

# PARKER OUTSIDE THE BOX

BY RAY STOEVE



**T**HE MESSENGER COMES FOR ME near the end of fourth period, which is perfect, because I'm already hangry. I gather my stuff and follow her, wondering if I can make this quick and get to lunch early.

"Parker!" Ms. Kerry smiles when I walk into her tiny office.

I nod, sitting in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "My grades are up," I say.

"Yes! Yes, they are. That's not why you're here." She folds her hands. "So. You're back up to Bs and Cs, which is great."

I weave my fingers together, cracking my knuckles.

"But there's one thing left before you're set." She shuffles through some papers and hands one to me. I scan the list: the YMCA, the Humane Society, the zoo. "Your community service hours. You have to complete sixty to graduate, and you have five weeks left."

When I walk in the door that afternoon, Kevin is on the couch playing *Call of Duty*. Eric is watching him, because Mom says he's too young to actually play shooter games. I don't know how seeing it is different from doing it, but whatever.

Kevin and Eric are my stepbrothers. Their dad, David, and my mom met when I was in middle school. My parents had just finalized their divorce, and she was looking around on a dating site. David caught her eye: two young kids, recently widowed, with his own veterinary practice. She thought they'd have a lot to talk about, and she was right. Sometimes people stare at us when we're out in public, because Mom and I are white, and David, Kevin, and Eric are Black. But I just glare back, and people usually have the grace to look away. → Great job to try and fight stereotypes

In my room, I look at the list of organizations. I'm not stoked about this. It was hard enough to get my grades where they were supposed to be. Trying to be a cis girl

will need some vocab pre-lesson

up until last year tanked my will to do anything else. And now this? In five weeks?

"These are just options," Ms. Kerry had said. "Feel free to find your own."

Sure.

Some of the names on the list are familiar, some aren't. One has "Pride" in the name, so it must be gay-related. The Northwest Pride Association Youth4Youth program. Sounds like an unfortunately named dating site for teenagers.

I ask Siri and she pulls up the website on my phone. It's a local mentorship program based in Seattle and the surrounding area. LGBTQ high school students get paired with younger LGBTQ buddies. Like Big Brothers Big Sisters except I wouldn't have to pick a gender box. That's cool. → Does sound cool! How will this benefit / change both ppl involved

Kevin screams the F-word from the living room. Eric's cackle follows. It might not be too bad, hanging out with a kid a few times a week. No worse than my brothers. Especially if all the kid wants to do is shoot hoops and play virtual soldiers.

"I'll do this one," I say, pointing to the mentorship program.

"Wonderful." Ms. Kerry beams at me, and grabs a form from the huge organizer behind her desk. Northwest Pride's logo rainbows across the top.

Name: Parker Johnson

Date of birth: August 10, 2001

Gender:

I've never had to write about this. There's more than two boxes. There's male, female, nonbinary, even a fill in the blank. I've never seen a form with these options before. I check off "nonbinary," and it feels like letting out a breath I've been holding for years.

Ms. Kerry is still smiling at me when I hand back the form, the kind of smile cis people give when they're all excited to witness me being my True Self. "I'll send this over and they'll get in touch with you soon." *Why do you think she's so happy?*

"Cool." I escape the office and head for class. *capitalized?*

I came out as nonbinary at the beginning of last year, but some people (cough adults cough) still act like it was yesterday, like this is something new and adorable.

Or new and confusing. My friends don't give a shit; they switched pronouns without a blink. My family was just glad they didn't have to use a new name. *Do you feel like older generations have more of a hard time with this?*

I'm pretty happy the way I am, but sometimes I think *isn't it* in order. I should do something more. You know, march in a protest, change the way I look. Some people bind, but not me. Not because I don't want to. But binders are too

tight, and too warm, and turn my shoulder muscles into what feels like pincushions for invisible, white-hot needles. So yeah. People see my long hair and my chest and think girl. But everyone who matters just sees me. That's how I want it. I shouldn't have to cut my hair and flatten my chest and shrink to a size six just to be taken seriously. *!!! Glad they don't feel that pressure*

Family dinner night is Friday, the only day Mom doesn't work the evening shift at the hospital. David has Kevin in the kitchen keeping an eye on a three-bean chili, while he shows Eric how to make the regular white bread into garlic bread. Mom is on the couch, feet up, eyes closed.

"How are you doing, honey?" she says when I walk into the room. She always knows it's me, somehow.

"Fine." I grab plates from the cabinet and set them on the table. She opens her eyes and looks at me. "I got an email from that nonprofit."

"The one for your community service? That's good." She smiles. "I'm proud of you for taking care of that. I know it hasn't been easy getting all your requirements in order."

