

I Am Princess X

By Cherie Priest

She was on her way back from the University District, where she'd been camping out in a park with her notebook- plotting a novel she hadn't told anyone about, and waiting for her dad to notice she was gone. Her dad worked a lot, but sometimes he did it from home, not his office downtown. Even when he was home, it usually took him a few hours to look up and see that she wasn't there anymore. They got along all right, but that was mostly because they didn't spend much time together. May thought maybe she reminded him of her mother. She didn't take it too personally.

Anyway, she had a key to the apartment, and she came and went as she chose, to and from the thrift stores, bubble tea shops, and coffee houses, where she still got hot chocolate instead of coffee. Her memories of Libby still stung sometimes, but she hung on to them.

She might as well. The whole city was haunted by her.

So the sticker on the very last building before Olive Street shouldn't have caught her eye at all. It was vinyl, and cheap. The edge was starting to peel. The colors were a little faded. It was round with a black border.

But within this border was the outline of a girl with shiny blue hair. She wore a pink puff-sleeved dress, a tall gold crown, and red Chucks. In her left hand, she held a purple sword shaped liked a katana.

All May could do was stand there staring at the sticker so hard that she couldn't see anything else. Her breath caught in her throat

and she tried to choke it back down, but it stuck there like a big wad of gum. She tried to cough, and that worked a little better- except then she was crying: that dry-heaving cry where nothing comes out.

It didn't make any sense. It wasn't possible.

She reached out and touched the sticker anyway, barely believing it was real. It couldn't be, could it? The hem of a pink dress. The fire engine-red shoes. The hand with a sword. Yes, it was *definitely* Princess X.

She kept staring at the vinyl sticker like maybe it'd pop to life and tell her none of it was ever true. Not the bridge. Not the car. Not the water. Not Libby's closed casket and her empty house, with an empty room, and an empty closet where boxes of Princess X memorabilia used to be.

Maybe none of it *was* true. Or at least not the most important thing.

Maybe Libby was alive.