

Xperiment

Sharon Kaye



Illustrations by Christopher Tice

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Chapter One

There was a hole in the fence. That's how the whole thing started.

Xalden "X" Fujimoto knew he probably should have left it alone. But there it was: a secret discovery at recess. Someone had to investigate. Why not him?

A tall wooden fence ran all along the back of the schoolyard, past the basketball court, behind a line of bushy evergreen trees. X never would have gone back there if he hadn't been so upset that day.

Mrs. Phatears, the playground supervisor, was getting carried away with her whistle again. Here she came: long gray coat, tight gray hat, and heavy gray boots clacking on the cement.

"Woooooooooot!" she blew. "Stop chasing!"

"Woooooooooot!" she blew. "No taking your coats off!"

"Woooooooooot!" she blew. "Hands to yourselves!"

X used to like the playground. But lately, there were too many rules to have any fun. Now he couldn't stand the feel of Mrs. Phatears's disapproving gaze on him. Then, that day in late September, Mrs. Phatears blew her whistle directly at X.

"Woooooooooot!" she blew. "Xalden, put those down!"



X was gathering shiny rocks because some kids from his class had started a “store” under the slide. He thought that maybe they would let him play if he had “money” to buy things at their store. He really wanted to join their game and didn’t know how else to do it.

“Xalden!” Mrs. Phatears repeated. “Now!”

“But...but why?” X blurted out.

Anger flared in Mrs. Phatears’s eyes. “BECAUSE I SAID SO!”

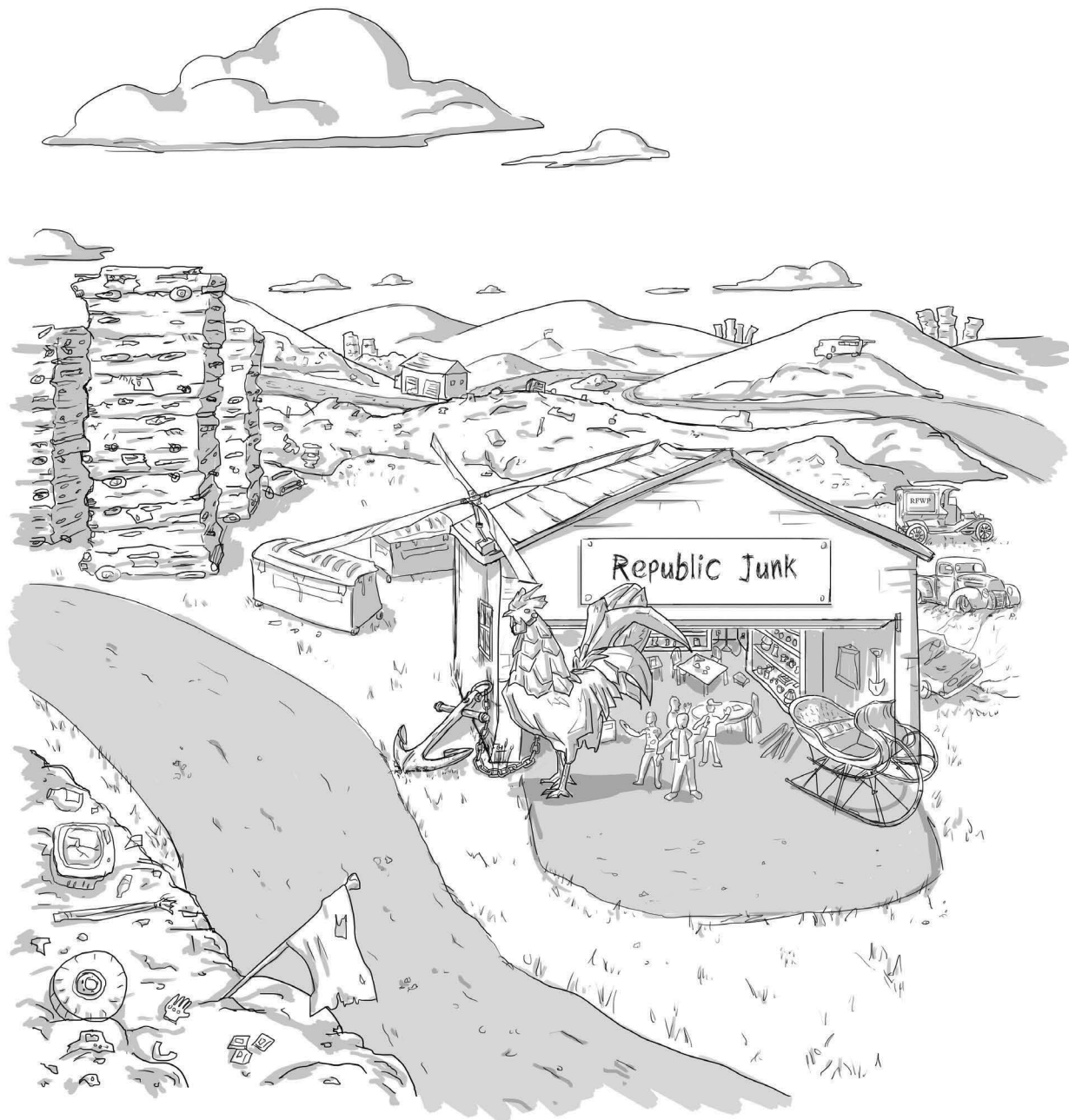
X could feel his cheeks burning. A half-dozen kids turned to stare. Everything around him slowly merged into a blurry streak. He felt trapped in a world created by someone else. He dropped the shiny rocks and ran to the fence, trying to get as far away from the playground as possible.



