

STEP SISTER

ALSO BY JENNIFER DONNELLY

These Shallow Graves
Revolution

The Waterfire Saga

STEP SISTER

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To everyone who's ever felt that they're not enough

This is a dark tale. A grim tale.

It's a tale from another time, a time when wolves waited for girls in the forest, beasts paced the halls of cursed castles, and witches lurked in gingerbread houses with sugar-kissed roofs.

That time is long gone.

But the wolves are still here and twice as clever. The beasts remain. And death still hides in a dusting of white.

It's grim for any girl who loses her way.

Grimmer still for a girl who loses herself.

Know that it's dangerous to stray from the path.

But it's far more dangerous not to.

Prologue

Once upon always and never again, in an ancient city by the sea, three sisters worked by candlelight.

The first was a maiden. Her hair, long and loose, was the color of the morning sun. She wore a gown of white and a necklace of pearls. In her slender hands, she held a pair of golden scissors, which she used to cut lengths of the finest parchment.

The second, a mother, ample and strong, wore a gown of crimson. Rubies circled her neck. Her red hair, as fiery as a summer sunset, was gathered into a braid. She held a silver compass.

The third was a crone, crooked and shrewd. Her gown was black, her only adornment was a ring of obsidian, incised with a skull. She wore her snow-white hair in a coil. Her gnarled, ink-stained fingers held a quill.

The crone's eyes, like those of her sisters, were a forbidding gray, as cold and pitiless as the sea.

At a sudden clap of thunder, she raised her gaze from the long wooden worktable at which she sat to the open doors of her balcony. A storm howled down upon the city. Rain scoured the rooftops of its grand palazzos. Lightning split the night. From every church tower, bells tolled a warning.

"The water is rising," she said. "The city will flood."

"We are high above the water. It cannot touch us. It cannot stop us," said the mother.

"Nothing can stop us," said the maiden.

The crone's eyes narrowed. "*He* can."

"The doors are locked," said the mother. "He cannot get in."

"Perhaps he already has," said the crone.

At this, the mother and the maiden looked up. Their wary eyes darted around the cavernous room, but they saw no intruder, only their cloaked and hooded servants going about their tasks. Relieved, they returned to their work, but the crone remained watchful.

Mapmaking was the sisters' trade, but no one ever came to buy their maps, for they could not be had at any price.

Each was exquisitely drawn, using feathers from a black swan.

Each was sumptuously colored with inks mixed from indigo, gold, ground pearl, and other things—things far more difficult to procure.

Each used time as its unit of measure, not distance, for each map charted the course of a human life.

"Roses, rum, and ruin," the crone muttered, sniffing the air. "Can you not smell them? Smell *him*?"

"It's only the wind," soothed the mother. "It carries the scents of the city."

Still muttering, the crone dipped her quill into an inkpot. Candle tapers flickered in silver candelabra as she drew the landscape of a life. A raven, coal-black and bright-eyed, roosted on the mantel. A tall clock in an ebony case stood against one

wall. Its pendulum, a human skull, swung slowly back and forth, ticking away seconds, hours, years, lives.

The room was shaped like a spider. The sisters' workspace, in the centre, was the creature's body. Long rows of towering shelves led off the centre like a spider's many legs. Glass doors that led out to the balcony were at one end of the room; a pair of carved wooden doors loomed at the other.

The crone finished her map. She held a stick of red sealing wax in a candle flame, dripped it onto the bottom of the document, then pressed her ring into it. When the seal had hardened, she rolled the map, tied it with a black ribbon, and handed it to a servant. He disappeared down one of the rows to shelve the map, carrying a candle to light his way.

That's when it happened.

Another servant, his head down, walked between the crone and the open doors behind her. As he did, a gust of wind blew over him, filling the room with the rich scent of smoke and spices. The crone's nostrils flared. She whirled around.

"You there!" she cried, lunging at him. Her clawlike hand caught hold of his hood. It fell from his head, revealing a young man with amber eyes, dark skin, and long black braids. "Seize him!" she hissed.

A dozen servants rushed at the man, but as they closed in, another gust blew out the candles. By the time they had slammed the doors shut and relit them, all that remained of the man was his cloak, cast off and puddled on the floor.

The crone paced back and forth, shouting at the servants. They poured down the dusky rows, their cloaks flying behind them, trying to flush the intruder out. A moment later, he

burst out from behind one of the shelves, skidding to a stop a few feet from the crone. He darted to the wooden doors and frantically tried the handle, but it was locked. Swearing under his breath, he turned to the three sisters, flashed a quicksilver smile, and swept them a bow.

