

Cinders and Sparks

MAGIC AT MIDNIGHT



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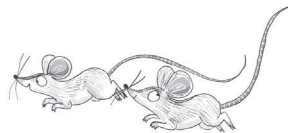
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For Karrahan, Edie and Ayse,
who are already magic





‘A long time ago, in a kingdom far, far away, there lived a girl. And, even though the girl was humble and poor, she was as kind as she was beautiful and, whenever she passed by, all the townsfolk would say she was—’

‘Incredibly boring?’

A young girl with messy hair and bright





eyes stood in the doorway, yawning so hard her head almost fell right off her shoulders.

‘Good morning, Cinders.’ Margery, the storyteller and the girl’s stepmother, gave her a stern look. ‘Have you finished all your chores already?’



‘Yes,’ said Cinders.

‘You’ve chopped the wood?’

‘Yes,’ said Cinders.

‘You’ve fed the pigs?’

‘Yes,’ said Cinders.

‘Done all the dishes?’

Cinders looked back at the pile of plates, bowls and saucepans stacked up in the sink. She had not done all the



dishes. She had not done *any* of the dishes.

‘Yes,’ said Cinders, swiftly stepping to the side to block her stepmother’s view of the kitchen. ‘May I go outside now?’





‘No,’ replied Margery, turning back to her book. ‘Ladies don’t play outside.’

‘Ladies stay inside and sit nicely,’ Cinders’s stepsister, Agnes, announced from her seat on the sofa. ‘Like us, listening to Mother reading. Ladies don’t ruin their dresses in the mud as you always do.’

‘I like reading but I like reading for myself, not listening to Margery,’ Cinders muttered, scratching at a stain on the hem of her dress. What had she spilled on it that was purple? ‘She doesn’t do all the voices. And I’d rather read outside, not cooped up in here. Sometimes it gets a bit muddy – I can’t help that.’

‘I wouldn’t mind reading outside,’ piped up





Eleanor. 'It's a lovely day. Maybe I'd like it.'

'You wouldn't like it at all,' Agnes informed her little sister. 'There are bugs everywhere, and it would be no good at all for your complexion. You want to stay inside with me and Mother.'

'Do I?' Eleanor replied with a shrug. 'If you say so . . .'

'As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,' Margery said, turning her back on Cinders, 'there was a beautiful girl in a faraway kingdom and she was loved by everyone she met. She was good and truthful, and she never lied to her stepmother about finishing her chores when there was clearly a sink full of dishes waiting to be washed.'





Cinders sloped back into the kitchen, turned on the tap and stared out of the window. Not for the first time she wished the elves would make some kind of device for washing dishes instead of just useless things, like phones for playing games. A washy-dishy-thingy. Hmm. The name might need work.

Cinders sighed. Trust Eleanor to side with Agnes. They always ganged up against her. Before her father had remarried, she'd dreamed of having a loving mother and a sibling to play with, but instead she'd been saddled with Miserable Margery and the Terrible Twosome. Margery wasn't *so* bad, but she thought about nothing but herself and how she looked and what people thought of her and her girls.





She was always nagging Cinders, punishing her messiness and forgetfulness with chores, chores and more chores. It hadn't been so bad when they'd first come to live in her pink cottage at the edge of the woods, but, as they'd got older, Cinders had realised her stepmother was always going to be bossy and boring, and that she and her stepsisters had absolutely nothing in common.

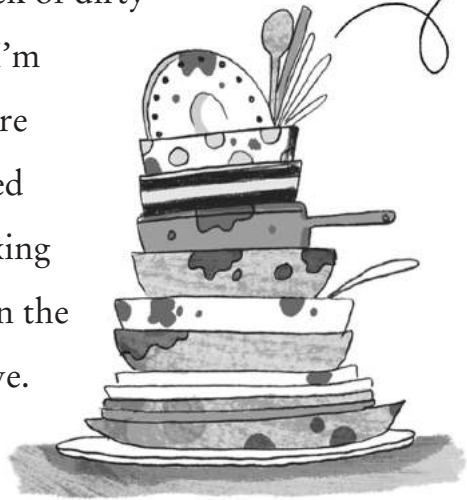
When she was inside, Cinders was always covered in glitter and glue or had paint in her hair. When she was outside, she loved to climb trees and chase her dog, Sparks, around the forest. Elly and Aggy hated to leave the house unless they were absolutely forced to do so. Their idea of a dreamy afternoon was





poring over pictures of Prince Joderick before discussing the very latest trends in ribbon tying, or taking photos of themselves. More than anything, they hated the idea of any activity that might get them dirty. Cinders couldn't remember the last time she wasn't head to toe in mud by the end of the day. All she wanted was an adventure. All her stepsisters wanted was a new elf phone.