That's when he noticed the hole.

The fence was made of a long line of tall boards. Each was nailed to a cross-board at the top and at the bottom. But one of the boards was attached only at the top, making it easy to swing open like a stiff curtain—to see the world beyond.

It was a junkyard. X already knew that from peeking through the slats in the fence. If you drove down Orchard Street behind the school, you'd pass right by the entrance. There was a big old house with a dented red pick-up truck parked in its wide gravel lot. A giant aluminum rooster, a sleigh, a ship's anchor on a heavy chain, a real helicopter blade, several window frames, and other odd things were sitting around the outside of the garage. Inside the garage, you could see tables, chairs, mirrors, manikins wearing crazy clothes, and a lot more stuff. The sign out front read "Republic Junk, Thrift Shop, and Recycling Center."



X played it cool when he discovered the hole. He didn't want anyone else to see it and report it to Mrs. Phatears. He knew that he could slip through. But should he? The junkyard was definitely off limits. What if Mrs. Phatears caught him? He thought about it during the rest of recess and for the rest of the day.

Just before the final bell rang, X went to the drinking fountain. A girl with dirty-blond hair and ripped blue jeans stood in line behind him, waiting her turn. It was Vida Hume, who was running the store under the slide.

“What are you smiling about?” Vida asked him.

X flinched in surprise, not realizing that he had been smiling. He was glad she couldn’t read his thoughts. He had made up his mind.

“Oh, nothing,” he replied nonchalantly.

“I bet you don’t ever have to comb your hair,” she speculated, touching the top of his head.

It was true. His hair was spiky-black and so short that it always looked the same, wet or dry. He pushed her hand away. Talking about his appearance made him feel self-conscious. He was Japanese, and she was Caucasian, like almost everybody else in the school.

Then the bell rang. Instead of hanging around for a while on the playground as usual, X darted back to the fence and slipped through the wooden curtain.



Chapter Two

The junkyard was a different world.

Stacks of flattened cars loomed before him like the skyline of a small city. He crept around it down the gravel path toward a shed crammed full of old computers and printers. At the open double doors, sitting next to the fattest little TV he had ever seen, was a large box full of old cell phones. Beyond the shack was a neighborhood of broken-down bicycles and lawn mowers. Beyond that was a district of rusty sinks, tubs, and refrigerators. Beyond that was a mountain of dirt.

X took a deep breath, drinking in the view. A new place, full of possibility!

Suddenly, X heard a sputtering motor. He hid against the wall of the shed. A dented red pick-up truck lumbered toward him. As it got closer, X could see that it had a sign painted on the side that read “Republic Junk. We haul anything!”



An old man with a long white beard and a cowboy hat was driving the truck, singing at the top of his lungs to the radio. He cast a glance in the direction of the shed but didn't seem to notice X. The truck kept going toward the far side of the yard until it was out of sight.

X could feel his blood racing through his veins. He waited until he felt it was safe and then started walking in the other direction.

Around the corner, he spotted an abandoned camper with colorful graffiti spray-painted all over it. The door was torn off. A pair of eyes was peering at him from the back window!

X froze. Who could it be? It was too late to escape without being seen. But it was not too late to escape. X took off like a shot for the fence and slipped back through the wooden curtain.

When he got home, he tried to put the whole experience out of his mind. He resolved never to go back through the wooden curtain again.

The next day at school, Vida Hume got in line behind him again at the drinking fountain.



“I saw you at Republic Junk yesterday,” she whispered, glancing around to be sure that no one else was listening.