I shrug.

"Jen? You need anything?" David leans on the door.

"I'm okay, sweetie." They smile at each other.

Once dinner is on the table, we chow down. Mom asks me about the mentorship program, and I tell her a little more.

"Do you think they'll pair you with a trans kid?" David asks, gently tapping Eric's elbow so he takes it off the table.

"Maybe." I haven't given it much thought since I turned the form in.

"I bet they will," Mom says. "I bet there's some non-binary ten-year-old out there who would love a buddy like you."

"Yeah, then you wouldn't be bugging us all the time," Kevin says through a mouthful of bread.

"Right, because I love hanging out with twelve-year-old wannabe Marines." I roll my eyes.

"I think it'll be good for you," Mom says. "You can get involved, make a difference in the community."

"I guess." I chug some milk to cool the burn of the chili. Do I want to make a difference? I don't know.

Some of my friends do. They show up for every protest in Seattle, participate in student groups, go to Pride events. But I've never been into that stuff. I had to be someone I wasn't for sixteen years. I just want to relax and be comfortable for a while.

*How do students feel about this? Should folks be more involved in the whole thing? (probably to be so much more educated about it?)*

On Sunday, David drops me off at the volunteer orientation for Northwest Pride. It's in a huge new building

across the street from Cal Anderson Park, down a hallway and through a frosted glass door. Inside, the walls are painted golden yellow, and a smiling young man greets me from the reception desk. He directs me to a conference room, and when I push open the door, twelve people swivel their heads to look at me.

"Parker?" The presenter, a tall woman with a rich, warm voice, consults her clipboard.

"That's me." I find an empty seat at the far end of the table.

"Welcome! Now that we're all here, how about a round of names and pronouns?"

The training is an hour long. Mission statement, history, how the program works, what to expect, ideas for buddy hangouts: She covers it all. I take notes, feeling nervous for the first time. Some of the other volunteers have experience working with kids: they've been babysitters, or had summer jobs as camp counselors. I don't have anything. What am I supposed to say to a kid I've never met? What if my buddy doesn't like the activities I pick? *→ Change can be nerve-wracking, what has been your experience with this?*

And another problem: the program isn't enough to cover my community service hours. We can see our buddies a maximum of twice a week, four hours each. The presenter explains this is the best balance they've found, so the program doesn't cross the line into unpaid childcare.

But that doesn't cover all the hours I need.

After the training, I approach the presenter.

"Hey," I say, reading her nametag. "Alicia. I'm doing this for community service hours." Uh-oh. That sounds bad.

But she's nodding. "Lots of people do."

"Cool," I smile. "So the thing is, even with the program, I still need to do thirty hours."

"Well, you know, we have a lot of other needs here." She grabs a volunteer pamphlet and hands it to me, along with a business card. She's the volunteer coordinator. "If you see something else you'd like to do, feel free to email me."

I nod and head out. The sun is shining outside, filtering through the leaves on the trees surrounding the park. I cross the street and sit on the low wall at the park entrance, looking around while I wait for David. During the orientation, Alicia said we'd get our buddy assignments Monday. I kind of hope I do get a trans kid. If I'd known any trans people when I was little, maybe it would have made a difference for me. Maybe I wouldn't have spent so long trying to get myself to like tight jeans and low-cut shirts. Maybe I would have understood why my skin crawled whenever anyone called me miss, or girl, or she.

I'm not a she. "She" is a basketball clanking off the rim without going in. "They" is the roar of the crowd

when I make a shot. I might be playing on the girls' team, but when I'm on the court, I'm just Parker.

My name echoes from the street. David's there in our ancient station wagon. Once I'm in the car, he raises his eyebrows.

"So. We watching the game tonight?"

"I don't know. Am I gonna have to explain the rules again?" I smirk and he swats his hand in my direction. David never played sports, so he doesn't really understand why I love the Seattle Storm so much, why watching a game gets me so hyped up. But he wants to spend time with me, and he listens while I rant about player stats. It's nice. I don't see my dad much now that he lives in Florida, and he never showed much interest in me or what I like anyway.

So maybe David doesn't get basketball. But he tries. That's enough. *Go David!*

"I can't believe this!" Stella shrieks at her phone screen.

"What happened now?" I ask. Stella is always upset about something, and it's usually political.

"The principal keeps stalling on gender-neutral restrooms," she says, flipping back her curly red hair. The fresh sunburn on her nose stands out against the pale white skin of her cheeks. "We went to see him again last week, with a petition signed by, like, two hundred people." Stella is the president of the Queer Alliance. "He

*Has do organizations like this help to create change? Tackles, tackles*

said he'd change the signs by Friday and make them available to students, but he didn't." She leans over and shows me a photo someone texted her: the single-stall staff bathrooms, still labeled "Men" and "Women." Under that, "Adults Only."

