

Jo
&
LAURIE



MARGARET
STOHL & MELISSA
DE LA CRUZ

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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For all of you, dear readers.

Make your own happy endings; Jo would want you to.



“You’ve got me, anyhow. I’m not good for much, I know, but I’ll stand by you, Jo, all the days of my life. Upon my word I will!” And Laurie meant what he said.

—Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868)

I believe there are some natures too noble to curb, too lofty to bend. Of such is my Lu.

—Abba Alcott, on the subject of her daughter Louisa (1850)

AUTHORS' NOTE



THE STORY THAT we now think of as *Little Women* was originally published as two separate volumes written by Louisa May Alcott in 1868 and 1869.

In those pages, Jo March—one of young adult literature's most beloved writers and sisters—writes and publishes the story of her life with her family at Orchard House.

Our own reimagined story takes place *between* the two volumes, after the success of the first, as Jo struggles to write the second.

Just as we expect “Lu” did.

—MS & MdIC

Prologue



LITTLE WOMEN

*The Offices of Roberts Brothers, Publishers and Bookbinders
Washington Street, Boston, Massachusetts
1868*

*L*ittle Women? That's the title?" The author looked concerned. Above her light brown eyes and beneath her threadbare linen cap, the chestnut curls that framed her face were shaking. Miss Josephine March was all of seventeen years old, and though her girlish curves were slight, her spirit was immense.

There was nothing *little* about her, or her characters.

Or so she had thought.

The book in question—a volume of domestic stories, loosely inspired by her own family—was one she hadn't wanted to write, had in fact steadfastly *refused* to write, until her editor had offered a notably *unrefusable* royalty, instead of the usual piffling advance. Only then had she dashed off a dozen chapters in a fit of pique. To her dismay, he'd loved them, and she'd had no choice but to finish the final chapters, which she'd come to deliver now.

And lo—insult beyond injury—it would be called *Little Women*.

“Isn’t it perfect?” Mr. Thomas Niles beamed at her over his spectacles. Her editor at Boston’s (moderately) respected and (moderately) solvent Roberts Brothers Press, Niles felt he had developed some (moderate) expertise in the publishing industry. His authors, at times, disagreed.

This was one of those times.

“Far from it!” Jo drew a worn cambric handkerchief square from her pinafore pocket and dabbed dramatically at the corner of her left eye, although both author and editor knew there was no actual tear to be wiped away.

Only fury, and there’s not a cambric square big enough in the world for that—

“It’s dismissive!” Jo seethed. “It’s pap!”

“Oh?” Niles pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his bulbous red nose. “How so?”

“It’s . . . trite!” Jo dropped the handkerchief upon the bundled pages in front of her. They were tied with string, the requested final chapters, as painstakingly inked as the others before them. Her hands hovered, as always, just above the parcel; it was never easy, letting go of the fruit of *so many* stolen hours in her damp writing garret under the attic eaves, where she’d burnt her last saved stumps of candle-wax—as well as her fingers—and ruined her eyes in the service of one of these so-called *little* stories. *The nerve!*

Niles sighed.

“Trivial!” Jo huffed.

“When you say *trivial*,” Niles began, “do you mean—?”

“For starters, that’s not a title, it’s a literal restatement of the very essence of the plot,” Jo interrupted.

He eyed the parcel hungrily. “Yes, and I’m told it’s charming.”

Jo’s head-shake was very nearly violent. “It’s not *charming*. I’m not *charming*.” After making a living writing her customary *blood-and-thunder* tales—or so she thought of them—this business of feminine tradition and treacle was all very unfamiliar. To be fair, with the exception of her sisters, Jo knew and liked hardly any girls at all.

“You’re *very* charming, Miss March. Nearly as charming as your book,” Niles said, looking amused. “And a tribute to little women everywhere.” He pulled a tin from his outer vest pocket. “Peppermint?”

Buying time with sweets, again. Niles offered them up only when he found himself in a tough conversational crossroads, Jo knew.

So that’s it, then.

There really is no changing the title.

“Thank you, no.” Jo looked out the window as a horse and carriage clattered up Washington Street, spraying mud in every direction, including onto the glass of the (moderately) well-kept Roberts Brothers offices. She tried not to wring her hands in despair and failed. “I suppose it is what it is. Perhaps it doesn’t matter what you call it. I dashed the thing off in weeks, and for what?”

“Money,” Niles said. “The almighty dollar. Which you happen to need, not unlike the rest of us. Speaking of earning your

wage, are those the chapters you owe me?" He reached for the bundled pages between them.

