

CHAPTER 1

The Aristocrat



“Any time now!” exclaimed Uncle Harry.

Isabel listened to the echoes of the axes and mauls. The carpenters were underneath the *Aristocrat's* bottom, moving toward the bow. They were pounding out the last blocks that kept the schooner's big hull from sliding down the greased launching ways. Soon the shiny black vessel, stretched halfway across the Whitney shipyard, would be afloat.

A hot day might make the *Aristocrat* stick and refuse to slide. But it was November in Maine. And it wasn't hot.

Isabel counted the masts again. Six. *Two more than Papa's schooner would have had*, she thought.

"I've never seen anything quite like her," Grandpa Marsh marveled, leaning on his cane. "She'll make a mighty splash into the Kennebec!"

Isabel frowned. "Well, it should have been our schooner going over today."

"Don't let your papa hear you say that," Grandpa warned gently.

"Don't worry, Grandpa. He can't hear me all the way back at the house. Anyway, someone should tell him to do something about that grand oak frame that's wasting away on the stocks."

"And what do you suggest he do?" Uncle Harry cut in.

"Why, finish her up, of course. Our schooner was supposed to be done by now. It will be 1907 in less than two months! And winter is coming soon. Papa can't just let the frame be blown into a pile of timber! Besides, look at all the people who came to *this* launching. Ours would have been even more crowded, I'm sure of it!" But looking around, Isabel couldn't imagine half as many people fitting into the neighboring shipyard of Marsh & Marsh.

"Perhaps if we had a sponsor as pretty as Miss Whitney," Grandpa teased, eyeing the schooner's bow.

Isabel gazed up at the bow, where a throng of people swarmed the christening platform. A tall, husky man

puffing on a cigar caught her eye first. She had seen him before in town. Papa had tipped his hat to him. He was Walter Goodwin, the wealthy businessman and proud owner of the *Aristocrat*.

Just behind Mr. Goodwin stood John Whitney, the *Aristocrat's* builder. Even though he had done this dozens of times, he paced the deck nervously. His wife stood nearby, chatting with the guests invited aboard.

Finally, Isabel's eyes focused in on the star of the show, twelve-year-old Charlotte Whitney. Isabel hadn't seen her since the summer, when Charlotte and her friends had nearly knocked Isabel over with their bicycles. They flew by her so fast she didn't even have time to yell "Watch it!" Soon after that incident, Charlotte had left town for some fancy girls school in Massachusetts.

Taller than Isabel remembered, Charlotte held a bouquet of red roses in her slender, white-gloved hands. She wore a dark red suit coat and matching skirt. Below her decorative hat, jet-black hair fell in long ringlets down her back.

Isabel tugged at her own hair with envy. Mama had braided her straight, chestnut-colored locks that morning, making her look even younger than her ten years.

Suddenly, loud creaks and cracks filled the air.

"There she goes!" Uncle Harry bellowed.

The carpenters leapt out from beneath the schoo-

ner, hurdling over rolling blocks and timber to safety. As the *Aristocrat* began to slide down the ways, the crowd grew quiet.

Isabel had been to enough launchings to know what everyone was thinking: Would the large vessel land safely in the water? A successful launching was supposed to mean good luck for a ship. Isabel secretly hoped the *Aristocrat* would tip sideways into the river.

On deck, Charlotte raised the bouquet of roses. In one swift toss, she scattered the flowers across the bow of the schooner.

“I christen thee ‘Aristocrat,’” she pronounced, her voice vibrating like an organ. “And may God bless thee!”

Leaving a trail of smoke behind, the *Aristocrat* dropped off the ways into the Kennebec River. She landed upright with a powerful whoosh, then dipped her bow as if to curtsy. Whistles and cheers erupted from the crowd. Isabel glared at Charlotte Whitney’s beaming face.

I’d make a much better sponsor than her! she thought. *Edward would have been proud. Maybe Papa would even smile again.* It had been a long time since Papa had smiled. . . .

“What a spectacle!” Uncle Harry roared.

Grandpa nodded. “Goodwin’s got a fine vessel there.”

“Indeed,” Uncle Harry agreed. “I wish I owned a

piece of her.”

I wish she'd sink, Isabel mumbled under her breath.

The crowd was beginning to thin, as spectators made their way out of the shipyard.

“Well, I don't know about you,” Uncle Harry said, “but all this excitement has made me hungry. And my sister makes a tasty apple pie.” He turned to face Isabel. “Race you to your mama's kitchen?”

“You go on ahead, Uncle Harry. I'm not very hungry.”

Uncle Harry shrugged, then started off alone.

Using his cane, Grandpa hobbled closer to Isabel. “What's the matter, my dear?” he asked. “You've been scowling ever since we arrived. And it's a good thing Miss Whitney can't see you from back here!”

“I'm sorry, Grandpa. I just wish today belonged to us—to Papa and Edward, I mean.”

Grandpa wrapped his free arm around Isabel. “Every day belongs to your brother now,” he said softly, gazing toward the sky. “As for your papa, I can't say what he's thinking.”

“But that's just it, Grandpa! Papa *isn't* thinking. He's sold off two more ships this year. Our fleet is shrinking fast. Will he just get rid of the schooner, too? And how? Surely he can't sell her half-built!”

Grandpa tapped his cane against the cold ground. “Well, if it were me,” he said, “I'd reopen the shipyard this very day!”

Isabel raised her eyebrows. “You would?”

“Of course. But as you know, I turned the shipyard over to your papa when my legs started to fail. He made the decision to close it down.”

Even though Grandpa and Papa were partners, it was Papa who actually ran the business now. Still, Marsh & Marsh was just as much Grandpa’s as it was Papa’s.

That got Isabel thinking. If both Papa and Grandpa *owned* the shipyard, couldn’t either one of them reopen it? Maybe that’s all Papa needed—someone to reopen the shipyard *for* him!

When Isabel blurted out her idea, Grandpa looked at her thoughtfully. He smoothed his stubbly, gray beard and scratched his thick brow. Slowly, a smile grew on his face.

A smile so big it worried Isabel.