He was dressed in a sky-blue frock coat, leather breeches, and tall boots. A gold ring dangled from one ear; a cutlass hung from his hip. His face was as beautiful as daybreak, his smile as bewitching as midnight. His eyes promised the world, and everything in it.

But the sisters were unmoved by his beauty. One by one, they spoke.

“Luck,” hissed the maiden.

“Risk,” the mother spat.

“Hazard,” snarled the crone.

“I prefer Chance. It has a nicer ring,” the man said, with a wink.

“It’s been a long time since you paid us a visit,” said the crone.

“I should drop by more often,” said Chance. “It’s always a pleasure to visit the Fates. You’re so spontaneous, so wild and unpredictable. It’s always a party, this place. A regular bacchanal. It’s so. Much. *Fun.*”

A handful of servants spilled out from a row between the shelves, red-faced and winded. Chance pulled his cutlass from its scabbard. The blade glinted in the candlelight. The servants stepped back.

“Whose map have you stolen this time?” the crone asked. “What empress or general has begged your favor?”

Still holding his cutlass in one hand, Chance drew a map

from his coat with the other. He tugged the ribbon off with his teeth, then gave the parchment a shake. It unrolled, and he held it up. As the three women stared at it, their expressions changed from anger to confusion.

"I see a house, the Maison Douleur, in the village of Saint-Michel," the crone said.

"It's the home of—" said the matron.

"A girl. Isabelle de la Paumé," the crone finished.

"*Who?*" asked the maiden.

"All this trouble for a mere girl?" asked the crone, regarding Chance closely. "She's nothing, a nobody. She possesses neither beauty nor wit. She's selfish. Mean. Why her?"

"Because I can't resist a challenge," Chance replied. He rerolled the map with one hand, steadying it against his chest, then tucked it back inside his coat. "And what girl wouldn't choose what I offer?" He gestured at himself, as if even he couldn't believe how irresistible he was. "I'll give her the chance to change the path she is on. The chance to make her *own* path."

"Fool," said the crone. "You understand nothing of mortals. We Fates map out their lives because they wish it. Mortals do not like uncertainty. They do not like change. Change is frightening. Change is painful."

"Change is a kiss in the dark. A rose in the snow. A wild road on a windy night," Chance countered.

"Monsters live in the dark. Roses die in the snow. Girls get lost on wild roads," the crone shot back.

But Chance would not be discouraged. He sheathed his cutlass and held out his hand. As if by magic, a gold coin

appeared in his fingers. "I'll make you a bet," he said.

"You push me too far," the crone growled, fury gathering like a storm in her eyes.

Chance flipped the coin at the crone. She snatched it from the air and slammed it down on the table. The storm broke. "Do you think a *coin* can pay for what you've set loose?" she raged. "A warlord rampages across France. Death reaps a harvest of bones. A kingdom totters. All because of *you*!"

Chance's smile slipped. For a few seconds, his fiery bravado dimmed. "I'll fix it. I swear it."

"With *that* girl's map?"

"She was brave once. She was good."

"Your head is even emptier than your promises," the crone said. "Open the map again. Read it this time. See what becomes of her."

Chance did so. His eyes followed the girl's path across the parchment. The breath went out of him as he saw its end . . . the blotches and hatches, the violent lines. His eyes sought the crone's. "This ending . . . It's not . . . It *can't* be—"

"Do you still think you can fix this?" the crone mocked.

Chance took a step towards her, his chin raised. "I offer you high stakes. If I lose this wager, I will never come to the palazzo again."

"And if *I* lose?"

"You allow me to keep this map. Allow the girl to direct her own steps forevermore."

"I do not like those stakes," the crone said. She waved her hand, and her servants, who had been slowly edging closer to Chance, charged at him. Some were bearing cutlasses of their

own now. Chance was trapped. Or so it seemed.

"There's no hope of escape. Give me back the map," said the crone, holding out her hand.

"There's always hope," Chance said, tucking the map back into his coat. He took a few running steps, launched himself into a somersault, and flew over the heads of the servants. He landed on the worktable with the grace of a panther and ran down its length. When he reached the end, he jumped to the floor, then sped to the balcony.

"You are caught now, rogue!" the crone shouted after him. "We are three storeys high! What can you do? Leap across the canal? Even *you* are not that lucky!"