I shrug. "Maybe he just didn't get around to it."

"What? Come on, Parker. We've been talking to him for months now. I thought you of all people would care."

I frown. Stella means well, but she's always saying stuff like that. As if I'm a representative for all non-binary people. I don't like using the girls' restroom all the time, but I'm used to it. It's not the worst thing in the world. And most people think I'm a girl anyway. I don't really feel like I have the right to demand an all-gender bathroom. I'm not the kind of person who needs it most. → *Is it fair to put pressure on people to advocate for change?*

She catches my look and sighs. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

"You did, though."

"Don't be mad. I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated." She glares at the phone. "Washington State prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender identity. And the school district mandated the availability of alternative restrooms to students. He's breaking the law!"

"So call the police." I'm trying to joke, but she turns her glare on me.

"Cops are not our friends," she says.

"I know that. I only suggested it because he's white," I say. "Nothing would happen to him." Soon after their engagement, Mom and David gave me the Talk about police brutality and racism. How my new brothers wouldn't ever have the same experience I did with cops, and how I needed to think twice anytime I thought police might be helpful to our family. I never forgot how it felt to watch David choke up as he talked to me.

"I just don't know what it's going to take," Stella says. "We need all-gender restrooms at this school."

"It'll happen." I nudge her elbow with mine. But she just shakes her head, biting her lip, and stares off down the hallway.

I get the email that night: "Youth4Youth Buddy Assignment," the subject line reads, with rainbow flag emojis on either side. I open it, a sudden burst of nerves making my heart pound.

My buddy is a nine-year-old named Xavier. He's a fan of comics, skateboarding, and lady pop stars. I smile at that last one. I love when kids say f--- it to gender stereotypes. Reading on, I learn more about his family: a single mom who works at Target, and an older sister in high school.

The next line turns my nerves into excitement: *You were matched with Xavier because he specifically requested a trans mentor.* So he must be trans too. Except, a trans boy, because of the pronouns. Or maybe

*Capitalization again. Interesting.*

not. I know a few nonbinary people who use binary pronouns.

Either way, I'm excited now. I imagine pushing him on the swings while he laughs. Him cheering for me from the sidelines at a basketball game. Him asking me for advice on coming out. Kevin and Eric are cool, as siblings go: they respect my pronouns, they make fun of me like they would anyone else, and they don't joke about identifying as an attack helicopter. Kevin even told off one of his friends once. But I know they don't get it. Not that they need to. Still, I wish I had someone as close to me as my family who really understood. Maybe I can be that person for Xavier.

*Parker is signed up to help Xavier but so you think Parker will be just as changed/helped by the experience?*

Now that I have something new to look forward to, the week crawls by. Right after I got my buddy assignment, I emailed Xavier's mom. She got back within an hour, email full of exclamations and smiley faces, and we made a plan to meet up on Saturday. My first buddy hangout has to be observed by a Northwest Pride staff member, so I chose something I thought would make a good impression: the skate park. It's something Xavier likes, it's active, and something I don't know anything about. That means we'll have plenty to talk about. Maybe he can even teach me to skate.

Friday night, I knock on Kevin's doorway. His door is open and he's on his computer, engrossed in some

online fantasy RPG. "Hello. Earth to Kev." He's dead to the world, eyes fixed to the screen, back to me. "Come in, Kev." I cross the room and grab him in a headlock, grinding my fist through his fuzzy Afro down to his skull.

"Get off me!" He flails and I let go, laughing.

"Can I borrow your board tomorrow?"

He swivels, eyebrows raised. "You're going skateboarding? Since when?" I tell him about Xavier and he nods. "So all the times I begged you to take me skating and you said no, and now you want my board?"

"Come on, Kev."

"Five dollars."

"Are you serious?"

He gives me a blank-faced stare. "You wanna roll like me, you gotta pay the fee." He starts beatboxing and I can't help grinning.

"Fine." I dig out the five-dollar bill I brought just in case.

He crows, grabbing it from me, then bounds to his closet, digs around for a minute, and hauls out his skateboard.

"Thanks, bro." I take it from him. He waves me off and turns back to his game.

Saturday dawns warm and sunny. The park is across from the library, with a deep bowl at one end,

surrounded by a flat concrete plaza, curbs and rails of various heights scattered around. A group of older guys sits on the opposite side from me, a few of them zooming in and out of the bowl. A smaller boy grinds loudly down a rail, stumbling off at the end.

I look around. There's a couple moms with strollers, an old man smoking on a bench.

