



STEPSISTER

JENNIFER DONNELLY



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In the kitchen of a grand 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.

- T W O -

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.

– T H R E E –

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 to 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?*

– F O U R –

“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.

– F I V E –

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 duke 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 graveled 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.

- S I X -

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."