"It's not about earning my wages," Jo said, tightening her grip on the manuscript. "Not *just* about that." She'd written it on assignment, because Niles was experimenting beyond the standard Continental Gothic that came flowing from Jo's pen so easily.

And, yes, because of the money.

The result was a collection of domestic moments, sure, but it had surprised even her; it wasn't just feminine drivel, even if the title might perhaps now doom it to be. She hadn't expected it to come as quickly as it had, or as pleasantly. Not that she would admit that to her editor. "Money's not a reason. Not a proper one, anyway." *Even if we are poor as rats.*

"Many people—*most*—seem to think otherwise," Niles said, yanking his handkerchief from his pocket and mopping his brow, which was beginning to perspire as they argued. He was never without a handkerchief; decades of sobbing authors, Jo suspected, had trained him thus.

"Not all people," she sniffed.

"Certainly my investors do. You aren't the only family with war debts, you know."

Jo had no answer for that, for he was right. She supposed she would never be considered a real writer now, never be taken seriously by the public. Never invited to lecture at the Athenaeum with Ralph and Henry and . . . *Who was that other chap?* Perhaps this was what happened to feminine scribblers who aspired above their little place in the Concord world.

Strike another blow to the weaker sex—and all that rot.

“Charming,” she sighed.

“Ideally, you’ve written equally charming last chapters as well.” Niles eyed the stack hopefully. “Seeing as my typesetters have very nearly caught up with you.”

Jo snorted, which was a good indication of her feelings concerning the process that put her words on the page. Lottie Roberts, who manned the letterpress, had once changed “*Christopher Columbus!*”—Jo’s most oft-uttered oath—to “*My Heavens!*” and Jo had never forgiven her. This was, truthfully, not an isolated event; “*Blazes!*” had been mysteriously printed as “*How sad!*”—“*Hell!*” as “*The Down Below!*”—“*Blow me down!*” as “*No!*”—and “*A French pox upon you, Adventuress!*” had been eliminated altogether.

“Your typesetters go too far.” She glared, repeating the warning not to change a word of her text for the twentieth time.

“Yes, well.” He snapped shut his peppermint tin. “When women of polite society are allowed to speak like common sailors, you are welcome to terminate their employment yourself, Miss March.”

“And I look forward to the day, sir.” Jo pursed her lips.

“I am confident you shall meet it.” Niles smiled. For despite all indications to the contrary, the two were fond friends. Niles reminded Jo of her father, who had left Concord years earlier to join the Union army as a chaplain. Mr. March had come home only once in all that time—when the Union prevailed and the war was won, three years ago. Shortly thereafter, he’d left once more to volunteer in the Reconstruction efforts in the South, helping to

build schools and churches for previously enslaved people. And though his letters usually came frequently, the March women felt his absence keenly.

But Jo still had Niles, and if they fought, they fought well, each considering the other the more harmless version of their species. (The dollar a story Niles paid to run Jo's wild romantic adventures didn't hurt, either. Neither did the fact that subscriptions to his circular, *The Tall Taler*, had gone up by forty-three since engaging her. *Forty-three!*)

"Call it what you will. No one will read it, anyway." Jo tapped her fingers along the brown-paper-wrapped parcel. "I don't know why you believed you could sell it."

"Perhaps." Niles nodded.

"I should have used a different name instead of my own," she sighed. "Eustacia. Thomasina."

"Possibly." He nodded again. "Eustacia Emerson is lovely. I'm quite partial to Thomasina Thoreau, but Hildegarde Hawthorne could also do just fine." He winked.

Hawthorne. That was his name, the other Athenaeum chap!

"Fine." She picked at the string about the parcel. "Take my daft little book of scribbles and do with it as you will."

"I've seen dafter. Trust me."

"Trust you? You have no sense of anything, least of all publishing! Why, you couldn't sell *Romeo and Juliet* if I wrote it for you."

"Admittedly a bit somber for my taste—I do prefer a happy ending to my *sensation stories*. So do our *Tall Taler* readers. Why

couldn't Romeo have married Juliet and settled down in a nice Tuscan villa? A sequel by any other name . . .”

The author bit her lip; it kept her from responding in a discourteous manner.

“Now give it here,” the editor said, sliding his fingers impatiently across the blotter atop his desk and taking the manuscript from her hands.

“Take it.” She scowled.

Manuscript obtained, Niles traded his peppermints for the bottle of peppermint schnapps he kept in the bottom of his drawer for special occasions.

“A toast!” he offered, pouring two thimblefuls into two cups.

Jo grudgingly accepted.

“To our *Little Women!*” her publisher cried. “And to the bright future of Jo March, Thomas Niles, and Roberts Brothers! May 1868 prove to be a banner year for us all!”