"Parker?" I turn and see a short, curvy woman, a big smile on her face.

"Hi." I lift a hand, but she's already spreading her arms, and suddenly we're hugging.

She steps back, still smiling. "I'm Leanne. Xavier's mom."

"Oh, yeah! Hi. How are you?" I scan behind her, but I don't see any kids.

"Just great. I'm so glad to meet you. We've been talking about you all week." She points at the bowl. "That's my kiddo."

The small boy I'd seen on the rail a minute before is now at the bowl's edge. He tips down and disappears, then sails up the other side and back down again. He's skinny, with olive-brown skin and floppy black hair smashed onto his forehead by a helmet.

She looks up at me as we watch him. "I'm just so excited for him. We were hoping that his mentor would be trans, but honestly I'm just happy for him to have anyone in his life from the gay community."

"Oh." I glance over at her. Maybe Northwest Pride didn't tell her. "I'm, uh. I am trans."

"Really?!" She looks at me again and does that eye-flick cis people do, where they check out my chest and then my face, like they're searching for something: evidence, maybe. "I had no idea."

"I'm nonbinary. I was assigned female at birth. My pronouns are they/them." I haven't had this conversation in a while, and the words are stiff and awkward.

"Oh, great! I've never met a nonbinary person before." She laughs lightly. "Well. He'll be excited."

Xavier rolls to a stop in front of us. "Are you Parker?" "That's me." I extend a fist for him to bump, and he does, gazing up at me from behind his long bangs.

"They're nonbinary, sweetie," Leanne says.

"Cool." Xavier doesn't smile. "Do you skate?"

I heft Kevin's board in one hand. "I was hoping you could teach me."

"Well, you're wearing the wrong shoes." He points at my Nikes.

"You used to skate in sneakers," Leanne says.

He scans me up and down, taking in my bright white basketball shorts, my baggy Seattle Storm T-shirt with its rolled-up sleeves, my black snapback, and my hair, tied in a low pony.

"How come you have long hair?" he asks.

"I like it."

"Change  
This 'change'  
for Parker may  
have happened  
a while ago but  
in what ways do  
they have to experience  
it over and over?"

He nods. "Come on." Dropping his board, he zooms back toward the bowl. I look at Leanne and she nods.

"I'll just be over there," she says, pointing to a bench. I look and see Alicia, who waves at me.

When I join Xavier, he's balancing on the side edge of his board, the other edge on the sidewalk, trying to flip it.

"Okay. First we have to figure out whether you're goofy or not." He points at my feet.

I know that term. Even though Kevin acts like I never did anything for him, I definitely took him to the skate park a few times back in the day. I set my right foot on the board.

"You are. That's cool. Most people aren't." He still looks so serious. Does this kid ever smile?

"Okay, so push off like this." He knocks his board over onto its wheels, sets his left foot on it, and pushes off with the right.

Doesn't seem that hard. I imitate him, pushing a few times before swinging my back foot onto the board like I've seen Kevin do.

"I did it!" I spread my arms wide and he circles out and around, looking over at me.

"You have to bend your knees more."

I obey, and start curving toward the benches, losing speed.

"Turn!" he calls out.

How do I turn? The benches are feet away. I don't know how to stop.

Crack! My shins hit wood and I land on my <sup>butt</sup> on the concrete as the board slides under the bench. I sit there, massaging my legs.

Xavier rolls up. "You should have turned."

I close my eyes and open them. "Yep, I got that." "Sorry."

"Nah. It's fine. Let's go again." I stand up slowly and hobble to my board.

We spend the afternoon skating. I manage to master turning on my board after only five more falls, earning a knee scrape that makes Xavier suck in his breath. Eventually, we take a break, sitting on the bench and watching a new group of skaters take over the bowl. There's even a few girls skating — people I assume are girls, anyway. I know from experience that looks don't always equal gender.

"So your mom mentioned you wanted a trans mentor," I say, because it's the first thing that comes to mind.

He nods. "Can I ask what bathroom you use?"

I look down at him. He's watching the skaters, skinny shoulders drowning in a bright red Fox Racing shirt. "I use the girls' room," I say.

He wrinkles his nose. "Why?"

"Well, I'm nonbinary. The men's room isn't comfortable either. And I was socialized as a girl, so I'm just used to it." He nods. I lean back against the bench, enjoying the hot sun on my skin. "How about you?"

"I don't."

"Don't use the girls'?"

"I don't use the bathroom at school. I wait until I get home." He fiddles with his board, running his finger-nail across the glittery black surface.

"Wow. I'm sorry."

He shrugs. "I don't want to be alone in there. The guys at school are mean. They still call me my old name."

I frown. "That's dumb. I think your name is really cool."

