

Cinders

METTE BACH

When Ash finds love will she discover the courage to be herself?

Seventeen-year-old Ash has been living with her mother in her mother's boyfriend's house, along with his daughter Mimi and son Noah. When Ash's mother dies, Ash stays so she can attend a high school with a top coding program. But her stepsiblings take advantage of Ash's precarious living situation, with Mimi posting embarrassing pictures of Ash online and Noah making her do his homework. Ash's only solace is the social media app she has developed to support people who are being bullied online.

Using the handle Cinders, Ash starts chatting with a girl who calls herself Charming. They become close, without ever meeting in person. Charming helps Ash see her own strength in not letting her situation cause her to be bitter, but instead using it to reach out to help others. For the first time since her mother died, Ash feels like someone sees that she is special and is there for her. But what will happen when they finally meet?

METTE BACH was born in Denmark and raised in Delta, BC. She is the author of Lorimer's teen novels *Femme*, *Killer Drop* (named a Best Book for Kids and Teens), and the Real Love books *Love is Love* and *You're You*. Mette works for Family Services of Greater Vancouver running a meal program for homeless and at-risk youth. She lives in Vancouver.




Real Love

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*For Billeh Nickerson for being the closest thing to
a Fairy Godmother I've ever had.*

PROLOGUE

Phoenix

ASH REMEMBERED THE WORDS of her mother. “The phoenix is living flame. Once it burns down to embers, it will rise again and be reborn. Whenever your life seems to turn to ashes, it’s really a new start. That’s why I named you Ashley. That’s where your name comes from.”

Ash’s birth was what some people would have called an accident. Ash’s mom liked to call it the greatest miracle of her life. When her mom met Ted, who would become Ash’s stepfather, she told him that

her daughter was more important than any man in her life. She used to tell Ash that no romantic love could hold a candle to the love between a mother and child.

Ash and her mom talked about everything from myths to hairstyles, from making art to making muffins. They watched Oprah together and danced to music videos together. They were so close, they seemed to share one life instead of two. So now that her mom was gone, Ash was torn up inside. A part of her had died right alongside her mom. Her mom might have been the one who was cremated, but Ash, the part of her still living and breathing, felt like the pile of ashes. The ashes from which she had to rise again.

01 Once Upon a Time

ASH'S ARMS WERE HEAVY with garbage. She carried the huge bag out to the bin behind the big house. How had the family managed to create so much waste in just one week? She knew it was mostly the take-out containers and leftovers from her mother's funeral. Somehow, that made it even heavier.

Ash's stepsister, Mimi, aimed her phone at Ash. *Not this again*, thought Ash. It had been going on for months, Mimi snapping photos of Ash holding garbage,

taking out garbage. At first, it was at school where Ash worked in the cafeteria. It started as a way for Mimi to crack up her friends. But soon Mimi found that posting the pictures online could make her Mean Queen of social media. She added pics of Ash doing chores around the house where Ash and her mother lived with Mimi's father, Ted, and brother, Noah. Mimi documented all Ash's garbage disposal and dubbed her Garbage Girl. All of it for the Instagram account Mimi used to ridicule people at their school. It was the exact reverse of Humans of New York. They called it Dorks of North Delta. Ash had no time for it. She sighed and glared at Mimi.

“Really, Mimi? The garbage from my mom’s funeral?” she said. She tossed the heavy black bag into the bin. “Really?”

Mimi just laughed.

“You’re not hurting me, you know,” Ash said. “But I worry about you. This isn’t exactly your best self.”

Even in the depth of her own sorrow, Ash tried to feel sorry for Mimi. It wasn’t that she loved Mimi — she

absolutely didn't. But she was haunted by something her mom had said. Her mom told Ash to be kind to people who didn't know how to be kind themselves.

Mimi rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"Whatever indeed."

Ash was the same age as Mimi and her twin brother, Noah. But Ash had always been too busy to be as immature as her stepsiblings. It was easier for Ash to accept they lived on a different planet from hers and to just stay out of their way.

After her chores were done, Ash sat by the fireplace. She could see herself in the highly polished metal. She looked sad and tired. While she read a book on computer programming languages, Mimi came and snapped another shot of her. Ash would see it later that day, posted to Mimi's Instagram account with the caption, *Poor little orphan girl*.

Mimi and Noah each had a huge bedroom with a bathroom. Ash stayed in the guest bedroom, which was still used mostly for storage. A year after she and her mom had moved in, the room was still full of boxes. Ted

had told her to make herself at home. But it didn't feel like home. Home was where she and her mom lived until her mom's cancer got so bad that they couldn't live on their own. Ted proposed to Ash's mom as a final romantic gesture after years of the on-again-off-again thing they had. So now Ash was left here with these kids who were supposed to be her family. Kids who didn't like Ash.



The morning that Ash was heading back to school after her mom's death, she found Noah in the kitchen. He was eating a prepared meal from Choices Market. Ash wasn't a guest in the house anymore. But she didn't feel right opening cupboards to look for cereal. Noah ignored her just standing there as he sat on the tall stool by the counter and downed his meal.

No way was Ash opening the fridge. After listening to Noah chew for what seemed like an hour, she noticed an apple in the fruit basket on the counter. It

looked like it was for decoration. She didn't care. She had to eat something. So she took it.

Ted came downstairs. He nodded his head in Ash's direction and said to Noah, "You're driving her to school."

Ash wished he hadn't done that. It was her first day back after a week of grief leave. She wanted to ease back to her old life in her own way by taking the bus. But now Noah had to look at her. Ash and Noah lived their lives across a divide. Aside from their parents being connected, they had nothing in common.

Noah grunted in protest. It was clear he didn't want her riding with him any more than she did. "I have to pick up Sam, too. And I'm already giving Mimi a ride."

"So?" Ted said. "You have four seats in your car."

"Like a taxi," Noah huffed. He hopped off the chair and left the kitchen. Just before he was out of view, he looked back at Ash. "Be at the front door at quarter past eight."

Ash nodded.

This wasn't her life. It couldn't be. She would make it work because she had to. But she would not kid herself about them ever being a family. She knew Noah from the last two years of coding class. While Ash was busy trying to build an app, Noah was at the back of the room, shooting his mouth off about his car. The very car she'd now have to sit in.

Ash stood by the front door, with her shoes laced up. She thought about how her mom taught her to tie her shoes when she was little. When she thought of all the things her mom wasn't there to teach her now, she burst into tears. Her mom had been more like a sister to her. People had said they looked alike. They had slept in bunk beds in the old apartment. Ash wondered how she could deal with losing both her mother and her best friend.

Ted put his arm around Ash. She felt she barely knew him and she knew her mom didn't love him, not for real. But she let him hold her. She buried her face in Ted's chest and sobbed into his shirt.

"Where's she going to go now?" Noah asked.

“Now that her mom . . .”

“Nowhere,” Ted said.

“She’s staying here?”

“She’s Mary’s daughter. We can’t very well let her be homeless, can we?”

Noah shrugged. “Don’t see why not.”

They talked like she wasn’t even there, which made Ash cry all the more. She wished that she wasn’t there. She wished she wasn’t alive at all. Everything was awful.

“There’s only a few months of school left,” Ash managed to say. “I’ll be out of here by June.”