Chance wrenched open the balcony's doors and leapt up onto its railing. The rain had stopped, but the marble was still wet and slippery. His body pitched back and forth. His arms windmilled. Just as it looked as if he would surely fall, he managed to steady himself, balancing gingerly on his toes.

"The map. *Now*," the crone demanded. She had walked out onto the balcony and was only a few feet away from him. Her sisters joined her.

Chance glanced back at the Fates; then he somersaulted into the air. The crone gasped. She rushed to the railing, her sisters right behind her, expecting to see him drowning in the swirling waters below.

But he was not. He was lying on his back, cradled in the canopy of a gondola. The boat was rocking violently from side to side, but Chance was fine.

"Row, my fine fellow!" he called to the gondolier. The man obliged. The boat moved off.

Chance sat up, eyeing the Fates with a diamond-bright intensity. "You *must* accept my stakes now! You have no choice!" he shouted.

The gondola grew smaller and smaller as it made its way down the canal. A moment later, it rounded a bend and disappeared.

"This is a bad state of affairs," the crone said darkly. "We cannot have mortals making their own choices. When they do, disaster follows."

The maiden and the mother stepped back into the room. The crone trailed them. "Pack a trunk," she barked at a servant. "I'll need quills and inks . . ." Her hand hovered over the bottles upon the table. She selected a deep ebony. "*Fear*, yes. *Jealousy* will be useful, too," she said, reaching for a poisonous green.

"Where are you going?" the maiden asked.

"To the village of Saint-Michel," the crone replied.

"You will stop Chance from taking hold of the girl?" asked the mother.

The crone smiled grimly. "No, I cannot. But I will do what we Fates have always done. I will stop the girl from taking hold of a chance."

One

In the kitchen of a mansion, a girl sat clutching a knife.

Her name was Isabelle. She was not pretty.

She held the knife's blade over the flames of a fire burning in the hearth. Behind her, sprawled half-conscious in another chair, was her sister, Octavia.

Octavia's face was deathly pale. Her eyes were closed. The once-white stocking covering her right foot was crimson with blood. Adélie, the sisters' old nursemaid, peeled it off and gasped. Octavia's heel was gone. Blood dripped from the ugly wound where it used to be and pooled on the floor. Though she tried to hold it in, a moan of pain escaped her.

"Hush, Tavi!" Maman scolded. "The prince will hear you! Just because your chances are ruined doesn't mean your sister's must be."

Maman was the girls' mother. She was standing by the sink, rinsing blood out of a glass slipper.

The prince had come searching for the one who'd worn it. He'd danced all night with a beautiful girl at a masquerade ball three days ago and had fallen in love with her, but at the stroke of midnight, the girl had run away, leaving only a glass

slipper behind. He would marry the girl who'd worn it, he'd vowed. Her and no other.

Maman was determined that one of her daughters would be that girl. She'd greeted the royal party in the foyer and requested that Isabelle and Octavia be allowed to try the slipper on in privacy, in deference to their maidenly modesty. The prince had agreed. The grand duke had held out a velvet pillow. Maman had carefully lifted the slipper off it and carried it into the kitchen. Her daughters had followed her.

"We should've heated the blade for Tavi," Maman fretted now. "Why didn't I think of it? Heat sears the vessels. It stops the bleeding. Ah, well. It will go better for you, Isabelle."

Isabelle swallowed. "But, Maman, how will I walk?" she asked in a small voice.

"Silly girl! You will *ride*. In a golden carriage. Servants will lift you in and out."

Flames licked the silver blade. It grew red. Isabelle's eyes grew large with fear. She thought of a stallion, lost to her now, that she had once loved.

"But, Maman, how will I gallop through the forest?"

"The time has come to put childish pursuits aside," Maman said, drying the slipper. "I've bankrupted myself trying to attract suitors for you and your sister. Pretty gowns and fine jewels cost a fortune. A girl's only hope in life is to make a good marriage, and there's no finer match than the prince of France."

"I can't do it," Isabelle whispered. "I *can't*."

Maman put the glass slipper down. She walked to the hearth and took Isabelle's face in her hands. "Listen to me, child, and

listen well. Love is pain. Love is sacrifice. The sooner you learn that, the better.”

Isabelle squeezed her eyes shut. She shook her head.

Maman released her. She was silent for a bit. When she finally spoke again, her voice was cold, but her words were scalding.