Jo clinked her glass against his. It seemed rude otherwise. With a final sigh and a shake of her curls, the author drank to her defeat. The editor drank to her success.

Little Women it was.

1869



ONE YEAR LATER

1



HAPPY ENDINGS

*C*hristopher Columbus! I don't believe it," Jo said, shaking her head at the small mountain of carefully inscribed paper envelopes covering the round dinner-table of Orchard House, the Marches' neatly kept cottage farm. "Who are these people? They just keep coming."

The old cottage didn't answer.

Jo shifted uncomfortably in her horsehair-cushioned seat, and even the soft lawn collar of her new day-dress didn't make her feel better. This could partly have been due to the particular circumstances of the dress itself; Thomas Niles had sent one for each of the March women, all the way from Boston by carriage, at an expense never before undertaken by any Orchard House resident, with a note: *For Our Dearest Little Women, with Greatest Admiration for Our Most Productive Partnership, and with the Hope of Many Future Successes. Respectfully, Mr. Thomas Niles, Editor & Partner, Roberts Brothers.*

The dress was fine. It was the implication of the note that made Jo squirm. Two thousand copies, sold out almost from the start! Certainly, the book's popularity had surprised everyone, particularly its eighteen-year-old author. But future successes? Beyond Mr. Niles's promotion to partner? That meant future books about her family. And successes meant *expectations*. Expectations she wasn't sure she could meet. She'd wanted the book to do well, naturally, but—

"Believe what?" Amy, Jo's little sister, called up from the root-cellar, where, as usual, she was foraging for something better than the dull piece of bread and scrape of butter she customarily had for her tea. The last of the raisins, most like. "Coming from where?"

"Where else? That book, of course!" Jo shook her head. Her chestnut ringlets were bound up in rags that were meant to make her look exotic, but only succeeded in making her look like one of their old homemade rag dolls. (*Perhaps*, as her older sister, Meg, had pointed out, *because they're made from the very same rags.*)

Nineteen-year-old Meg was distressingly traditional, which accounted for her taste in the most tediously earnest boys—the one thing both Jo and Amy could agree upon. Otherwise, the three March girls did not agree on much, though they loved each other dearly.

A small shout echoed up the cellar steps. "Don't yell. You know it upsets *Marmee*." Jo heard the sarcasm in the tone; she could imagine the smirk on her little sister's face.

"Don't . . ." Jo picked up an envelope and tore off the corner with her teeth. "Do *not* start!" There was a pause—and a

crash—and Jo imagined the baskets of last year’s potatoes that had most like been upset on the stone cellar floor. It was a bright sunny day in May, and Jo wished she felt more sanguine about her success and less rattled by its expectations.

Then she heard Amy’s voice. “You were the one who gave her that treacherous nickname, Jo! She’s *Marmee* forever now, in *thousands and thousands* of copies of a book everyone in the world mistakes for our real life!”

Jo tossed the letter over the grating and into the dining-room fireplace, picking up another. “Oh, you ridiculous tartlet. Blame Mr. Niles! He insisted.”

The stomping that accompanied the declaration brought Amy up the stairs and into the small, warm dining-room where Jo sat.

Amy flung herself into the creaking wooden chair across from her sister. “What are you doing, anyways?” But she instantly forgot her question upon spying a ceramic bowl in the center of the table. “I didn’t know there were oranges! Oh, Jo! Such fancies we have now!” Oranges were a rare delicacy, shipped all the way from Florida or raised in a greenhouse, and only the wealthiest households were able to afford them.

It was true. Though it was still a bit soon for Jo’s royalties to make the March family much in the way of actual dollars, Jo’s career now brought certain niceties into the house on a regular basis. And Jo had to admit, the more-than-modest success of the book had been satisfying, if bewildering, to acknowledge. It had completely taken her by surprise, and if a few obnoxious reviewers had dismissed her work as *slight feminine rubbish*, her pride was

somewhat assuaged by the very real physical comforts said scribblings had brought them.

Jo pulled the fruit bowl away from her sister, thumping it back to the table, where it had been holding a pile of letters down. “Mama’s saving those for preserves,” she scolded.

“Hannah hasn’t let Mama Abba make preserves in years,” the youngest and blondest and prettiest of the March sisters answered back.

Youngest and prettiest and by far the most irritating, Jo thought. *At least I got that part right.*

“So what’s gotten you all up in arms?” asked Amy.

Jo turned back to the table in front of her and motioned to the pile of mail with a touch of incredulity. “These are letters from my readers.”

Amy was making a little pile of orange peels on the table. “All those? For you? You’re *no fun* at all! Why would anyone write you?”