"Thanks. Do you like X-Men?"

I blink, wondering where he's going with this for a minute, and then I connect the dots. He named himself after Professor X. The leader of the mutants. I grin. This kid has a keen sense of irony. *super cool*

"Yeah," I say. "I've only seen the movies, though."

"What?!" He turns to me, mouth open, the biggest display of emotion I've seen all day. "That's ridiculous! I'll bring you some comics next time."

I laugh. "Sounds good."

"Xavier, honey. Time to go." Leanne leans on the back of the bench. Alicia is nowhere in sight. "She had to go," Leanne adds as I look around. "But she said to tell you 'great job.'"


We make a plan for Thursday, and they head out of the park, toward a battered Subaru. I drop my board, set my right foot down, and skate toward the bus stop.

School drags on toward the end of the year, but for once, I don't mind. Let time slow down. Maybe then I can complete community service on time. Between my hangouts with Xavier every week, and two hours every evening stuffing envelopes at the Northwest Pride office, I figure I can cover it. Barely. *→ Do you have to be fully + completely invested to make change happen?*

By the third-to-last week of school, I'm struggling. Volunteering means I stay up late to finish homework. And then I'm in class, like today, resting my chin on my cupped hands so my fingers can hold up my eyelids without anyone noticing.

I excuse myself for the bathroom. Maybe a walk will wake me up.

The hallways are empty, sun pooling on the blue-and-white linoleum. The familiar hum of irritation whirs to life in my brain as I approach the bathroom doors. At the door to the girls', I stop. Usually I'd just push right through the doors, but today I'm angry. Why do I have to choose? Cis people seem to think a sign on a door will keep them safe, but I'm not safer in a gendered bathroom. I've seen the looks cis women give me when they think I'm a teenage boy. And good luck to me trying to use a men's bathroom.

Deep breath. I walk in and head for a stall. I think of Xavier, holding his pee all day just to avoid making the choice: bury his real self five minutes at a time and risk ridicule or worse, or embrace his real self and risk ridicule or worse. Which is safer? Which is better? Which one might get you a world of hurt, and which one definitely will? 

There's no way to know.

At lunch, I find Stella in the library with some of our other friends. They're working on posters. I read one over her shoulder: #PEEQUALITY FOR ALL, in bright orange marker.

"I hate that slogan," Tristan says, rolling his eyes. "It sounds like they're talking about the quality of my urine, not my bathroom rights."

I snicker.

"Come on, guys," Stella says. "This is serious."

Tristan catches my eye and grins. "You're such a good ally, Stel, we should make you an Honorary Trans."

She rolls her eyes. I pull up an empty chair next to Lexie, who smiles at me from behind a curtain of blond hair before returning to the elaborate drawing of an anime girl on her poster.

Stella shoves poster paper and markers at me. "I know you don't want to be part of a protest, but do you want to make signs?"

I shrug. "Why not?"

She raises her eyebrows. I pretend not to notice, selecting a dark blue marker from the pile. "So I'm guessing no gender-neutral restrooms yet."

"Nope. So the Queer Alliance is holding a sit-in in the principal's office next week." Stella smiles.

"What time?"

She tilts her head. "We're going in at lunch, when he's gone. Why?"

"Just curious."

"Wait. Are you going to come?"

I keep my eyes fixed on my poster and shrug again. She snorts, and I feel the irritation rise. She thinks she knows me, but she doesn't. She can hold protests all she wants, but she'll never understand what it feels like to be trans in a world that wants to erase you.

On Sunday, I go over to Xavier's house. It's small and beige, the yard surrounded by a chain-link fence. When I knock on the door, Leanne lets me in.

"Parker! The new issue is here!" Xavier appears from a room down the short hallway to the back of the house. He's got an X-Men comic in one hand. "You have to catch up."

"Wanna read outside?"

He nods.

The backyard is in full sun, except for a gnarled apple tree casting a circle of shade onto the yellowed grass.

We spread a blanket and he plops down, instantly lost in the comic. I pick the next one from the stack of issues he brought out for me and start reading.

I've never been much for comics, but the X-Men are fun. My favorite is Mystique, who can shape-shift into anything she wants. I wish I could do that.

We read for a long time, until the shadows move and the sun starts creeping onto our blanket. Xavier runs inside and comes out with chips and juice.

"How's school?" I ask.

"Almost over."

I choke on my juice from laughing, and he watches me, confused. "What's so funny?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. You're right. It is."

"Mom's transferring me to a new school next year," he says. "This one has trans kids like me."

"That's great." I high-five him. "And hopefully no a--holes. I mean, jerks."

"You can say that word," he says, rolling his eyes. "I've heard it before."