“You are ugly, Isabelle. Dull. Lumpy as a dumpling. I could not even convince the schoolmaster’s knock-kneed clod of a son to marry you. Now a prince waits on the other side of the door—a *prince*, Isabelle—and all you have to do to make him yours is cut off a few toes. Just a few useless little toes . . .”

Maman wielded shame like an assassin wields a dagger, driving it straight into her victim’s heart. She would win; she always won. Isabelle knew that. How many times had she cut away parts of herself at her mother’s demand? The part that laughed too loudly. That rode too fast and jumped too high. The part that wished for a second helping, more gravy, a bigger slice of cake.

If I marry the prince, I will be a princess, Isabelle thought. And one day, a queen. And no one will dare call me ugly ever again.

She opened her eyes.

“Good girl. Be brave. Be quick,” Maman said. “Cut at the joint.”

Isabelle pulled the blade from the flames.

And tried to forget the rest.

Two

The little toe was the hardest.

Which didn't come as a surprise. It's often the small things that hurt the most—a cold glance, a cutting word, laughter that stops when you enter the room.

"Keep going," Maman urged. "Think of what we will gain—a prince for you, perhaps a duke for Tavi, a home for us all in the palace!"

Isabelle heard the desperation in her mother's voice. She knew that the dressmaker had cut off their credit and that the butcher had sent a boy to the house with an overdue bill. She tightened her grip on the knife and finished what she'd started.

The blinding pain, the smell of seared flesh, and the sight of her own toes lying on the hearth were so horrible that for a few seconds Isabelle was certain she would faint, but then Adélie was at her side with gentle hands and soothing words.

A wad of soft cotton was brought. A fresh white stocking. Brandy. And the glass slipper.

Maman handed it to her. "Put it on. Hurry," she said.

Isabelle took it. It was heavy in her hands and cold to the touch. As she slid her foot into it, pain bit into her, sharp-toothed

and savage. It moved up her leg and through her body until she felt as if she were being eaten alive. The blood drained from her face. She closed her eyes and gripped the arms of her chair.

And yet, when Maman demanded that she get up, Isabelle did. She opened her eyes, took a deep breath, and stood.

Isabelle could do this impossible thing because she had a gift—a gift far more valuable than a pretty face or dainty feet.

Isabelle had a strong will.

She did not know that this was a good thing for a girl to have, because everyone had always told her it was a terrible thing. Everyone said a girl with a strong will would come to a bad end. Everyone said a girl's will must be bent to the wishes of those who know what's best for her.

Isabelle was young, only sixteen; she had not yet learned that Everyone is a fool.

Three

Each step was agony.

Halfway down the hallway that led from the kitchen to the foyer, Isabelle faltered. She heard a thin, rising wail. Had it come from her?

"It's Ella," Maman said darkly. "Hurry, Isabelle. We must finish this business. What if the prince hears her?"

Just before the prince had arrived, Isabelle had locked Ella in the attic. Ella had wept. She'd begged Isabelle to let her out. She wanted to see the prince. She wanted to try the glass slipper.

"Don't be ridiculous," Isabelle had told her. "You didn't even go the ball. You'd only embarrass us in your ragged dress."

It was a cruel thing to have done. She'd known it even as she'd turned the key in the lock, but it hadn't stopped her. Nothing stopped her anymore. *God in Heaven, what have I become?* she wondered, as she heard another wail.

Maman eyed her closely, so closely that Isabelle felt she could see inside her.

"Let her out, Isabelle. Do," she said. "The prince will take one look at her and fall head over heels in love, like every

other man who sees her. Do you want to be kind or do you want the prince?"

Isabelle tried, but could not find an answer. The choices Maman gave her fit no better than the slipper did. An image flashed into her mind, a memory from long ago. She, Tavi, and Ella had been playing under the ancient linden tree that shaded the mansion.

A carriage had pulled into the yard. Two men, associates of Ella's father—Isabelle and Tavi's stepfather—had gotten out. Being genial, well-mannered men, they'd stopped to chat with the girls, but what happened next had changed everything.

Isabelle wished she could go back in time. She wished she could stop what had been put in motion that day, but she didn't know how.

And now it was too late.

Who set us against each other, Ella? she wondered. *Was it those men? Was it Maman? Or was it the whole heartless world?*

Four

“Keep your weight on your heel. That will help with the pain,” Maman advised. “Come now. Hurry.”

She pinched color into Isabelle’s bloodless cheeks and together they continued down the hallway.

The prince, the grand duke, and the soldiers who’d accompanied them were all in the foyer, waiting for her. Isabelle knew she must not fail as her sister had.