“Precisely the question.” Jo quirked an eyebrow. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Perhaps because they feel that I write to them . . . well, *for them.*”

“You mean in the *book*?” Amy had gone wide-eyed, as if the idea of Jo’s newfound regard—or more specifically, her little tome’s—had only now struck her. “At least they aren’t thronging to our actual house, I suppose. Your readers.”

“Could you imagine their disappointment? Upon learning the home of the Great American Authoress was this damp and earwiggy place?”

“I suspect they’d be more shocked by your earwiggy curls,” Amy sniffed, with a self-satisfied toss of her own neat braids. “And what do these letters say?”

Jo stared at the pile. “Some begin by asking for an auto or a photo—neither of which I can afford to send. But really, they want the very same thing. All of them.”

“Well, what is it?” Amy asked, impatient now.

Jo sighed. “They want to know how it all ends, which apparently means who marries who.”

“Well, they have a point. How *does* it end?” Amy cocked her head, sucking juice from her delicate fingers.

Jo snorted. “It ends the way it ends! Isn’t it enough the way I left it? That I become a writer? That Laurie goes off to college, and our father returns from war? That a very serious boy proposes to our very pretty sister—and that you, scamp, learn the error of your ridiculous ways?”

Amy smirked. A curl of orange peel fell to the tabletop.

“You’re hideous.” Jo flicked the peel gingerly off an envelope. “You should live in a barn.”

“*I’m* hideous? While you’re the one telling the whole world about the time Mr. Davis struck me and made me throw away my pickled limes?” Amy leaned forward and pinched the soft white bit of Jo’s wrist.

It was true; some of the more popular chapters of Jo’s little book had involved Amy’s misbegotten transgressions at their old school—in particular, a scene of the littlest March smuggling a sack of concealed treats into her desk and being punished as a result.

Amy had sworn to never forgive Jo, though she'd enjoyed her newfound fame all the same. "*Of course* that character is inspired by me," she'd say to anyone who asked. "Really, I created her myself."

"Maybe you shouldn't be such a ravening little *pickled piglet* every second of every day. Besides, those limes did, in point of fact, fund the purchase of those very oranges," Jo teased, "so I assumed you approved of those sorts of things."

"And so I do, those things. Most things. Though Meg was right that it was a curious choice to invent a neighboring dowager aunt who absolutely despises us all . . ."

Not this again.

"You know why." Jo frowned. "It was just, everything was a bit too—"

"*Treacly*, I know, I know. The great and temperamental Jo March can only handle so much sugar in her spice." Amy looked at Jo sideways. "If only we did have a rich aunt."

"Anyway, it's not about me," Jo tried to explain, as she had a thousand times before. "It's about the story. They all come with their own shape and spirit, you know. I can't control how they turn out."

"Why not?" Amy demanded, shoving a section of *lime-funded orange* into her mouth. Even the scent was intoxicating, especially within the rather more pedestrian walls of Orchard House. The smell of adventure and faraway lands.

Well worth the price of the limes, Jo thought.

Amy kept going, dribbling juice as she spoke. "You're the writer, aren't you?"

"I am, and use a napkin, you monster." Jo pulled a folded

square of cloth from beneath the pile of envelopes, brandishing it at her sister.

“What? This?” Amy grinned with an orange-peel smile instead of teeth. Still, she took the napkin, spitting her peel into it. “I still don’t understand.”

“I only write the characters for what feels like a moment, until the characters sort of . . . take up the quill on their own . . . and begin to write each other. Tell each other their stories. They breathe on each other, and make each other live. And from then on, I’m just an eavesdropper, Amy.”

“But you crawl upstairs with your quill and your ink-pot, and that’s when the story begins. I’ve seen you do it a thousand times.”

“That’s where it all starts. But the early bits are just, I don’t know. Pantomimes made with paper dolls . . . paper dolls and promises, I suppose.”

A final wedge of orange halted in mid-flight as she shot her big sister a look. “What about Beth?”

Two pink spots appeared in Jo’s cheeks. “What about her?”

Amy put down the orange. “You changed what happened to her. You let her live. You *wrote* her, Jo.”

Jo looked at the orange peels in the palm of her hand. She couldn’t bear hearing Beth’s name mentioned, not even by Amy, who had loved her as much as Jo had. “That was Niles’s idea. He said the book was too sad otherwise.”

Is that it? You did it for Niles?

Or did you do it for yourself?

Unlike what had happened in real life, in Jo’s book, Beth, the

third March sister—younger and sweeter than Jo, older and wiser than Amy—had recovered from scarlet fever and lived. It was the least Jo could do for poor Bethie, whose absence in the house was still a shadow they lived under, an ache they all felt.

