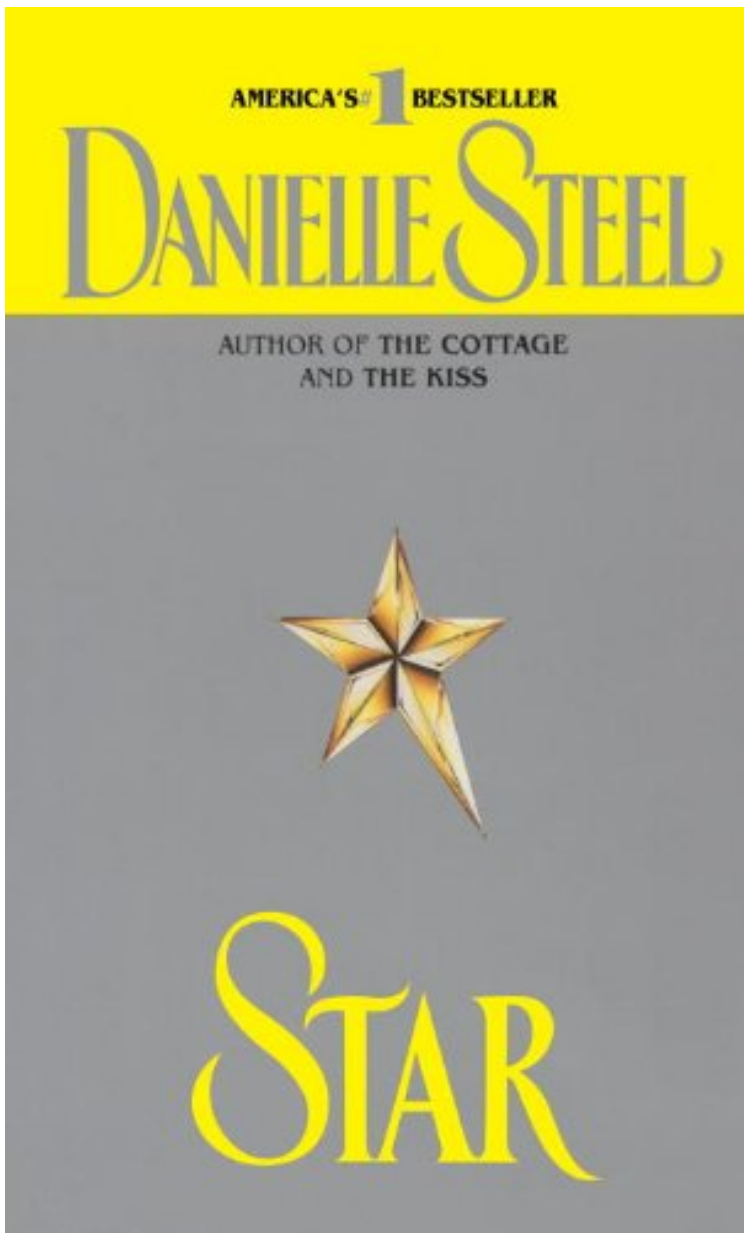


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# Star



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurYoung, innocent and strikingly beautiful Crystal Wyatt was an outcast, envied and resented by all but her devoted father, with whom she shared a deep love for their remote California ranch. When her father dies, Crystal is alone and unprotected. Devastating events shake the once peaceful valley.

