

Chapter 1

Maris da Pais

1410

Vila do Conte, Portugal

On her fifth birthday Maris stood on a high scaffold with her father watching his boat builders hammer ribs into the skeleton of his new caravel. A light breeze ruffled her hair and the triangular sails on the model ship she held in one hand. She cradled it against her, and listened as Father told her what the men were doing. She loved the smells of freshly cut wood and piles of sawdust under the sawhorses next to the ship. Father had brought a sawhorse home for her and hammered a frayed rope on one end for a tail. She called it her pony and sat on it in the sunny courtyard of their home, imagining she was galloping down the beach like horseback riders she had seen.

The sounds of the shipyard were music to her, shouts and hammering, occasionally a warning cry if someone dropped a tool or sent a piece of wood flying.

Her birthday was just like any other day, but it made her feel special to be old enough for lessons from Father. He promised to start her soon on mathematics, Latin, and mapmaking, just like Tomas her brother.

“I have named this ship Three Sisters,” Father said.

“But I have a brother, not sisters,” Maris said without thinking. She knew better than to question Father, really, she did.

Father smiled down at her. “You will,” he said. Then he waved and shouted to the men below, “Send Alfonso up here.”

Maris wriggled with anticipation and waved her model ship at the white-haired man who climbed the ladder to join them.

“Maris, my star of the sea,” the old man exclaimed, pretending to pull a nail from his ear and handing it to her. “If only your father and mother had named you *Stella Maris*.”

Maris giggled and showed him the model. “Father cut the pieces, but I put it together,” she said. “I will name her *Stella Maris*.”

“Your father has told me of your skills.” He studied the model and fingered the sails. “Nicely sewn, I suppose your grandmother helped with that?”

“No,” she said. “I cut and sewed the sails.”

Father smiled and patted her head. Then he said, “Alfonso, tell me the truth. What is holding them up? Surely the ship should be farther along by now.”

Maris held her caravel up to the blue sky and watched the breeze fill the sails. She smiled, imagining it sailing out beyond the clouds.

After the three of them climbed down from the scaffold, Alfonso crouched beside her. “Don’t ask me how I know this,” he said, “but when you grow up, you will sail a big boat like *The Three Sisters*. Would you like that, little one?”

Maris froze. Being a real sailor was her secret wish. How did Alfonso know?

Father laughed. “She is five years old today, let’s not look too far ahead.”

Alfonso stood. “Good evening, Captain,” he said to Maris, then nodded to Father,

touched his cap and hurried away.

Please let my secret be safe, Maris thought. She studied Father's face.

"He has no business making fake prophesies to you, daughter. Forget them." Father took her hand. "Come, we'll walk by the ocean and clear our heads."

On the beach, they walked down to watch little waves lap the hard sand and leave white foam moustaches. As the sun set, the calm ocean water was streaked red and pink, like the sky. Maris breathed in the salt air and felt as she always did near the ocean, as if a giant hand was cupping her as she cupped her *Stella Maris*.

Alfonso called me "Captain," she thought and pointed at the bright line of the horizon. "I want to sail *there*," she said.

Father said gently, "But the horizon can never be reached. When you sail that far, it will be in front of you again, as far away as before. No one can get there."

"I can and I will," Maris said.

She knelt on the sand and, as foaming wave came up, she pushed the little ship into the shallow water. The receding wave carried it a short distance and left it lying on its side in the wet sand.

Father said, "We can find a calm tide pool and sail her there."

Maris picked *Stella Maris* up and brushed sand from her sail. "No," she said. "*Stella Maris* belongs in the ocean."