The angel of Orchard House.

Because the truth was, since she'd passed, Beth was still somehow there but not there in Orchard House—same as her abandoned, porcelain-faced dollies, still in their old room, sealed in the close air of the cedar chest at the foot of the empty daybed.

The chest Jo walked past no less than ten times a day.

In some ways, I've begun to imagine myself a well-worn Roman step . . ., she had written into her tear-smearred journal. (Never mind that her "Rome" was only the capital city of her heart's imagination, and that Jo had yet to venture farther than Boston.)

. . . just a sanded bit of stone in an empty stairwell, still carrying the deep grooves and depressive dents of every passing sole that ever touched it. A meaningless monument to absence made permanent. To eternal loss and stillness. To the impressions that remain, whether or not we ask them to, long after their makers have turned to dust.

"Your editor said the truth was too sad for your book?" Amy gave Jo a pointed look. "He wasn't wrong, you know. Though some girls like sad books. Poppet does."

Jo looked past her sister to the little grating that hid the fire,

forcing herself to breathe, in and out, again and again, as far as the nipped-in waist of her new day-dress would allow. Beth had known her best—and worried about her—for Beth had seen how dark Jo could get and, more to the point, how lost she would feel without her Beth. And so Beth had made her promise—

No, stop.

It was still too painful. Jo could not let herself dwell on her memories. On the grief that had wrung out Orchard House in the days after the scarlet fever had taken the second-youngest March.

It was only writing her book, her *Little Women*, that had allowed Jo to begin to feel even some relief.

Jo took Amy's discarded orange peels and tossed them into the fire with a brisk, no-nonsense motion, as if she were sweeping out all her sorrows with them. They curled up into little black husks, making the whole house smell like oranges.

2



THE SEQUEL PROBLEM

No more sad truths. No more ghosts, however angelic. Not this afternoon.

Jo inhaled sharply and changed the subject. “I thought we might go into town and get you a new ribbon tomorrow.”

“You did?” Amy sounded shocked—and gleeful. “Can we?”

“I believe so.” Jo smiled as she tossed another letter onto the pile. “Roberts Brothers wants a sequel, you know. Now that the first book is selling, Mr. Niles says if I were to do it, he could finally offer us the sort of money that could properly change our lives.”

Amy sat up. “Really?”

“They’ve had to reprint it, you know. They’re even in talks to make *Little Women* into a theater piece in London’s West End.” Jo couldn’t hide the pride in her voice at that fact.

“Oh.” For once in fifteen years of her life, Amy had nothing to say.

“A literary society wants to bring me on a steamship to Paris for a speaking engagement.”

Amy's mouth fell agape. "Paris?! You? Because of a *book*?"

"Yes, me. They want me to speak next year." Jo frowned. "Why else do you think the fruit baskets and the flower arrangements and the sweets and the dresses keep coming?"

But Amy hadn't heard a word after *Paris*. "Speaking engagements! The theater! The River Seine! *Resplendid!* Oh, truly! As famed as if you'd written *The Orphan of the Rhine!*" Amy clapped her sticky-sweet hands together. "Think of all *those* oranges! And grapes! And the cherries we'll have this summer! Oh, cherries!" Cherries were Amy's favorite and hard to come by for those of modest means.

Jo shook her head. "I can't think of it. It's all become . . ."

"*Wonderful?!!*" Amy's eyes widened.

"Strange. And . . ."

"*Incredulous?!!*" Amy clasped her hands dramatically.

"*Confusing.* Because it isn't real, you noodle-head. My book's based on us, but my characters aren't us, not really. We're not *those* little women." The title still made her cringe a little. "So how can I keep writing them?"

"So?! If we aren't, then who is?" Amy was spluttering now. "*The cherries, Jo!*" Her face had gone pale. "*Think of the cherries!*"

"I do! It's all I think about! Why do you think I wrote the stupid thing in the first place? Father's war debts . . . and all the costs of maintaining Orchard House . . . the animals and the gardens . . . coal and milk and butter and meat and sugar . . . setting aside something for Mama Abba's future . . ." Jo tried not to feel resentful of her father for leaving them alone, but some days were harder than

others. While she rarely said it aloud, she couldn't help but wonder what she would have been free to write if she didn't so keenly feel the pressure to earn. *Then again, as a member of the gentle sex, would I have been encouraged to write at all?*

"Animals? Gardens?" Amy was still spinning. "You mean *ball gowns!* And *petty-furs!* And the *Grand Tour!* We can travel the world, Jo! We can go to Rome and Sardinia and Capri, where I will paint and you will write and Meg will . . . come with us!"