With nothing but her dreams, her beauty, and her awe-inspiring voice, Crystal escapes to embark on the career that will ultimately make her a star. But stardom itself is shadowed by danger and violence and haunted by a memory that must be resolved before Crystal can find happiness and peace.From the Paperback

edition. Extrait Chapter One The birds were already calling to each other in the early morning stillness of the Alexander Valley as the sun rose slowly over the hills, stretching golden fingers into a sky that within moments was almost purple. The leaves on the trees rustled gently in the barest breeze as Crystal stood silent in the damp grass, watching the brilliant sky explode in shimmering colors. For brief moments, the birds stopped singing, almost as though they, too, were in awe of the valley's beauty. There were lush fields, rimmed by rugged hills where their cattle wandered, grazing. Her father's ranch covered two hundred acres, its fertile earth yielding corn, walnuts, and grapes, with the cattle they bred bringing in their greatest profit. The Wyatt Ranch had been profitable for a hundred years, but Crystal loved it not for what it brought them but for what it was. She seemed to commune silently with spirits only she knew were there as she watched the tall grass rustle softly in the breeze, and felt the warmth of the sun shine down on her wheat-colored hair, as she began to sing softly. Her eyes were the color of the summer sky, her limbs long and graceful as she suddenly began to run, pressing the damp grass beneath her feet as she headed toward the river. She sat on a smooth gray rock, feeling the icy water dance over her feet as she watched the sunlight reach the rocks. She loved watching the sun come up, loved running in the fields, she loved just being there, alive and young and free, at one with her roots, and with nature. She loved to sit and sing in the quiet mornings, her full voice billowing around her, magical even without music. It was as though there was something special about singing then, with only God to hear her. There were ranch hands who herded her cattle, and Mexicans who tended the corn and the vineyards, her father overseeing all of it. But there was no one who loved the land as dearly as she, or her father, Tad Wyatt. Her brother, Jared, helped him after school, but at sixteen he was more interested in borrowing her father's pickup and going to Napa with his friends. It was a fifty-minute drive from Jim Town. He was a good-looking boy with his father's dark hair, and a knack for taming wild horses. But neither he nor her sister, Becky, had Crystal's lyrical beauty. Today was Becky's wedding day, and Crystal knew that her mother and grandmother were already busy in the kitchen. She had heard them as she slipped away to watch the sun come up over the mountains. Crystal waded out into the stream, the water rushing to her thighs as she felt her feet go numb and her knees tingle, and she laughed aloud in the summer morning, pulling her thin cotton nightgown over her head and tossing it onto the bank.

She knew there was no one to watch her as she stood gracefully in the stream, totally unaware of how startlingly beautiful she was, a young Venus springing forth from the stream in the Alexander Valley. From the distance she looked every bit a woman, as she stood holding her long pale blond hair on top of her head with one hand, as the curves of her exquisite body were swallowed slowly by the icy water. Only those who knew her well realized how young she was. To a stranger she looked full-grown, eighteen or twenty, her body ripe, her eyes huge and blue as she looked up at the early morning sun and squinted happily at the sunshine, her shimmering nakedness seemingly carved out of the palest pink marble. But she was not a woman, she was a girl, not yet fifteen, although she would be fifteen that summer. She laughed to herself as she thought of them looking for her, coming to her room to wake her so she could help them in the kitchen, her sister's fury to find her gone, her grandmother clucking in toothless irritation. As usual, she had escaped them. It was what she liked best, fleeing from tedious obligations and running loose on the ranch, wandering through the tall grass, or into the woods in the winter rains, or riding bareback singing to herself as she rode clear over the hills to the secret places she had discovered on long rides with her father. She had been born here, and one day, when she was very old, as old as Grandma Minerva and even older than that, she would die here. Every inch of her soul loved the ranch, and this valley. She had inherited her father's passion for the land, for the rich brown earth, and the lush green that carpeted the hills in the springtime. She saw a deer standing nearby, and she smiled. There were no enemies in Crystal's world, no dangers, no secret terrors. She belonged here, and never doubted for a moment that she was safe here. She watched the sun rising in the sky, and walked slowly back to the riverbank, stepping over the rocks easily with her long legs, until she reached her nightgown and pulled it over her head and let it cling wetly to her body as her mane of pale blond hair fell far past her shoulders. She knew it was time to go back, they would be furious by now. Her mother would already have complained to her father. She had helped make twenty-four apple pies the day before, she had baked bread, dressed chickens, helped to cook seven hams, she had stuffed fat ripe tomatoes with basil and walnuts. She had done her share, and she knew there was nothing left to do except fret and get in the way, and listen to Becky shout at her brother. She had plenty of time to shower and dress and get to the church by eleven. They didn't need her, they only thought they did. She was happier roaming the fields and wading in the stream in the morning daylight. The air had already grown warmer and the breeze was dying down. It was going to be a beautiful day for Becky's wedding. She could see their house in the distance as she

heard her grandmother's voice calling shrilly for her from the porch outside the kitchen. "Crysstall! . . ." The word seemed to reverberate everywhere as she laughed and rant toward the house, looking like a long-legged child, with her hair flying out behind her. "Crystal!" Her grandmother was standing on the porch as she approached. Grandma Minerva was wearing the black dress she wore when she had serious work to do in the kitchen. She had a clean white apron over it, and she pursed her lips angrily as she saw Crystal gamboling toward her, her white cotton nightgown glued damply to her naked body. There was no artifice to the girl, there were no wiles, there was only that staggering natural beauty she was still unaware of. In her own mind, she was still a child, and aeons away from the burdens of being a woman. "Crystal! Look at you! You can see right through that nightgown! You're not a child anymore! What if one of the men sees you?" "It's Saturday, Grandma. . . no one's here." She smiled openly into the weathered old face with a broad grin that evidenced neither embarrassment nor contrition. "You should be ashamed of yourself, and you should be inside getting ready for your sister's wedding." She muttered disapprovingly as she wiped her hands on her apron. "Running around like a wild thing at sunrise. There's work to do here, Crystal Wyatt. Now get inside and see what you can do to help your mama." Crystal smiled, and ran around the wide porch to climb easily into her bedroom window, as her grandmother slammed the screen door and went back to helping her daughter in the kitchen.