Staring at the stack of dirty dishes, she sighed. 'I'm going to be stuck here forever,' she muttered under her breath, fixing her big green eyes on the bright blue sky above.





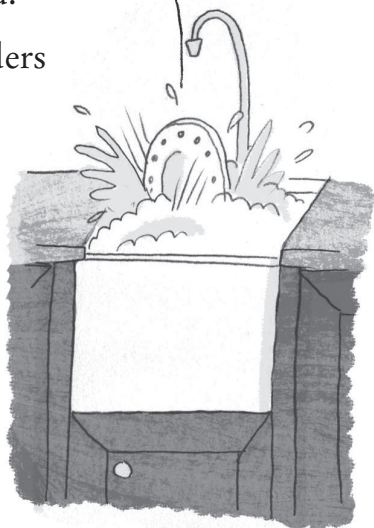
‘I wish these dishes would wash themselves.’

Cinders reached out for another dirty plate, but before she could even touch it she felt a jolt shoot through her hands. The plate jumped off its pile, plopped into the sink and disappeared under the bubbles with a splash.

Margery, Elly and Aggy all looked up at once at the sound.

‘Nothing to see here,’ Cinders called to them, smiling like a loon. ‘Just me, washing the dishes – same old, same old.’

Fishing around in the sink, she hunted for the missing piece of china in a panic.





If she broke another plate, she'd be scrubbing the toilet for a month. Suddenly it flew up out of the sink and set itself on the kitchen table, squeaky clean and bone dry.

‘But I didn’t even touch you,’ Cinders whispered, pulling her hands out of the water. ‘What is happening?’

One by one, all the dirty dishes whizzed themselves into the sink and out again, piling up neatly on the table.

Cinders gazed at her fizzing fingertips, holding them up in the sunlight. Were they *sparkling*?

‘Good morning, good morning and a good day to all.’

It was her father.





Margery closed her book and presented him with a heavily powdered cheek for her morning kiss. He patted Elly and Aggy on the head and bumbled over to the kitchen to wrap Cinders up in a great big bear hug.

‘And a special good morning to you, my little princess,’ he said, pushing his spectacles all the way up his nose. ‘On dish duty again, are we? Whatever did you do this time?’

‘Nothing,’ she replied, sticking her suspiciously sparkly hands deep in the pockets of her apron. ‘Honest.’

‘She set the kitchen rug on fire, left my riding boots out in the rain and Agnes caught her feeding her vegetables to the dog,’ Margery corrected.





‘Did he like the vegetables?’ her father asked.

‘I think he would have preferred sausages,’

Cinders replied.

‘Me too,’ he agreed.

Margery sighed. Cinders smiled.


‘Well, well, well, I have a very busy day ahead of me,’ her father announced. ‘If the king wants to throw a ball, he’s going to need a ballroom, and most ballrooms, as I understand it, have a roof.’

‘It is traditional,’ Margery agreed.

Cinders’s father was the royal builder.

Every day, he left their little pink cottage and travelled through the woods all the way to the palace. At night he would show Cinders his plans and sketches for towers and turrets, but





she was never allowed to accompany her father into town. She dreamed of seeing the palace he had built for King Picklebottom, the place where her mother and father had met.

‘If you left off the roof, we could dance under the stars.’ Cinders twirled in a perfect pirouette and immediately crashed into a stack of tea towels.

‘You won’t be dancing under anything,’ Agnes said. ‘I hardly think the prince would invite someone like you to the ball.’

Cinders looked down at her stained, ragged dress, then over at her sisters with their glossy brown hair, painstakingly applied make-up and gorgeous, grown-up gowns. All before 9am on a Wednesday.





‘We’ll make a lady out of Cinders yet,’ her father said, planting a kiss on the top of her head. ‘She is my little princess, after all.’

Aggy and Elly pretended to stick their fingers down their throats before turning on sweet smiles for their stepfather.





‘Do you think I might be able to go to the ball this time?’ Cinders asked her father. ‘I’d love to see the palace.’

‘Not this time, little one,’ he replied with a sad smile. ‘Maybe next year.’

He always said that.

‘You always say that,’ she said. ‘Aggy’s been to the palace. Elly’s been to the palace. Why can’t I go?’

She planted her hands on her hips and fixed her father with her most serious stare.

‘Oh, Cinders,’ he said with a sigh. ‘You just have to trust me. You’ll get to the palace one day, just not yet.’

It was the same story every time she asked – he always had a reason not to take her: there





wasn't room in his carriage; she wouldn't like the food they served; everyone was far too busy to show her around. If she didn't know better, she'd think her father was trying to keep her away from the palace altogether.

'Fine. I'm going outside to feed Sparks,' she said quickly, hugging her father goodbye and running outside before her stepmother could stop her. 'But you'd better take me next time!'