"Amy!" Jo shook her head. "Stop swooning. I don't think I can do it. I've even tried to plot it out in my head. But I'm not . . . a romantic. Not this sort." She sounded strange as she said the words, mostly because she herself wasn't entirely certain of what she meant by them. "*Good Wives.* That's what the title is meant to be, of the second part. Roberts Brothers wants us all married off, Niles says. What madness! If I can't imagine it, I can't very well write it, and I can't sell a book I can't write."

Amy laughed. "Jo March! Of course you can! You've been writing romance since I was five! I've been more swooning damsels and lovelorn dashers in your plays than anything else!"

"That's not the same."

Amy ticked them off on her sticky fingers. "Roderigo of the North, Alphonse the Odious, the Countless Count . . ."

"This time it would be us, Amy. Even if . . . it's not. I can't write romances for *us.*"

"*Poppycock!*"

"Amy March! That mouth!" Jo tried to be scandalized, but in

truth, it was always a bit thrilling when one of the other Marches cursed.

“You’re just scared.”

“I’m not!”

“Of course you are,” Amy scoffed. “You’ve had a bit of luck with your first book, and now you’re afraid you’ll do something wrong and spoil everything.” As usual, her sister had hit the nail on the head, or, as she was more likely to say, *the head on the nail*.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Jo could feel her temper rising with her voice. She reached to pull the nearest golden curl, but Amy squirmed away.

“Don’t wrestle me like I’m Laurie!” Amy howled. “And don’t be prickly, I’m just telling the truth!”

Could she be right? The little potato? Jo thought about it. *She may just be right.*

“Don’t be such a fraidy-cat,” Amy said, earnestly. “Give the people what they want, Jo. Give them the sequel they deserve! You owe it to your readers . . . not to mention the London West Enders.”

“Do I?”

“Of course you do!” The youngest sister was no longer listening. “As for me, in the sequel, make sure I marry a count! No—a *prince!*”

Jo couldn’t help but smile. Her little sister was nothing if not predictable. “Pierre, the *Prince of Pickled Limes?*”

“No! Christophe . . . the *King of Cherries!*” Amy shouted as Jo chased her around the chair.

The wooden door pushed open as Meg March followed their mother inside, trailed by Hannah, their loyal servant and, in many ways, a member of the family. Hannah had helped raise the March girls from infancy. Jo truly didn't know how Mama Abba would have survived their father's absence without her.

"What king?" Meg asked, pulling off her plain, round-brimmed bonnet. The splintering straw was shaped like a coal scuttle, Jo thought. Way too homely for their sister. Even if they could have afforded a ribbon or two, it was near impossible to get Meg to really enjoy anything.

Regardless, Meg was generally held to be the first great beauty of the March family, with her rich dark hair and doll-like porcelain complexion—perhaps even more fragile than a doll's, like a teacup Jo might drop, or a silk stocking she might tear.

When Meg blushed, Amy said it looked like watercolor paints splashed across her cheeks. But Meg only looked delicate. In truth, Meg was as tough as any March sister, inside and out. She could beat Jo up the attic stairs and shinny up the old oak before Amy had reached the lowest branch. The rest was all feminine artifice and girlish manner—as per the style, and the society, of the day.

What a fat lot of rot, Jo thought.

Poor as the March family was, she didn't know why her older sister bothered with feminine artifice at all. She herself certainly didn't. Yet Meg did always seem to care what other people thought of her. And now Jo could not stand that her horrid *little* book had become a source of some awkwardness between them. But it had, because Jo had written that their neighbor Laurie's

otherwise unremarkable tutor, John Brooke, had proposed to Meg, and Meg had accepted him, when in truth they had never even exchanged a word with each other.

“What king? Why, the king I’m going to marry in Jo’s next book! The Cherry King!” Amy announced, even as she held up an orange.

“Amy! Those oranges were the last of the fruit basket the *book man* sent! I was saving them for the preserves!” Hannah scolded. “Now we’ve nothing to send to the picnic on Sunday.” Hannah sighed, but she drew her arms around Amy. “Next time, stick to the raisins, dearest.”

“You just wait for my wedding. All the preserves in the kingdom, Hannah. They’ll be yours—and you won’t have to can a one.” Amy winked wickedly.

“Lovely, my dearest. Are we invited to the wedding ceremony, then?” Mrs. March asked, draping her shawl over the little hook on the wall. “I’m not sure I have something suitable enough for the wedding of a proper king.”

“You’ll need Parisian silk,” Amy decided. “With the finest whalebone stitching, sewn right into the seam like a corset. It’s *au currant*,” she said.