Crystal stood alone in her room for a moment, humming to herself as she peeled off her nightgown, and tossed it easily into a damp heap in the corner, as she glanced up at the dress she would be wearing to Becky's wedding. It was a simple white cotton dress with puffed sleeves and a little lace collar. Her mother had made it for her, as simply as she could, with no frills, no added adornments to enhance her already striking beauty. It looked like a dress for a child, but Crystal didn't mind. She could wear it to church socials afterward. They had bought plain white pumps in Napa, and her father had bought her a pair of nylon stockings in San Francisco. Her grandmother had grumbled disapprovingly over those as well, and her mother had said she was too young to wear them. "She's only a child, Tad." It always annoyed Olivia when he spoiled their youngest daughter. He was always bringing her treats, or something foolish to wear from Napa or San Francisco. "It'll make her feel special." Crystal was the child he had adored since she was born, there was a place in him that ached each time he saw her. As a baby she had had a halo of platinum hair and eyes that looked right into his as though she had something special to say to him and no one else. She was a baby born with dreams in her eyes, and a magical quality about her that made people stop and stare. They had always stared at Crystal. People were drawn to her, to some quality deep within as well as to her beauty. She looked like no one else in the family, she was unique, and she was the music in her father's heart. It was he who had chosen her name the first time he had seen her nestled in Olivia's arms only moments after she was born. Luminous and perfect. Crystal. The name suited her to perfection, with her bright clear eyes and the soft platinum hair. Even the children she had played with as a child had known she was special, different in some intangible way. She was freer and brighter and happier than they were, never governed entirely by the rules and limitations set on her by others, like her nervous, always complaining mother, or her far less beautiful older sister, or the brother who teased her mercilessly, or even the stern grandmother who had come to live with them when Crystal was seven, when Grandpa Hodges died in Arizona. Only her father seemed to understand her, only he knew how remarkable she was, like a rare bird one had to allow to fly free from time to time, soaring high over the ordinary and the mundane. She was a creature delivered to him straight from God's hand, and he always broke the rules for her, gave her little gifts, made exceptions for her, much to everyone else's annoyance. "Crystal!" It was her mother's sharp voice outside her door, as she stood in the room she had shared with Becky for almost fifteen years. The door opened before she had time to answer, and Olivia Wyatt stood glaring at her in nervous disapproval. "Why are you standing there like that?" She was naked and beautiful, and Olivia didn't like to see it. She didn't like to think of her that way, already well into womanhood, yet with the innocent eyes of a child as she turned to look at her mother, in the blue silk dress she was going to wear to Becky's wedding. She had covered it with a clean white apron, just like Grandma Minerva's. "Cover yourself! Your father and brother are up!" She eyed Crystal sternly, and pressed the door closed behind her, as though they were standing just outside, waiting to see Crystal's naked young body. In truth her father would only have admired her, startled to see her as more of a woman than she truly was, and Jared would have been, as always, indifferent to his sister's striking beauty. "Oh Mama . . ." She knew how angry her mother would have been if she could have seen her standing naked in the stream only moments before. "They're not going to come in here." She smiled with an innocent shrug, as Olivia scolded. "Don't you know there's work to do? Your sister needs help with her dress. Grandma needs help carving the turkey and slicing the hams. Don't you ever make yourself useful, Crystal Wyatt?" They both knew she did,