“That was *you*?” X exclaimed.

Vida narrowed her eyes at X. “Who are you working for?”

“Working for?” X asked.

Vida planted her hands on her hips. “It’s Tammy, isn’t it?”

“Tammy?” X protested. “What are you talking about?”

“So it’s John, then,” Vida growled. “Well, you can tell him that we will *never* give up the camper!”

“Vida, I swear,” X pleaded, “I went to Republic Junk for the first time yesterday. I didn’t even know anyone else was there!”

Vida looked hard at X, trying to decide whether or not to believe him.

“Okay, good,” she said at last, “then you can be on my team.”

“What kind of game is it?” X asked, uneasy.

“It’s not a game; it’s a club. A *secret* club. It used to be just Tammy, John, and me. But we had a fight. They wanted to build a clubhouse out of old tires. I wanted to stay in the camper. So they went off on their own. I brought in a couple of friends, and so did Tammy. But one of Tammy’s friends called John ‘Coppertop’ because he has red hair. He got really mad. He said he’s bringing in some friends of his own today—and he wants the camper back!”

X gasped. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re going to fight for it.” Vida set her jaw stubbornly. “John knocked part of Tammy’s clubhouse down. So one of her teammates broke one of the camper windows—which was totally unfair because my team didn’t have anything to do with John’s attack on her clubhouse. It’s going to be an all-out war.”



“A war?” X echoed, just as Mrs. Phatears came around the corner toward them.

Vida put on an innocent face and waved cheerfully at Mrs. Phatears.

“Quiet in the hall,” Mrs. Phatears warned, as if the stern look on her face wasn’t warning enough. After she passed, Vida and X breathed a sigh of relief.

“Phatears shut down our store today,” Vida confided to X. “The junkyard is our only hope left. We kids need a place of our own, away from the soul-crushing sound of the whistle. Are you in?”

X was conflicted. He knew exactly how Vida felt, but he wanted no part of her war. If only he could convince her to help him find a way to restore the playground....

Vida clamped her hands on his shoulders and whispered, “Meet us in the camper after school.”

Chapter Three

When X arrived at the camper after school, he could already hear voices inside.

He peeked through the door. Vida had started a meeting with her team. Thrash Symachus, Carol Gilligan, and Jeanie Rousseau were sitting around the camper's little kitchen table. X knew all three of them from school, even though they weren't in his class.

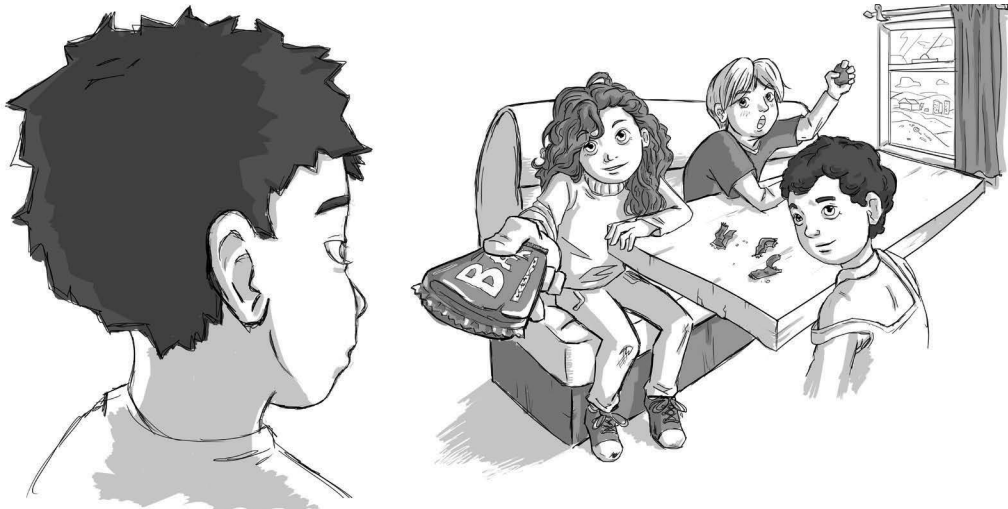
Vida jumped defensively when she heard X at the door and then sighed in relief when she saw that it was him. "Hey, everybody, here's X, our newest member."

X sat in the seat Vida offered.

Carol gave X a granola bar from her backpack. Wrappers from the others were still scattered around the table. "I felt so bad for you yesterday," she said, "when Mrs. Phatears yelled at you on the playground."

"Thanks," X mumbled, accepting the granola bar but not opening it.