Tavi had fooled everyone at first, but as she’d walked out of the house to the prince’s carriage, her heel had bled so much that she’d left carmine footprints on the ground.

No one had noticed the bloody tracks in all the excitement, but as Tavi had neared the carriage, a white dove had flown out of the linden tree. The bird had landed on the prince’s shoulder and had begun to sing.

Blood on the ground! Blood on the shoe!

This false, heartless girl is lying to you!

The prince had paled at the sight of so much blood. The grand duke, a rangy, wolfish-looking man, had become furious

when he'd learned that his sovereign had been tricked. He'd demanded that Maman return the glass slipper, but Maman had refused. She'd insisted that Isabelle had a right to try the slipper, too, for the prince had decreed that every maiden in the kingdom could do so.

"Are you ready?" Maman whispered to Isabelle now, as they approached the foyer.

Isabelle nodded, then walked out to greet the prince. She'd glimpsed him at the ball, but only from a distance, and when he'd arrived at the mansion, Maman had quickly ushered her into the kitchen.

Now, standing only a few feet away from him, she could see that his eyes were the blue of a summer sky, and that his blond hair—worn long and loose and tumbling over his shoulders—was shot through with streaks of pure gold. He was tall and broad-shouldered. His color was high.

Gazing at him, Isabelle forgot her wound, her pain, her own name. She was stunned speechless. He was that handsome.

The prince was silent, too. He was staring at Isabelle intently, his eyes taking in every plane and angle of her face.

"Ah, do you see that? He recognizes his own true love!" Maman purred.

Isabelle shrank at her mother's lie. Everyone at the ball had worn masks that covered the tops of their faces. She knew what the prince was doing—he was searching the curve of her lips, the line of her jaw, and the tilt of her chin for traces of the girl he'd fallen in love with.

But that girl wasn't there.

Five

Isabelle and the prince continued to stare at each other. Awkwardly. Silently. Until Maman took charge.

“Your Grace,” she said, pulling Isabelle down into a curtsy with her. “My younger daughter is the one you are seeking. The glass slipper fits her perfectly.”

“I hope you are certain of this, madame,” the grand vizier cautioned. “The prince will not look kindly on a second attempt to deceive him.”

Maman bowed her head. “Please forgive Octavia,” she said to the prince. “She is not a dishonest girl. Her only fault is that she was overwhelmed by love for you. What girl wouldn’t be?”

The prince blushed at that. The grand duke did not. “May we see the slipper?” he asked impatiently.

Isabelle and Maman rose. Dread knotted Isabelle’s stomach as she lifted the hem of her dress. All eyes went to her foot. To her immense relief, there was no blood. The stocking was as white as snow and the cotton Adélie had stuffed into it filled out the toe. The glass slipper itself sparkled with blue light.

“It fits,” said the prince dully.

The grand duke and the soldiers—every single one—bowed to Isabelle.

“Long live the princess!” a captain shouted.

“Long live the princess!” the rest of the company echoed.

Hats were tossed up into the air. Cheers rose, too. Isabelle turned in a slow circle, astonished. For once, the admiration was for her, not Ella. For once, she felt proud, powerful, wanted. Only moments ago, she hadn’t been good enough for the schoolmaster’s son; now she was going to be a princess.

“We must travel to the palace, mademoiselle,” the prince said to her, with a stiff smile. “There are many arrangements to make for the wedding.”

He bowed curtly, then headed for the door, and Isabelle saw that his strong shoulders sagged and that the light was gone from his beautiful eyes.

The prince loves someone else; he longs for her, Isabelle thought. If I go through with this, I won’t be gaining a husband, I’ll be taking a prisoner.

She felt sick, poisoned by a thing she thought she wanted. Just like the time when she was little and Adélie had made a batch of tiny cherry cakes and left them to cool and she’d eaten every single one.

She turned to her mother, ready to say, “This is wrong,” but as she did, she saw that Maman was beaming at her. For a few precious seconds, Isabelle basked in the warmth of her mother’s smile. She so rarely saw it.

“I’m proud of you, child,” Maman said. “You’ve saved us from ruin. I shall sell this gloomy house, pay off our debts, and never look back.”

Isabelle's protests died in her throat. It was a terrible thing to break the prince's heart, but it was a worse thing to break her mother's. She did not, for even a second, consider what her own heart wanted, for a girl's desires were of no consequence.