but seldom to the women of the house, and always to her father. She preferred riding the tractor with him, or helping him herd the cattle when he was short of men. She worked tirelessly in brutal rainstorms bringing stray calves in, and she had a gift of gentleness with all their livestock. But that meant nothing to her mother. "Get yourself dressed," and then, glancing at the clean white dress hanging on her closet door, "wear your blue gingham till we leave for church. You'll get your dress dirty helping Grandma in that." As her mother watched her, Crystal slipped into her underwear, and pulled her old blue gingham dress over her head. For an instant, it made her look like a child again, but her womanhood was already too advanced to be denied even by the faded gingham. She hadn't buttoned it yet, when the door flew open, and Becky exploded into the room, chattering nervously and complaining about her brother. She had brown hair like her mother's and wide-set brown eyes. There was a handsome plainness to her face, and her body was long and slim not unlike Crystal's, but there was nothing remarkable about her features, and her voice was pitched in an anguished whine as she told Olivia that Jared had soaked all the towels in the ranch's only bathroom. "I can't even dry my hair decently. He does it every day, Mama! I know he does it on purpose!" Crystal watched her silently almost as though they had never met. After living side by side for almost fifteen years, the two girls were more strangers than sisters. Rebecca was cut in her mother's mold, the brown hair and brown eyes, the nervousness, the constant complaining. She was marrying the boy she had fallen in love with when she was Crystal's age, and she had waited for him through the war. Now almost exactly a year after he had come home safely from Japan, she was marrying him. And at eighteen, she was still a virgin. "I hate him, Mama! I hate him!" She was referring to her brother, as her long brown hair hung damply down her back, and tears stung her eyes as she looked angrily at her mother and sister, berating Jared. "Well, you won't have to live with him anymore after today." Her mother smiled. They had had a long talk the day before, wandering slowly past the barn, as her mother explained what Tom would expect of her on their wedding night in Mendocino. Becky had already heard about it from friends, several of whom had gotten married within months of their sweethearts' return from the Pacific. But Tom had wanted to find a job first, and Becky's father had insisted that she finish high school. She had accomplished that five weeks before, and now on a bright, sunny day in late July, her dreams would come true. She was going to be Mrs. Thomas Parker. It sounded very grown up, and more than a little scary. And secretly, Crystal wondered why her sister was marrying him. With Tom, Becky would never go farther than Booneville. Her life would begin and end right there, on the ranch where they had grown up. She loved the ranch, too, far more than the others did, and she wanted to settle here one day after she'd seen a piece of the world. She dreamed of other places, other things, other people than the ones she had grown up with. She wanted to see just a little bit more of the world than the patch of land bounded by the Mayacama Mountains. There were photographs of movie stars tacked to Crystal's walls, Greta Garbo and Betty Grable, Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable. There were photographs of Hollywood and San Francisco and New York, and once her father had shown her a postcard of Paris. She dreamed at times of going to Hollywood and becoming a movie star. She dreamed of going to mystical places, like the ones she whispered about with her father. She knew they were only dreams, but she loved to think about them. And she knew with all her heart that she wanted more than a life tied down to a man like Tom Parker. Their father had offered him a job on the ranch, because he hadn't been able to find work elsewhere. He had left high school to enlist after Pearl Harbor. And Becky had waited patiently, writing to him every week, and waiting months sometimes for his letters. He had seemed so grown up when he came back, so full of stories about the war. At twenty-one, he was a man, or at least Becky thought so. And now, a year later, he was going to be her husband. "Why aren't you dressed?" Becky suddenly turned on her sister, standing barefoot in the blue gingham dress their mother had told her to put on. "You should be dressed by now!" It was seven o'clock in the morning, and they weren't leaving for the church until ten-thirty. "Mama wants me to help Grandma in the kitchen." She said it in a quiet voice, so unlike Olivia's and Becky's. It was a voice beneath which one could almost hear the husky sensuality of her singing. The songs were innocent, but the voice that sang them was filled with instinctive passion. Becky threw her own wet towel on the bed they had shared, still unmade because Crystal had fled to the fields to watch the sunrise. "How can I get dressed in here, in this mess?" "Crystal, make the bed," Olivia said in a stern voice as she went to help Becky comb her hair. She herself had made the veil that Becky would wear, with a little crown of white satin sewn with tiny white pearls, and yards of the stiff white tulle she had bought in Santa Rosa. Crystal smoothed the sheets, and pulled up the heavy quilt their grandmother had made for them years before. Olivia had made a new one for Becky as a wedding gift. It had already been taken to the little cottage that was going to be their home, on the ranch, and their father was going to let Becky and Tom live there until they could afford a