"Are you excited?"

He shrugs. "I just hope I can use the bathroom there."

"My friends are trying to get gender-neutral restrooms at our school right now," I say. "What do you think of that?"

He pops a chip in his mouth, picking at the grass.

"That's cool. I don't want to use a gender-neutral restroom, though. I want to use the boys' bathroom."

"It's a good start, though. And then I won't have to pick."

"Oh, yeah!" He nods. "I forgot."

The breeze blows around us, warm and soft. I sip my juice. Should we do something else? Is he getting bored?

"Want to go play basketball at the park?" he asks.

I grin. "Only if you're ready to lose."

For the first time, a smile sneaks onto his face.

*How is Xavier's experience helping Parker push for change? Are people more motivated to make change for themselves or for others?*

As the day of the sit-in approaches, I'm nervous. For the first time in my life, I want to join a protest, but I don't know what to expect. Logically, I know nothing bad will happen. We're just occupying the principal's office. At most, I'll get a detention, maybe a suspension. And I'm white. I won't face consequences as harsh as some other kids might.

But speaking up means giving up my anonymity. I won't be just Parker, that nonbinary kid who no one remembers is nonbinary. I'll be Parker, that nonbinary kid who was at the protest. Who wants gender-neutral restrooms. Who wants to change the way things are done at school. What happens once your name and face are out there? What happens when the people who don't want things to change know who you are?

!!!

At lunch, I head for the gathering spot: the T where the front hallway meets the hallway to the main office. A group of kids are already there, signs rolled up at their sides, talking in a low buzz. I slip in beside Tristan. He gives me a head nod and a fist bump.

We move toward the office at some invisible signal. Stella's in the front, leading us in, ignoring the secretary's raised voice, pushing through the swinging door into the back hallway toward the principal's office. I've never been back here before, and my heart is pounding, but I'm surrounded by people. Too late to back out now.

The office is empty and we crowd in, covering the floor, a few kids perching in the chairs. Stella stands behind the principal's desk.

"What's going on?" the secretary asks. "You can't be back here."

"This is a protest," Stella says. "Mr. Carter promised he would change the staff restrooms into gender-neutral restrooms, and he hasn't followed through. We aren't leaving until he does."

"Absolutely not." The secretary shakes her head. "You can come back and petition him in a small group."

"We already did that," Tristan says beside me.

The secretary sputters, glaring first at him, then at me. "I'm calling Mr. Carter."

"Good!" Stella says. "You do that."

She starts chanting, and the other kids follow suit. Tristan claps along, but doesn't chant. I just watch.

The principal appears a few minutes later, the top of his bald head almost brushing the ceiling outside the door. The chanting subsides.

"Well, it's not every day you can say you've been protested," he says with a chuckle. No one laughs.

"We're not leaving until you change the bathrooms like you promised," Stella says.

He smiles. "I know it's slow, but I'm working on it. Don't worry."

"How hard is it to change some signs?" another boy pipes up from the back wall.

"Here, we printed some up." Stella waves a stack of papers with the All-Gender Restroom logo on them. "The custodian said he could take down the other signs and put these up as soon as you say the word."

Mr. Carter's face darkens from white to ruddy, lips pressed together. "It's not that simple."

"It is that simple." Stella's on her soapbox. I want to tell Mr. Carter to give in now, while he still has his dignity.

"By refusing to change the signs, you are landing on the wrong side of history. Seattle mandated all-gender restroom signage on public single-stall restrooms almost three years ago. And you're breaking our state's anti-discrimination law, which protects transgender students and their bathroom access. There are students at this

school who every day feel the consequences of that decision. Kids who don't feel safe in gendered restrooms. Kids who have to choose between one or the other."

"She took the words right out of my mouth," Tristan mutters in my ear. It's a joke, but neither of us is laughing. I know Stella wants to help, but watching her stand there and talk when I'm right here, Tristan is right here, Lexie is right here, actually experiencing the things she's using for her moment of defiance? Anger rushes through my body in a wave of heat. *→ Is it right to speak up for change that impacts a part of you?*

"Parker deals with that every day!" *glory you aren't a part of it.*

Huh? I surface through the frustration and see her, hand extended to me, and then Mr. Carter, turning his stare in my direction. I open my mouth, but Stella keeps right on talking. I try to stay focused on what's happening, try to tell myself she means well, she's helping, but a tide of anger rises in my chest.

Mr. Carter holds up his hands. "All right, Ms. McMahon. I've heard enough." He smiles, but it's forced this time. The counselors and the office staff are gathered behind him now, and I spot Ms. Kerry over his shoulder. He looks back at them, then reaches for the phone on the wall, dialing a number.