"You should've just chucked those rocks at her," Thrash suggested. "I would've."



Chapter Five



Around the corner came a red-haired boy with three other boys behind him. It was John Locke and his team. They were carrying sticks.

Thrash snatched one of the brooms from Carol's hands. "Come on!" he urged. "We've got them outnumbered!" He trotted toward the invaders, brandishing the broom in front of him. Carol did not follow.

John came to a halt and made a hand signal for his team to stay in formation behind him.

"Vida Hume!" John shouted. "We have come to take possession of the camper. I had it first. I fixed it up. It's mine. So take your team and go."

“No way, John!” Vida replied. “You may have had it first, but then you left.”

“I know,” John conceded. “But only temporarily. I was always planning to come back. And I never said you could have it. You stole it while I was gone.”

“Stole it!” Vida scoffed. “I’ve been protecting it from Tammy’s team! They’re the ones who broke the window!”

As if on cue, a new group of kids came over the hill on another path. It was Tammy Hobbes and her team.



“We may have broken the window,” Tammy shouted, “but that’s because you tore half of our tire-fort down, John. Now we can’t even get the roof to stay on.”

John folded his arms. “You should think about the consequences before you go calling people names!”

“I didn’t call you a name!” Tammy objected.

“Well, someone on your team did!” John insisted.

“It was Joey!” someone shouted.

“It wasn’t me!” a wiry boy with light blue eyes and a shock of white hair returned.

And then everyone was shouting at one another, moving closer together, getting more and more angry.

X looked around him in desperation. Why had he gotten involved in this war? He glanced up the path to see if he could make it back to the wooden curtain without anyone noticing. *No*, he thought, *I can’t bear to go back to the playground. I won’t give up on the chance for freedom.* Then he had an idea.

X cranked on the baby monitor he was still holding. It emitted an ear-piercing screech. Everyone turned to X, instantly quiet.

X turned the baby monitor off. “Um...hi,” he said, surprised that his idea had worked so well. “I’m X. I think we can avoid a fight here if we take a vote.”



X looked around at his audience. He had their attention. He suddenly felt terrified. All their eyes were on him, waiting for him to speak. But his throat felt dry, and he couldn’t remember what he wanted to say. He looked at Carol. She smiled at him and nodded enthusiastically.

X cleared his throat. “I propose we all help fix the tire-fort for Tammy’s team. Then they have a clubhouse, and the rest of us can share the camper.”

Everyone was still for a moment, each thinking about how X's proposal would affect himself or herself.

"All those in favor, raise your hand!" X called.

Five hands went up: Tammy and her teammates plus X. Five kids in favor, eight against.

Seeing that her team lost the vote, Tammy frowned. "Aww, come on, guys!" she complained.

Vida was baffled. "Why would *we* want to help fix *your* tire-fort?"

"Because it would bring peace," X explained. "Voting is democracy. In order for it to work, you have to vote for what's best for everyone as a whole, not what's best for you alone."

X barely finished his sentence before a confused jumble of counter-proposals, questions, and shouting erupted. He cranked the baby monitor back on again to try to silence everyone. But this time, Joey grabbed it out of his hand and slammed it against the side of the camper. It broke into pieces and fizzled off.



Shouting turned to pushing and shoving as John's team tried to force its way into the camper. Then came a loud crash—another broken window. Vida, who was struggling to barricade the door against John, was hit on the forehead with a flying shard of glass. Blood streamed down her face.

As X ran to help her, he heard Carol calling his name. A member of John's team had her pinned to the ground in an effort to wrestle her broom away from her.

Before X could decide what to do, someone barreled into him from behind, toppling him over. He sprawled on the ground in shock. Kids were running in every direction, shouting and throwing things.

It was a disaster.

All X wanted to do was run away. He wished he'd just stayed on the playground. Something was missing from this group of kids. There was something they needed in order to achieve the freedom they all longed for. But what was it?

Just then, a loud horn sounded, and the dented red Republic Junk truck came bumping over the horizon.



Chapter Ten



When they arrived at the tire-fort, they found it lying in ruins. Someone—no doubt the New Trailblazers—had knocked the rest of the walls down.

As they set to work piling tire upon tire to rebuild the fort, Vida explained her idea. “Tammy, when Mr. Kuhn asked you to think about our social crisis yesterday, it made you ask the question: *What would humans be like without government?* And the same was true for John and Jeanie, right?”

They all nodded.

“Well,” Vida continued, “when I think about our social crisis, it doesn’t make me ask that question. In fact, I have a problem with that question. I don’t think it’s possible for human beings to exist in a state of nature.”