Maman took Isabelle's arm and walked her out to the stone steps that swept from the mansion's front door down to its gravel drive. Isabelle could see a golden carriage drawn by eight white horses. The prince and the grand duke stood by it, waiting for her, deep in conversation.

Furrows marred the prince's brow. Worry clouded his eyes. Isabelle knew, as did everyone else, that his father was gravely ill and that a foreign duke, Volkmar von Bruch, had scented the old king's death and had brutally attacked villages along his realm's northern border.

Maman embraced Isabelle, promising that she and Tavi would follow her to the palace as soon as they could. And then, in a daze, Isabelle started for the carriage, but stepping down required that she put her full weight on her damaged foot. Halfway down the steps, the seared veins opened. She could feel blood, wet and warm, seeping into her stocking. By the time she reached the bottom step, it was soaked.

High above her, in the branches of the linden tree, the leaves began to rustle.

Six

The carriage was only ten steps away. Then seven. Then five.

A soldier opened the door for her. Isabelle kept her gaze trained straight ahead. The prince and the grand duke, still deep in conversation, weren't even looking at her. She would make it. She was almost there. Just a few steps. Three more . . . two . . . one . . .

That's when she heard it—the flapping of wings.

A white dove swooped down out of the linden tree and circled her. Maman, who'd been watching from the doorway, ran down and frantically tried to swat it away, but the wary bird kept itself above her reach. As it flew around Isabelle, it began to sing.

Blood on the ground! Blood in the shoe!

This is a girl neither honest nor true!

The prince stopped talking. He looked at the dove, then at Isabelle. His eyes traveled to the hem of her dress, which was stained with blood, then to the dark tracks she'd left in the dirt.

Isabelle slid her foot out of the glass slipper and took a step back from it. It toppled over, spilling more blood on the ground. The front of her stocking was bright red. Shame flooded through her.

"You cut off your own toes," the prince said, shaking his head in disbelief.

Isabelle nodded, frightened now as well as ashamed. She'd deceived him. God only knew what he would do to her. She'd heard grisly stories about palace dungeons, and heads stuck on pikes. Was that to be her fate?

But the prince didn't order his soldiers to seize her. There was no anger on his face, only sadness. And something else, something Isabelle had not expected to see—kindness.

"How did you stand the pain?" he asked.

Isabelle looked at the ground. Maman's words, spoken earlier in the kitchen came back to her.

Ugly . . . dull . . . lumpy as a dumpling . . .

"I've had a lot of practice," she replied.

The prince frowned. "I don't understand."

Isabelle lifted her head. She looked at his heartbreakingly handsome face. "No," she said. "You don't."

The grand duke joined them, fury sparking in his eyes. "I know battle-hardened soldiers who could not do what you did, mademoiselle," he said to Isabelle. Then he turned to the prince. "A girl capable of such an act is capable of anything, sire. She is unnatural. Unhinged. Dangerous." He motioned at a pair of soldiers. "Seize her."

Isabelle's heart lurched with terror as the two men started towards her, but the prince stopped them.

"Leave her," he ordered, waving them away.

"But, Your Grace, surely you will not allow a second deception to go unpunished," said the grand duke. "One is bad enough, but two—"

"I said *leave her*. She has crippled herself. What more could I do to her?"

The grand duke gave him a clipped nod. Then he addressed Maman. "I don't suppose you have any other daughters eager to cut off bits of themselves in order to marry the prince?"

"No," Maman said bitterly. "I have no other daughters."

"Then we shall be going," said the grand duke. "Good day, madame."

A fountain bubbled in the centre of the drive. As the prince climbed into the carriage, the grand duke, who was still holding the velvet cushion, ordered a soldier to rinse the glass slipper off in the water. The soldier did, then placed it back on the cushion. Maman stood watching them, rigid with anger.

Isabelle, light-headed from her ordeal, sat down on a bench under the linden tree. She closed her eyes, trying to make her head stop spinning. She was dimly aware of the horses stamping, impatient to be off. Of bugs whirring in the afternoon heat. Of the dove, now cooing high above her in the branches.

But then a new sound rose above these others—urgent and piercing. "Wait! Don't go! Please, please, wait!"

It was a girl's voice. It was coming from the mansion. She was shouting. Pleading.

Isabelle opened her eyes.

The girl was running down the steps. Her hair was wild. Her dress was little more than rags. Her face and hands were

streaked with soot. Her feet were bare.

But even so, she was astonishingly, achingly, breathtakingly beautiful.

It was Ella.

Isabelle's stepsister.