



# ONE

Libby Deaton and May Harper invented Princess X in fifth grade, when Libby's leg was in a cast, and May had a doctor's note saying she couldn't run around the track anymore because her asthma would totally kill her.

Their PE teacher sent them into exile on the little-kids playground — where the kindergarten teacher sat in the shade, reading a romance novel with a mostly naked man on the cover. A crowd of nervous six-year-olds watched the newcomers from behind the swing set, big-eyed, silent, and ready to bolt. For all the little kids knew, fifth graders were capable of anything.

But Libby and May just sat off to the side, against the brick wall, their legs stretched out across the asphalt. They had nothing to do. Nowhere to go. No one to talk to but each other, and it wasn't like they were friends or anything. Libby had changed schools after her parents bought a new house, and May had just moved to Seattle from Atlanta. They barely knew each other's names.

Still, there was solidarity in boredom, and sidewalk chalk lay all over the four-square court that no one was using right that minute. May kicked a piece that some tiny Picasso had ditched, and then crushed it with the heel of her shoe. The cement turned a satisfying cherry red, like the pavement was bleeding. She leaned her leg toward a blue piece, ready to smash it into dust as well — but Libby scooted forward, leveraging herself along with that cast-heavy leg.

“Hang on,” she said. “This might be cool.”

She gathered the remaining candy-colored chunks, lining up the pieces according to color until she had a rainbow, more or less. When

she was satisfied, she called over to the little kids: “Hey, do you guys want to watch me draw?”

The kindergartners exchanged wary glances.

“Come on,” Libby pressed. “I’ll draw anything you want. I’m kind of good at it.”

Curious, May leaned forward. May couldn’t draw for squat, but she liked watching other people be good at things.

Slowly, the kindergartners emerged from their hiding places. One particularly bold child shouted, “Draw a dog!”

Libby obliged, producing a green dog with a yellow collar and big blue eyes. The kindergarten girl adjusted her glasses and stood on tip-toes, squinting to see all the way over to the drawing. She nodded and looked back at her classmates. “It’s a good dog,” she declared.

And in five seconds flat, a mob of demanding munchkins descended on Libby and May, each one yelling a request.

“Draw a cat!”

“A boat!”

“A horse!”

“Do a haunted house!” urged a curly-haired kid with untied shoelaces.

Libby grinned. “A haunted house . . . I like that one, yeah. May, give me some purple, would you?”

May paused, not because she objected to purple but because she was a little surprised. It was the first time anyone except her teacher had said her name at school. Finally, she replied, “Yeah, sure,” even though it was hard to say “sure” without her Georgia accent coming through.

She handed over the chalk and watched as Libby spent the next few minutes drawing something right out of a scary movie — except it was sort of cute instead of frightening. The house’s shape was cartoony, and behind the broken windows, all the ghosts were smiling.

A boy in a Mariners baseball shirt stomped up to the finished drawing and assessed it with a critical eye. “Now you have to draw a princess who lives there!”

“A princess who lives in the haunted house. Got it.” Libby reached for the yellow, pink, and red nubs of chalk. Soon, a figure took shape — a blue-haired girl in a puff-sleeved princess dress, wearing a big gold crown and red sneakers.

May was transfixed. She’d never seen anybody draw anything half so good, at least not since that time at Six Flags, when a guy at a booth drew her picture for ten bucks. When Libby was finished, the little boy in the baseball shirt said the princess was awesome, and everyone agreed. Especially May.

But then the boy said, “Wait, it’s not done. You forgot her wand. Give her a magic wand.”

May shook her head. “Nah, Libby,” she said, forgetting her accent for once. “Don’t give her a wand. Anyone can be awesome with magic. You should give her something cool instead.”

“Something cool, okay. Like . . . what?”

“Ooh!” she exclaimed. “Give her a sword!”

“A sword! Yeah . . .” Libby took the purple chalk and swept it along the concrete. “A sword takes *skill*.” When she was done, she put the chalk down and wiped her hands on her pants. “How about that?”

“The sword looks kind of weird . . . ?” May said. She had forgotten about the kindergartners too.

“It’s a katana sword. Like the kind ninjas use. They’re basically the best swords ever.”

“Oh yeah, right,” May said, pretending she knew all about ninjas. “You can really mess somebody up with one of *those*.”

“Now we just have to give her a name. . . .” Libby looked up. “May? You got any ideas?”

May pondered the question. She needed a good answer. She might have a new friend in the works, and she didn’t want to blow it.

“If she’s got a sword, she’s probably on a mission,” she said. “Maybe she’s a spy, or a soldier, or like you said — she could be a ninja. She could have a code name.” It couldn’t be too complicated. It should be easy to remember, and quick off the tongue. “We could call her . . . Princess X.”

“Why X?” Libby asked.

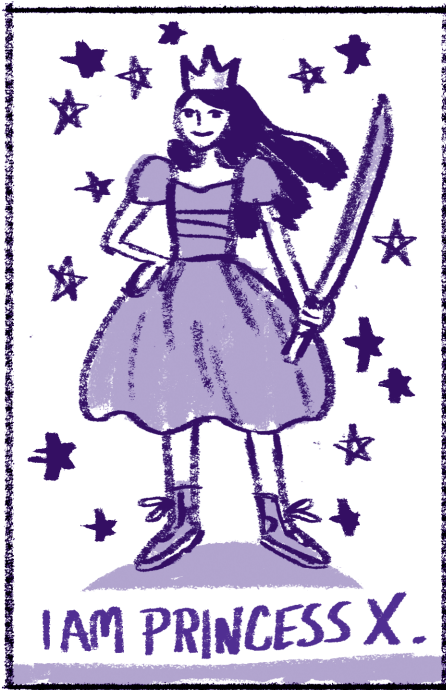
“Because X is the most mysterious letter,” May told her. “And things with X’s in them are usually pretty cool.” She hoped she was right, and it was cool enough.

Libby considered this, and then nodded. “Okay. That works for me!”

May exhaled and smiled. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I *do* like it,” Libby replied as she added the final touches. The glimmer on the princess’s crown. The logo on her Chucks. “It’ll work just fine. So here she is — I give you: Princess X!”







# I RULE A KINGDOM CALLED SILVERDALE ALL BY MYSELF

THE PAINTED DESERT

RIVER PARK FARMS

CAPITAL TOWN

CLOUDLAND MOUNTAINS

SWAMP OF MEMORIES

MY HOUSE