The room is silent. He's probably calling security, and we're all going to be written up.

"John? Yes. Hello. Could you change those signs we

discussed?" He nods around at the room, and everyone's mouths are opening, people turning to look at each other. "Wonderful. No, that won't be necessary. I've got some printouts on hand."

He hangs up the phone and spreads his hands. "Now, may I have my office back?"

We spill out into the hall, everyone chattering at once, shrieking and hugging. Stella grabs my arm.

"You came!" she says. "I can't believe it worked! I can't believe I stood up to him like that!"

"Yep." I nod.

"What's wrong?" We face each other, the group carying on down the hall without us. "Aren't you happy about this?"

I sigh. "Yes."

"So?" She's got that look on her face, the one I know means she won't let this go until I say something.

"You kind of . . . took over."

"I'm the president of the Queer Alliance." She stands, hands on hips, waiting.

"But you're not trans."

"No one else was speaking up."

"Because you didn't give them a chance."

She scoffs. "Right, because you've been so ready to put yourself out there."

"You used my name!" My voice comes out louder than

I intended, and she steps back. "You used me as an example. Like I'm just some stand-in for all the poor, oppressed trans kids at school. You pointed me out by name. Carter looked right at me. You never asked me if I wanted to be put on the spot. You just did it. Like you just do everything. Did you ever ask Tristan if he wanted to speak instead of you? Or Lexie?"

Her mouth is open, but she doesn't say anything. She just stares at me, eyes filling with tears, face bright red. The bell rings and she turns abruptly, marching away from me through the oncoming crowd. I hate that I feel guilty for yelling at her when I know everything I said was true. But I've never said anything to her before. Deep down, I felt like she wouldn't be able to hear it. And it looks like I was right.

Stella and I don't speak for the rest of the week. When Mom gets home Friday afternoon, I'm sprawled on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

"You look as tired as I feel," she says, dropping her purse on the table. Her scrubs today are bright purple. I shrug. She makes like she's going to sit on my outstretched legs and I swing them up out of her way, then set them on her lap.

"What are the headlines for the weekend?" she asks.

"Teen tells off friend who deserves it, gets put in friend jail for life," I say.

"Stella finally went too far, huh?"

I lay out the story and she shakes her head. "I admire her passion, but she needs to learn not everything is about her."

"So I didn't fix it up? Mess up. Sorry."

She waves her hand. "Maybe the raised voice was a bit much. But if it was me, I probably would have yelled too."

"I just don't know what to do now." I cross my arms. "I didn't do anything wrong, but how do I get her to talk to me again without apologizing?"

"You don't think she'll come around?" Mom watches me. I make a face. "Well. I would be surprised if ten years of friendship could go down the drain that fast. Whatever happens, I'm proud of you. Sounds like you took a stand in multiple ways this week."

I smile. I've used the gender-neutral restrooms every day since the protest, and every time I feel lighter. When I'm alone in those little rooms, washing my hands, looking in the mirror, I think about Xavier. How maybe he'll come to our high school one day and he won't have to worry. How even if people are *friends* to him about the boys' bathroom, he'll still have an option. Thinking about it makes me feel like I'm part of history, like I made a difference in some way, pushed back against the bull—. I *about making* understand why Stella is so passionate about social change. Even if she does need to learn when to step back.

*what is an example of a time you felt good about making a change?*

"Parker! Parker!" I spot Xavier as soon as I get to the skate park that weekend. He zooms toward me, ollying over a curb.

"Nice!" I yell back. I drop Kevin's board and push off toward him.

"Are you ready to learn to jump today?" he asks as we circle. I pull a face. "Come on! You promised."

"I'm scared!" I exaggerate a grimace, mouth wide like a carved pumpkin.

He rolls his eyes, smiling. "You'll be fine."

"Okay, okay. Taskmaster." I follow him over to an empty section of the plaza.

"Maybe this summer, you can actually go in the bowl," he says.

This summer. I'll be graduated. Hopefully. Which means no more community service. I've been so caught up that I haven't even thought about what happens with Xavier and me once school is over.

"Maybe," I say, because the silence is stretching too long.

He tilts his head.

I'm balancing on my board, but it feels like I'm on the edge of a cliff. "I might not be volunteering this summer."

"What? Why?" His voice is shrill.

I explain about my community service hours. When I finish, his face is blank.

"Xavier?"

He zips away from me.

He's fast, but I have the hang of skating now, and I follow him around the park, until he sits on a bench, arms crossed. He doesn't look at me when I sit down next to him.

"Are you upset with me?" I ask. Even though I know he is. There's a horrible twisting feeling in my stomach. I wish I'd thought about this sooner, wish I'd figured out what I want after I graduate.