place of their own. Olivia liked the idea of having Becky close to her, and Tom had been relieved not to have to rent a place they couldn't afford yet. To Crystal, it hardly seemed as though Becky was leaving at all. She was going to be less than a half a mile away, along the dirt track she herself often rode with her father on the tractor. Olivia was carefully brushing out Becky's hair as the two women talked about Cliff Johnson and his French wife. He had brought her home as a war bride, and Becky had debated long and hard about inviting them to the wedding. "She's not as bad as all that," Olivia conceded for the first time in a year, as Crystal stood silently watching. She always felt like an outsider with them. They always left her out of their conversations. She wondered if now, with Becky gone, her mother would pay more attention to her, and listen to what she had to say, or if Olivia would only spend all of her spare time at Becky's cottage. "She gave you a mighty fine piece of lace, said it was her grandmother's in France. You can do something nice with it one day." They were the first kind words anyone had said about Mireille since she'd arrived the year before. She wasn't a pretty girl, but she was friendly, and she had tried desperately to fit in, despite the initial resistance of all of Cliff's friends and neighbors. There were plenty of girls waiting for the boys at home, without bringing home foreign girls from the war. But at least she was white. Not like the girl Boyd Webster had brought home from Japan. That had been a disgrace his family would never live down. Never. And Becky had fought Tom not to invite Boyd and his wife to the wedding. She had cried, she had wailed, she had raged and even pleaded. But Tom had insisted that Boyd was his best friend, they had survived four years of the war side by side, and even if he had done a damn stupid thing marrying that girl, he was not going to keep him away from their wedding. In fact, he had asked Boyd to be his best man, which had made Becky even madder. But in the end, she had had to relent. Tom Parker was even more stubborn than she was. It was going to be an embarrassment having Hiroko there, and it wasn't as though one could forget what she was, with her slant eyes and her shining black hair. Just seeing her reminded everyone of the boys they had lost in the Pacific. It was a disgrace, that's what it was. Tom didn't like her either, but Boyd was his buddy, his friend, and he was loyal to him. Boyd had paid his own price for marrying her. No one had given him a job when he brought her home, and every door in town had been slammed in their faces. Finally, old Mrs. Petersen had felt sorry for him, and had given him a job pumping gas, which was too bad, because Boyd was smarter than that. He'd been planning to go to college before the war, but there was no hope of that now. He had to work to support himself and Hiroko. Everyone figured that eventually they'd get discouraged and move away. At least they hoped so. But in his own way, Boyd was as in love with the valley as Tad Wyatt and Crystal. Crystal had been fascinated by Boyd's pretty little Japanese wife when she first arrived. Hiroko's gentle, delicate ways, her hesitant speech, her enormous politeness and her cautious English drew Crystal like a magnet. But Olivia wouldn't let Crystal speak to her, and even her father had thought it best that she stay away from them. Some things were better left alone, and these days the Websters were among them. "What are you doing, standing there, staring at your sister?" Olivia noticed Crystal watching them, and suddenly remembered that she was there. "I told you half an hour ago to go help Grandma in the kitchen." Without a word, Crystal left the room, soundlessly on bare feet, as Becky chattered on nervously about the wedding. And when she got to the kitchen, there were already three women there, having come to help from neighboring farms and ranches. Becky's wedding was going to be the event of the year, and the first of the summer. Friends and neighbors would be coming from miles around. There were two hundred guests expected, as the women worked furiously to put the last touches on the enormous lunch they would serve after the service. "Where've you been, girl?" Her grandmother snapped at her, and pointed rapidly at a huge ham. They slaughtered their own pigs and cured their own. Everything they would be serving was homemade and homegrown, even the wine her father would be pouring. Crystal got to work without saying a word, and within moments she felt a sharp slap