Like the raisin. Jo smiled. She never corrected Amy anymore. The idiosyncrasies of Amy’s speech would surely give way to womanhood soon enough, and Jo found herself already missing them. Plus, they had been such great material in *Little Women, First Part*—which was what Mr. Niles had now taken to calling the first book, in hopes of pressuring her into the second.

Jo sighed.

“*Au courant*,” Meg corrected. She always corrected her sister, as the French tutor and governess that she was.

Amy ignored her, as the ungoverned student that *she* was. “And petticoats and puffed sleeves . . . opera gloves . . . and satin brocade slippers . . . and ribbons! Loads and loads of ribbons.”

“Don’t worry.” Meg smiled at their mother. “Jo will write you something *lovely* . . . but then make sure everyone knows your dress is borrowed.” She rolled her eyes at Jo. “I told you that Belle lent me her dress in secret!”

“Better borrowed than scorched!” Amy made a face at Jo.

If Amy had suffered the shame of the pickled limes, Meg had endured the shame of the borrowed dress, having scorched the back of her own—even though Jo had given herself that particular shame in the story and set it at Mrs. Gardiner’s party instead. Still, everyone who had been at the real Moffat ball knew which March girl that particular scorch mark had belonged to . . .

This is why I can’t write the sequel. Who knows what it would do to them? I’ve already wounded Meg’s pride by pairing her off with Laurie’s tutor when he’s never even said a word to her.

“Now, what fun would a dress be with no scorch marks?” A booming voice followed them inside, and the sound made everyone smile.

Jo pushed back her chair. “Exactly. That’s what makes it a story, you ninnyies.”

Theodore Laurence—affectionately called Laurie—burst into the room, lighting the whole place up as he entered, just as he

always did. Laurie was Jo's best friend, their next-door neighbor, and, luckily for Jo, the sort who didn't care too much for books—not even hers, not even when he appeared in them.

Quite the opposite; he insisted he'd never even read them.

Today, though, he carried inside an armful of paper envelopes, dropping a few at every step.

"Get out of my sight, you horrid boy!" Jo groaned. "Shoo! You're banished. I can't handle you and another one of your deliveries *most foul*."

The Laurences lived across the road from the Marches—and routinely brought in their mail as a favor. Laurie took his duties as Jo's postman with a great deal of mock seriousness, just as he did every new opportunity to tease her.

"Oh, you can handle me." Laurie laughed. "At least, you always have. Quite well, if you don't mind my saying."

"It's true, isn't it?" Jo smiled, despite her annoyance.

A sweaty lock of sun-streaked gold-brown hair flopped into his eyes, covering half of his cheerful, ruddy face. "I have always belonged entirely and devotedly to you, since long before you had such a great many passionate fans, *Milady Shakespeare*."

He tried to manage a bow, but it looked rather like a stagger and only sent more letters flying. Though an athlete, Laurie could often be awkward; though intelligent, he could often be a fool; though rich as a Cherry King, his tastes tended toward the acquired rather than the obvious. Jo suspected he'd had more than enough of *finer things*, and was interested in something more substantial. What that might be, however, she could not bring herself to yet imagine.

She reached out to place her hand gently upon his flushed cheek. “It’s true, dear boy. Even before I had a single reader, I had a singularly devoted you.”

She kept smiling as she reached for his ear . . .

“Undeniably.” Laurie’s eyes were on hers, as they so often were, these late-spring days. “I remain your first and your greatest—”

. . . and twisted as hard as she could.

“OWWW! SWEET GODLESS HEATHEN BEAST! What sorry man would have you!? Atrocity, thy name is woman! This must be hate mail!”

With that, Laurie howled and tossed the whole load of envelopes into the air, where they flew like so many handfuls of confetti about the room.

As befits the wedding of a Cherry King, Jo thought. Just so long as it’s not mine.

3



UNWRITTEN

The next day, Jo found herself in front of Meg's students while Meg found herself in bed with a spring cold and a borrowed volume of *The Necromancer*—Flammenberg's latest, just translated from the German. Jo was irritated that Meg had gotten her hands on it first (just as she'd done with the Dickens before that!), especially since, in return, all Jo had gotten were two very bored children squirming in front of their equally bored substitute governess.

"Why must we practice our handwriting again?" The older daughter (*Beatrice, or Bethany, was it? Belinda?*) regarded Jo with some skepticism. Jo didn't blame her; the lesson was so sodding dull, Jo would have wanted to break her own slate over her teacher's head had she been asked to do it herself. At that moment, their makeshift parlor classroom seemed very much the prison it was—to pupils and teacher alike.

