, and there’s no point in you coming in. We have a new shipment of TomorrowMen merchandise coming in next week, so business should pick up then. That stuff always flies off the shelves.” And he had continued to smile in a way that Miriam didn’t like.

“I haven’t seen Berg since he had that vegetable stand at the farmers’ market,” Raleigh said now, resting the side of her cheek

against Jamie's shoulder. Mir still remembered the day Raleigh told her she'd seen a new boy in her English class, a boy who was all edges, skinny, with dark hair and dark eyes. A boy who didn't seem to pay attention, but always had the right answer when the teacher called on him. He'd said hello to Raleigh as he'd passed by her in the hall the next day, and Raleigh had breathlessly relayed the encounter to Miriam. Mir had listened, smiling but feeling slightly queasy. First it had been only her and Raleigh. Then they'd added Evan. Maybe adding a fourth would make things very different for Raleigh and Mir.

Evan smoothed out his towel and lay down on it, reaching into his messenger bag. He pulled out a well-thumbed comic—*New TomorrowMen #67*—and flipped it open, bending the pages back at the spine. Miriam lay down beside him, looking up at the comic. She liked the artwork in this issue, superhero faces drawn with graceful black lines, fine details left to the imagination.

“Who drew this, Evan?”

“Stuart Samuel,” Evan said. “I like his art a lot. He drew a reboot of *Daredevil* for Marvel a few years ago, and after that he drew a *TomorrowMen* spin-off comic about Tristan Terrific. Now he's drawing the main book.”

“Which one is Tristan Terrific? Is he the one who can teleport through time?” Raleigh asked.

“No,” said Evan patiently, “that's the Mage of Ages.”

“Comics are so weird,” Raleigh sighed.

“Comics are incredibly weird,” said Evan. “That's why they're awesome.”

“I liked the TomorrowMen animated show when I was a kid,” said Raleigh.

“Which show? *The TomorrowMen: Earth’s Mighty Defenders*, *TomorrowMen GO!*, or *TomorrowMen Through Time*?”

“Oh my god, Evan,” groaned Jamie. “I’d call you a nerd, but I know you like that.”

“Nerds run the world,” Evan declared. “Because of nerds, we get five superhero movies a year. And there’s going to be a TomorrowMen movie next year.”

Evan turned to Mir.

“You’re going to see the movie, right?”

Mir stared at her feet, wishing he hadn’t asked her that.

“I’m not sure—”

“But you have to!” Evan said, his face bright and earnest. Mir cringed, willing him to stop talking about the TomorrowMen movie. “You have history with those characters! Your grandfather literally created most of them!”

“Wait, what?” said Jamie, his gaze darting toward Mir. Beside him, Raleigh sighed, pressing her face into the hollow of Jamie’s shoulder.

“I’ve told you about this before, I swear I did,” Raleigh said. Jamie was frowning, still staring at Mir. She looked back at him, unnerved by the intensity of his gaze.

“No. Or if you did, I don’t remember.”

“Years and years ago, Mir’s grandfather drew the very first TomorrowMen comics,” said Raleigh, her voice nonchalant. “Mir told us back in, what? Sixth grade? You should’ve seen

Evan's face when he found out. I thought his head was going to explode.”

“It's not a big deal,” Mir said.

“It's absolutely a big deal!” Evan roared. He was already climbing to his feet, arms spread wide, intent on telling the story. Mir watched him with growing horror.

“Listen well, and hear the story of the TomorrowMen! How Joseph Warrick, writer of the TomorrowMen, was born in New York, the only son of immigrant parents from Poland. He grew up on the hardscrabble streets of New York, as the world rebuilt itself after World War Two.”

“Why am I imagining the cast of *Annie*?” said Raleigh, grinning.

“But when Joseph Warrick was ten, his family moved to none other than Sandford, Nova Scotia. There he met a young artist, Micah Kendrick, grandfather of our very own Miriam Kendrick! Little did these two men know that together they would create one of the most popular and long-running comic books in the world: *The TomorrowMen*!”

Evan struck a classic superhero pose, fists on his hips, chest thrust out.

“Skybound! Leader of the TomorrowMen! An ordinary American soldier experimented on by his own government, he defied the cruel organization that gave him superstrength and chose to use his superpowers for good.”

Evan changed his pose, teetering on one leg, arms extended in front of him like he was flying.

“Skylark! An alien queen who came to Earth to warn us of an impending threat. She fell in love with Skybound and abandoned her empire to stay with him. Superpowers: flight, the ability to harness energy into psionic bursts, looking really good in spandex.”