on her bottom. "Nice dress, Sis. Dad get it for you in San Francisco?" Inevitably, it was Jared, leering down at her from his enormous height. At sixteen, he was always anxious to tease and to torture. He was wearing new slacks that were already a little too short, and a white shirt his grandmother had pressed and starched until it could have stood on its own. But his feet were still bare, he was carrying his shoes, and his new jacket and tie were cast lazily over his shoulder. He had fought like cats and dogs with Becky for years, but in the past year Crystal had become the object of his attentions. He helped himself to a slice of the succulent ham as Crystal swiped at his fingers. "I'll cut them off if you don't watch it." She waved the knife at him, more than a little teasing. He irked her constantly. He loved to tease and to play and to annoy her. More than once he had pressed her until she took a swing at him, which he always deflected easily, and then boxed her less than gently on her ear for trying. "Get away from me. . . go bother someone else, Jar." More often than not she called him Jarhead. "Why aren't you helping too?" "I've

got better things to do. I have to help Dad set out the wine." "Yeah. . . I'll bet ..." She growled at him, she'd seen him get drunk with his friends, but she would have died before squealing to their father. Even when they were at odds, there was still an unspoken bond between them. "Make sure you leave some for the guests."

"Make sure you remember to wear shoes." He slapped her bottom again and she dropped the knife and grabbed at his arm, but too late, as he sped down the hall toward his own bedroom, whistling. He stopped outside Becky's door for an instant, and poked his head in, as she stood in her brassiere and underpants, adjusting her garter belt, just as the door flew open. "Hi, kid. . . Wow!" He gave a long wolf whistle and Becky let out a hideous scream. "Get him out of here!" She threw her hairbrush at him, but he slammed the door shut before it hit him. They were familiar sounds in the comfortable old ranch house, and no one in the kitchen paid much attention as Tad Wyatt came in, already dressed in his dark blue suit for the wedding. He had an air of solidity and warmth and quiet distinction about him. His family had had money once, lots of it, but they had lost most of it years before, even before the Depression. They had had to sell off thousands of acres, and he had turned the ranch around and made it successful again, by the sweat of his brow, and with Olivia beside him. But he had seen a little bit of the world before he married her. He talked to Crystal about it sometimes when they went on long walks, or sat in driving rains, or waited for a cow to give birth in the winter. He shared things with her that had been long buried and were almost forgotten. "There's a big world out there, little girl. . . with a lot of beautiful places in it. . . not many better than this. . . but they're worth seeing nonetheless..." He told her about places like New Orleans and New York, and even England. And whenever Olivia heard him she scolded him for filling Crystal's head with nonsense. Olivia herself had never been farther than the Southwest, and even that seemed foreign to her. And her two oldest children shared her view of the world. The Valley was enough, and all the people in it. Only Crystal dreamed of something more, and wondered if she would ever see it. She loved the Valley too, but there was room in her heart for more than that. Like her father she loved the Valley with a passion and yet she loved to dream of faraway places. "How's my girl?" Tad Wyatt wandered in and looked proudly down on his youngest daughter. Even there, in the kitchen filled with women, in her old blue gingham dress, the sight of Crystal tugged at his heart and her beauty took his breath away, and it was impossible for him to conceal it. He was only grateful that this wasn't her wedding day. He knew he couldn't have stood it. And he wouldn't have let her marry a man like Tom Parker. But for Becky, he was all right. Becky didn't have dreams. . . there were no stars in the secret skies of her heart. . . she had no secret visions. She wanted a husband and kids and a cottage on the ranch, and an ordinary man like Tom, with no ambition and few dreams, and that was what she was getting. "Hi, Dad." Crystal looked straight into his eyes with a gentle smile, and without words, the love that they shared spoke volumes. "Did Mama make you a pretty dress for today?" He had wanted her to, he always wanted her to. He smiled, remembering the stockings he had given Crystal to wear to the wedding, even if Olivia did think him foolish. Crystal nodded, as he watched her. It was pretty enough. But not like anything you'd see in the movies. It was just a dress. A