“Really?” Carol objected. “But you saw the stick figures on the screen. They represented primitive humans, long ago, in our prehistoric days, before we invented government.”

“We may not have had a president in those days,” Vida persisted, “but even the most primitive human beings knew the difference between right and wrong. And I bet they had rules that they had to follow, or they would be punished.”

“If you think about it,” X agreed, “a creature without any rules isn’t really a human.”

“Exactly,” Vida continued. “So anyhow, our social crisis made me think of a different question.” Vida was rolling a tire over to Carol.

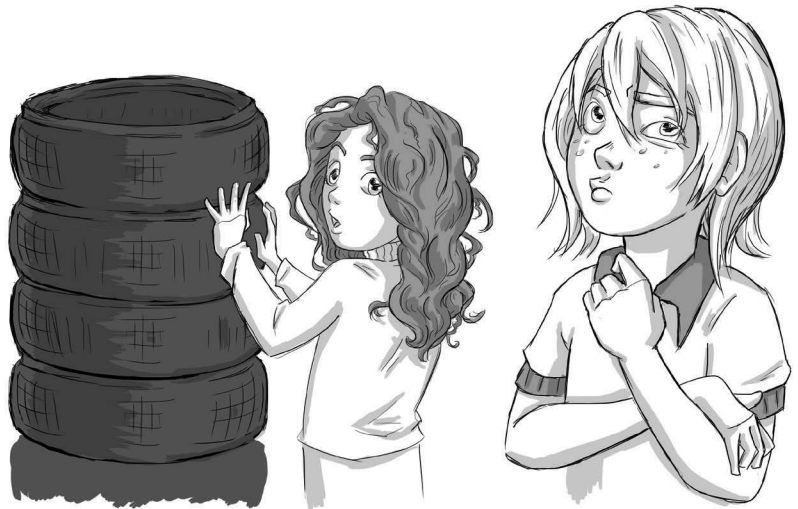
“What’s the question?” Carol asked, hefting the tire onto the growing clubhouse wall.

“My question is:

**WHAT IS IT LIKE TO
BE SOMEBODY ELSE?”**

This met with puzzled silence from the rest of the Stargazers.

At last John shrugged. “How would we ever know? We can’t get out of our own heads and into someone else’s.”



“That’s why it’s a *thought experiment!*” Vida insisted, rolling another tire to Carol.

“So what does the experiment make you think?” Jeanie asked.

“Well, I was imagining that I was Thrash. And I tried to ask myself why I am so angry that I want to throw sticks.”

“I don’t see why you care about Thrash!” Tammy erupted. “He broke the TV!”

“It’s called sympathy,” Vida explained. “And I think it’s the basis of government. If you don’t have sympathy for others, you’ll never have peace. Peace is justice, in my view.”

“I have sympathy for you guys,” Tammy objected, “but I don’t think I can sympathize with an enemy.”

“Remember,” Carol said, “Thrash wanted to be the leader of the Trailblazers instead of you. He said he was older and taller. You told him you had a stronger mind, which is basically saying that you’re smarter.”

“Maybe that’s what made him mad,” Vida agreed, looking over their work on the tire-fort with satisfaction. The walls were rebuilt. “Looks like it’s time for the roof,” she announced. “Can you guys help me with this?” She picked up the edge of a large sheet of metal. “This is really heavy. Everyone is going to have to take an edge.”

“But it’s true that Vida’s smarter than Thrash,” John insisted as he went over to help. “Don’t you think?”

“It doesn’t really matter whether or not it’s true,” Carol argued. “It made him feel bad.”

“But wait a second,” Jeanie interjected. “We were there too, Carol. Vida said she was smarter than us as well.”

“Yeah, and me too,” X added. “But we didn’t get mad.”

“Hey!” Jeanie suddenly dropped her corner of the metal sheet. Everyone groaned under the new weight, and the sheet clattered to the ground. “The more I think about it, the more it makes me mad that you said you were the smartest, Vida!”

X braced himself, thinking that Vida would launch a counter-attack. But she didn't. She smiled and hugged Jeanie.

“I'm sorry I said that,” Vida said. “I see now that it was wrong. But at least it proves my point! We're sympathizing with Thrash! Sympathy is contagious. When you imagine what it's like to be somebody else, you 'catch' that person's feelings—just like catching a cold. You feel the same as the other person. That's what makes enemies friends again.”

“Maybe you should tell Thrash you're sorry,” Carol remarked.

Vida nodded. “But I don't know if he would listen to me.”

“Now's your chance to try,” X announced. “Here come the New Trailblazers.”