“Sexist,” Raleigh snorted.

Evan pressed two fingers to his temples, glowering down at Raleigh, Jamie, and Mir. Mir smirked despite herself. He looked ridiculous.

“Tristan Terrific! A former villain with the power of pure persuasion. He can convince a person to do anything just by talking to them. He caused all sorts of trouble for Skybound and Skylark before changing his ways and joining their side.”

“Wasn’t there also a teleporting wizard?” said Jamie.

“I’m getting to him. The Mage of Ages! A New York businessman plucked from the modern day and whisked back to the era of King Arthur, he uses the magic of Excalibur to teleport through time.”

“And I guess they’re called the TomorrowMEN because they’re pretty much all dudes,” Raleigh said.

“There are other members of the team, some of them women, but they switch in and out,” admitted Evan. “Skybound, Skylark, Tristan Terrific, and the Mage of Ages are the core four.”

“And your grandfather created them,” Jamie said, his eyes narrowed at Mir. His tone was light, but Mir thought she saw suspicion in his glance.

“Co-created,” she said. “But, I mean, it’s not a big deal—”

“It’s such a big deal,” Evan muttered defiantly, resuming his heroic pose, fists on his hips, staring out over the lake. “It is the biggest deal.”

Mir sighed, looking downward at the sand underneath her feet.

“I never got to meet my grandfather,” she said. “He died a few years before I was born. My mom’s told me a bit about him, though. He drew lots of comics, not just the TomorrowMen.”

Mir remembered the first time she’d seen a photo of her grandfather in a book about the history of superhero comics. He looked shockingly young, smiling and standing next to an equally young Joseph Warrick. There was only one photo of her grandfather at home, a small framed family portrait of him, her grandmother, and a very young Stella held between them. Micah Kendrick looked so much older in that photo, as though something had been taken from him. A year ago Mir had searched for her grandfather’s name online, and discovered pages of links to a court case settled ten years earlier, when Micah Kendrick’s daughter, Stella, ended a twenty-year legal battle over the rights to the TomorrowMen with the TomorrowMen’s longtime publisher, Warrick Comics. Micah Kendrick had died eight years before that.

“And now they’re making a movie out of these comics,” said Jamie, still looking at Mir with narrowed eyes. “I’ve been reading about it. Warrick Studios is worth millions, and when the TomorrowMen movie drops, they might be worth billions.

The merchandising alone makes them a ton of cash. You're not secretly a rich kid, are you? You haven't been hiding that from us all these years?"

All these years? Mir thought. *You've been a part of this group for a year. Next to Raleigh and Evan, you don't know me at all.*

"I'm not a rich kid," said Mir. "My family doesn't get anything from the TomorrowMen merchandise or the movie. There was a legal case over the rights to the characters years ago, but my mom settled with Warrick Studios after my grandfather died."

"Settled," said Jamie. His face seemed sharper than usual, and Mir thought she caught a note of disgust in his voice. "Warrick Studios must've paid a lot of money to make your family go away."

Mir made a show of adjusting her sitting position, carefully folding her legs underneath her. Raleigh looked worried, glancing from her boyfriend to Mir. Mir knew Raleigh's expression; she hated it when there was weirdness in the group. *When it was just the three of us there was never any weirdness*, Mir thought, picking at a blade of grass so she wouldn't have to look at Jamie.

"I don't know—I don't think it was that much money. I know my parents bought our house with what they got from the settlement, but . . ." Mir's voice trailed off.

Jamie chuckled, the sound like a knife scraping on pavement.

"Your mom doesn't even have to work. She does those

paintings, which she sells for like zero dollars. I mean, both my parents work, and they don't own their own house."

Mir stared at him, not sure what to say. A slick, awful feeling sloshed in her stomach. Jamie's gaze seemed to pin her against the sky.

"I'm not rich," Mir said. Her words felt thin and ineffectual.

Jamie continued to stare at her, then turned away, leaning his cheek against the top of Raleigh's head.

"I guess not," he said. "If you were a rich kid, your parents probably wouldn't still have dial-up internet. At least my parents have high speed."

Raleigh laughed, which Mir knew was her choosing to believe the moment of weirdness had passed. She wrapped her arms tighter around Jamie's torso, and in the early evening light they seemed to fuse together. Mir forced the edges of her mouth up in a semblance of a smile. She glanced at Evan, who was staring at Jamie. Evan caught Mir's eye, but didn't smile.

He can see how messed up things are too, Mir thought. She looked away, staring over the tops of the pine trees on the other side of the lake.