nice, white dress. The nylon stockings were going to be the best part of her outfit, invisible and sheer and exciting. But Tad knew she could have worn anything, and she would have been lovely. "Where's your mama?" He looked around the kitchen and saw only his mother-in-law and three of his wife's friends, and Crystal. "Helping Becky dress." "Already? She'll be wilted before we ever get to the church." They exchanged a smile, the day was already getting warm, and the kitchen seemed to be steaming. "Where's Jared? I've been looking for him for an hour." But he looked good-natured as he said it, he wasn't easily ruffled. He had been patient with all of them ever since they were children. "He said he was going to help you with the wine." Crystal smiled as their eyes met again, and she offered him a slice of the ham she had only moments before begrudged her brother. "Help me drink it more like." They both laughed and he walked down the hall to Jared's bedroom. Jared's passion was cars and not ranches and his father knew it, the only one who truly loved the ranch, who understood it, who loved the land as he did, was Crystal. He walked past the bedroom where Becky was dressing with her mother's help, and knocked on his son's door. "Come and help me move the tables, Son. There's still work to do outside." They had set long tables with white linen cloths, left over from his own mother's wedding half a century before. The guests would eat shaded by the enormous trees that surrounded the ranch house. Tad Wyatt poked his head into Jared's room and found him lying on the bed, looking at a magazine full of pictures of women. "Can I interrupt you long enough to give me a hand, Son?" Jared jumped to his feet with a nervous grin, his tie askew, and his hair slicked back with a tonic he had bought in Napa. "Sure, Dad. Sorry." Tad was careful not to rumple the boy's carefully styled hair, and put a powerful arm around his shoulders. It seemed odd to him that one of them was getting married so soon. In his mind, they were still babies. . . he could remember Jared

learning to walk. . . and chasing chickens. . . and falling off the tractor when he was four. . . teaching him to drive when he was seven. . . hunting with him when he was hardly taller than the rifle. . . and Becky barely older than that, and now she was getting married. "It's a fine day for your sister's wedding." He looked up at the sky, and smiled at his son, as he directed Jared and three of the ranch hands where to put the tables. It was another hour before everything was set to his liking, and when he went back to the kitchen for a cool drink with Jared, Crystal was gone, and there was no sign of any of the women. All of them were in Becky and Crystal's room now, exclaiming over the dress, and sighing and dabbing at their eyes as they saw Becky finally in her lace and gauzy splendor. She was a beautiful bride, as most girls are, and all of them were pressed around her, offering her their good wishes, and making veiled comments about her wedding night, until she blushed hotly and turned to see Crystal quietly slipping into her own simple dress in the corner. The dress offered no excitement at all and yet in its stark simplicity, it only seemed to set off her beauty more. The treasured nylons were carefully in place, and the flat white pumps didn't add to her considerable height. And as she stood quietly in the corner, and they turned to look at her, with her sheaf of pale gold hair, and a little halo of baby's breath and white roses, she looked almost like an angel. By comparison, Becky seemed overdressed, overdone, and far less striking. Crystal seemed to be frozen in place in a rare moment between childhood and womanhood, there was no artifice to her, nothing raw, nothing sharp, only the subtle smoothness of her startling beauty. "Well. . . Crystal looks very nice," one of the women said, as though by ordinary words one could make her less dazzling, but it couldn't be done, Crystal was who she was, and nothing could diminish that, not even the plain white dress that she wore. As one looked at her, all was forgotten except the graceful way she moved and her incredible face beneath the halo of innocent white flowers. Becky was carrying white roses, too, and the women in the room had to force themselves to turn around and exclaim over her again. But there was no denying it. It was Crystal who was the beauty. "We'd better be going," Olivia said finally, and led the women outside to where her husband and Jared were already waiting. They were using separate cars to get to the church. The wedding itself was going to be small, their friends were invited to the lunch afterward, but very few had been invited to the church service. *Revue de presse* "Ms. Steel's fans won't be disappointed." --The New York Times Book .