"Why, indeed?" *These are Meg's students*, Jo thought; *they'll*

need a Meg-like answer. Unfortunately, Jo rarely had a Meg-like anything, let alone an answer. Instead, she leaned forward and stared into the child's eyes. "So that, *Sweet Countess Belinda*, when called upon to handwrite pirate maps with immense clarity or else be made to walk the plank, you are not fed to the sharks."

"Really?" Belinda's braids snapped as she startled to attention.

Jo sighed. "No."

"It's for writing tidy market-lists," the girl's brother said from his own blot-stained paper, a smirk on his lips. (*Leopold? Leon? Lewiston?*) "And tidy recipes. That's what girls do, Belinda."

Jo frowned at him. "Girls do a *great many things*, my esteemed *Master Leopold*."

Belinda looked up at her thoughtfully. "*Until* they get married?"

"Course not," Leopold snorted. "*When* they get married. That's their job. The cooking and the laundry and the shopping-lists."

"Oh." Belinda sounded disappointed.

Leopold smiled. "Now, the man of the house, he could very well be a sea captain out walking the plank. I intend to go to sea, myself. To India."

"Only India?" Jo raised an eyebrow.

"India has tigers in it," Belinda said, wistfully.

"But we're respectable, so at least you won't have to be a governess," Leopold said, looking at Jo. "Will she?"

"*Will I?*" Belinda looked nervous.

Jo thought about answering both of them—*with a sound slap*—and then thought the better of it, given the March Quaker streak

and her family's general distaste for violence. "These are all excellent lines of questioning. And seeing as the rather *delicate topic* of relations between the sexes seems to hold such interest for you," she said, sternly, "I've just the thing."

She pulled out a dog-eared copy of Byron, the most scandalous of her entire collection—which accounted, truthfully, for the dog-eared bit. "Copy the entire page of verse, please. Top to bottom. With care. Lord Byron deserves your best handwriting."

As soon as the ledgers came out and the book was propped open, the room fell utterly silent. Leopold was immediately glued to the page, and Belinda's eyes went wider and wider as she read in silence, her mouth forming a small O.

Jo watched with satisfaction as their hands shook, copying (*savoring!*) every inappropriate word and graphic descriptor, while the clock plodded most non-Byronically toward her freedom.

When she could take it no longer, she stood and stretched, pacing the length of the carpeted hallway outside the parlor prison.

This was why she wrote the first book, wasn't it? To be free? Freedom, after all, was the whole point, was it not? Byronic or otherwise. Freedom to create, to do as she pleased. Freedom from poverty and servitude. Freedom from war debts, from worry about who would pay the coal man and the butcher. Freedom from having to be the kind of girl who grew up to only write grocery-lists.

Freedom to go and write whatever she liked . . .

Like Good Wives, for the Roberts Brothers?

Jo paced the hall.

If not for that, then what? Why bother?

But the thought triggered another, a memory of the last time Jo had posed such a question. It was the fateful night Amy had burned Jo's first finished manuscript to ash in a fit of spiteful sisterly pique. The shock of the loss had sent Jo spinning to her darkest place, hurtling her into one of her bone-chilling, soul-killing winter moods that—no matter how merry she seemed—was always waiting right outside her own heart's door. Beth had sat with Jo in bed for hours that night, gently patting her older sister's heaving shoulders while she sobbed and threatened to never write again.

“Why bother?!” Jo had cried.

“Mama Abba says you're writing your way out from the shadows to the light, every day,” Beth told her. “Writing your way back to Orchard House, and to us, as you build your castles in the air. So you can't stop, you see? You must never stop, Jo, because I need you here with me. In *our* castle.”

“I must never stop or we shall never have anything to eat but bread and water,” Jo moaned into the quilts, sobbing harder. “Never mind any castles.”

As Jo thought of it now, she wondered if it were still true. Like perhaps all writers, Jo wrote not just because she wanted to, which she did, and not just because she needed to earn a wage, which she did, but because she must. Because she needed a way—and a place—to live. Despite the darkness. Even if only a castle in the air.

Jo had always known she was meant to be a writer; it had forever been her earliest memory and the most important thing in her life. She couldn't remember why or when she'd first believed

it might happen. She'd just always known—and with an absolute surety she'd never felt about anything else—that she could be one, at least in terms of natural talent and proclivities.

She was perhaps *wild and queer*—as she liked to say—and truly rubbish at a great many things, but at this one thing in particular, this writing thing, she was good. Better than good.

She, Josephine March, was meant to be a writer of books. A great many books. Her mind, her soul, her imagination—sometimes it even felt like her very body itself—were bursting with all that she had to say. And now not only had she written a book, but she had published it as well.

She was a writer.

So why couldn't she write?