"Leave me alone." He turns away from me.

I look around. His mom sits on the other side of the park, talking on her phone. I don't know what to do.

"I might keep volunteering," I say. "I don't know yet."

"Why would you? You only needed to graduate."

The words sting, but he's right. I can't think of anything to say.

He stands up, not looking at me. "I want to go home."

"Okay."

I watch him trudge across the park to Leanne. She pauses in her conversation as he talks to her, then looks up at me, tilting her head in a question, the same way Xavier does. I turn up my hands and she shrugs, waving to me as they walk toward the car. Xavier doesn't look back.

The last week of school rolls in. I've been volunteering at Northwest Pride on weekends too. Those shifts, plus

after school, plus my weekly four-hour hangouts with Xavier, will be enough. I hope.

Every time I think of Xavier, I feel like the world's worst person. I emailed his mom to explain what happened, and she understood, but it didn't feel like enough.

I'm still so tied up in guilt that I don't even notice the messenger come in to fourth period on Wednesday.

The instant I hear my name, I know what's happening.

When I walk into Ms. Kerry's office, she doesn't look up, fixed on whatever she's typing. A few excruciating minutes later, she lifts her head. "Parker. Good to see you. Still protesting?"

I smile. "There's a lot of stuff left to change."

She smiles back. "Speaking of change." Her fingers tap the keys on her laptop and she spins it toward me. At first, I'm not sure what I'm looking for, but then I see it: the number under the community service hours category.

Sixty-two.

I did it.

I made it.

"I'm graduating?" I look up at her, and she nods.

"Good work," she says.

I let out a whoop and pump my fist, surprising a laugh out of her.

"I hope you enjoyed your community service," she says. "Alicia had wonderful things to say about you."

"I did," I say. "I really did." Xavier and I went to the water park for one of our hangouts, screaming our way down the slides. I'd never had that much fun swimming before. Usually I'm too in my head about all the ways I wish my body was different. But not that time.

My heart hurts when I think of Xavier. He's the reason I'm graduating. His face flashes in my mind, the way the playful light in his eyes vanished when he found out why I was volunteering. I want to see him, want to apologize.

When the bell rings, I head for the usual spot, making it all the way down the hall before I spot Stella sitting there and stop.

She still isn't talking to me. I start to turn, but she looks up and we lock eyes.

There's a long moment of what would be silence, if the halls weren't full of yelling kids, and then she stands up.

"Hey," she says.

I raise my hand in greeting.

"Are you still mad at me?" she asks, so quietly I have to step closer to hear her.

I think for a minute as she watches me. "Not exactly." Her face starts to fall. "I mean, what you did was pretty frustrating. I know how passionate you are, but I just wish you would let other people take the lead sometimes. It's not all about you."

Her face is turning red again, her eyes glassy. This is it. I've really done it this time.

But then she nods. "I know," she says, voice small and watery. "I'm sorry."

I nod. We stand there. I don't know what to do next, and she still looks like she's going to cry. So I change the subject.

"I'm graduating after all," I say.

Her eyebrows jump up to her hairline. "No way." She covers her mouth. "Oh ~~she~~ I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

I laugh. "It's all good. I didn't think I was going to either."

She smiles, and we sit down and start talking.

Graduation passes in a whirl of gowns and flashing cameras, Mom and David waving from the stands. The weekend after, I wake up expecting to feel happy, but I don't.

I keep thinking about Xavier. He's not just a buddy to me. He's a third brother. My trans little brother. I think about us skating, him bossing me around, the questions he asks all casual, like they don't really mean anything, but I know they do. They're the questions I wish I'd been able to ask someone at his age.

I send off an email to Leanne, not knowing if it will matter, but knowing I have to try. If I'm going to help

make the world a better place, I have to own my ~~pages~~ ups, not just ride the protest wave.

*He's still pretty mopey, Leanne writes back. But he didn't say no to a meet-up. The usual place and time?*

The next day is Sunday, and I take the familiar bus ride, board in hand. I'm nervous, stomach surging and rolling.

The park is busy, but I see them right away. Leanne ruffles Xavier's hair as I approach and kneel down so we're almost eye to eye.

"I'm still mad at you," he blurts out before I can say anything.

"That's okay. I'd be mad too if I were you," I say.

His small, dark eyebrows rise.

I take a deep breath. "Xavier. I'm not going to stop being your buddy."

He's silent, fiddling with his own board. If he brought it, that must be a good sign.

"Do you believe me?" I ask.

"Why would you if you don't have to?" He stares at the park, jaw clenched, and suddenly I feel like I'm going to cry.

"Because I like you, kid."

"I'm not a kid," he says, but he half turns his head toward me.