

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
JENNIFER DONNELLY

STEPSISTER

BEAUTY ISN'T
ALWAYS PRETTY.



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STEP SISTER

JENNIFER DONNELLY

Scholastic Press / New York

To everyone who's ever felt

that they're not enough

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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 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, crookbacked 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 servants are watchful,” said the mother. “He will not 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. 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