

A NOVEL



*The
Orchard House*

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI



Praise for novels by Heidi Chiavaroli

The Orchard House

“As a longtime fan of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, I was eager to read *The Orchard House* by Heidi Chiavaroli, anticipating a glimpse into the life of the author who penned the classic. I got that and so much more. . . . *Orchard House* invited me in, served me tea, and held me enthralled with its compelling tale.”

LORI BENTON, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BURNING SKY, THE KING’S MERCY, AND MOUNTAIN LAUREL*

“*The Orchard House* is a captivating story of sisters, difficult relationships, and the mending of broken hearts. . . . Heidi Chiavaroli has written *Orchard House* with depth and soul.”

ELIZABETH BYLER YOUNTS, CAROL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE SOLACE OF WATER*

“With insight into the complexities of female friendship and sisterhood, Heidi Chiavaroli spins a dual tale that is at once rooted in history and solidly contemporary. *The Orchard House* is sure to please historical fiction fans, readers of Louisa May Alcott, and anyone who has ever had a friend who felt as close as a sister.”

ERIN BARTELS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *WE HOPE FOR BETTER THINGS AND THE WORDS BETWEEN US*

“A line from *Orchard House* captures the very essence of this time-slip novel. Chiavaroli did an exceptional job ‘giving awareness through the power of this story,’ merging the poignant topic of domestic abuse between historical and contemporary. This is a story I had a hard time walking away from, even after reaching the epilogue.”

T. I. LOWE, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE CAROLINA COAST SERIES

“I knew from the very first page that this was going to be a special book. Lyric, evocative, and honest, *The Orchard House* is a book meant to be savored.”

SUSIE FINKBEINER, AUTHOR OF *STORIES THAT BIND US* AND *ALL MANNER OF THINGS*

“Alcott fans, take joy! Heidi Chiavaroli has brought Louisa’s world of Concord to life through captivating characterization in her modern story line, and in her historical timeline through exquisite detail both carefully researched and respectfully imagined. *The Orchard House* is a home for the literary soul.”

AMANDA DYKES, AUTHOR OF *SET THE STARS ALIGHT* AND *WHOSE WAVES THESE ARE*

The Tea Chest

“Captivating from the first page. . . . Steeped in timeless truths and served with skill, *The Tea Chest* is sure to be savored by all who read it.”

JOCELYN GREEN, CHRISTY AWARD–WINNING AUTHOR OF *BETWEEN TWO SHORES*

“*The Tea Chest* brings two women, separated by centuries, face-to-face with the same question: What is the price of liberty? A master at writing dual timelines, Chiavaroli takes us beyond the historical connection between these two women and wraps them together with a shared spirit.”

ALLISON PITTMAN, CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF *THE SEAMSTRESS*

“Swoon-worthy romance, heartbreak, and intrigue combine for a thrilling story that will keep me thinking for a long time to come. Bravo!”

AMY K. SORRELLS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE I SAW YOU*

“*The Tea Chest* is timeless and empowering. Long may Heidi Chiavaroli reign over thoughtful, effortlessly paralleled fiction that digs deep into the heart of America’s early liberty and the resonance of faith and conviction she offers as its poignant legacy.”

RACHEL MCMILLAN, AUTHOR OF *MURDER IN THE CITY OF LIBERTY*

“*The Tea Chest* is not only a story of America’s birth as a nation, but also one that reflects the clamoring in humanity’s heart to soar unfettered by the weight of chains that bind.”

JAIME JO WRIGHT, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE HOUSE ON FOSTER HILL* AND *THE CURSE OF MISTY WAYFAIR*

“*The Tea Chest* is an enthralling story of beauty birthed from sorrow, hope amid ashes, and healing through pain.”

TARA JOHNSON, AUTHOR OF *WHERE DANDELIONS BLOOM* AND *ENGRAVED ON THE HEART*

The Hidden Side

“*The Hidden Side* is a beautiful tale that captures the timeless struggles of the human heart.”

JULIE CANTRELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* AND *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PERENNIALS*

“Heidi Chiavaroli has written another poignant novel that slips between a heart-wrenching present-day story and a tragic one set during the Revolutionary War. I couldn’t put this book down!”

MELANIE DOBSON, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *CATCHING THE WIND* AND *MEMORIES OF GLASS*

“This page-turner will appeal to readers looking for fiction that explores Christian values and belief under tragic circumstances.”

BOOKLIST

“Filled with fascinating historical details, Chiavaroli connects two women through an artifact of the past. This heartrending tale will engage aficionados of the American Revolution and historical fiction.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Both halves of *The Hidden Side* are singularly compelling, with more of a fine threading between stories than an obvious connection. There is also the

shared message that even during times of spiritual darkness, with prayer and hope, forgiveness and new beginnings are always possible.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“Chiavaroli’s latest time-slip novel does not disappoint. Both story lines are fully developed with strong character development and they are seamlessly woven together.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, TOP PICK

Freedom’s Ring

“From the Boston Massacre and the American Revolution to the Boston Marathon bombing, history proves the triumph of grace. . . . Evocative, rich with symbolism, honest in its portrayal of human errors, *Freedom’s Ring* explores what happens when individuals reach the limit of their own ability and allow God to step in.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“First novelist Chiavaroli’s historical tapestry will provide a satisfying read for fans of Kristy Cambron and Lisa Wingate.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Joy, anguish, fear, and romance are seamlessly incorporated with authentic history, skillfully imagined fiction, and the beautiful reminder that good can—and does—come out of darkness.”

ROMANTIC TIMES



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HEIDI CHIAVAROLI



Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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The Orchard House

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Designed by Jacqueline L. Nuñez

Edited by Caleb Sjogren

Published in association with the literary agency of Natasha Kern Literary Agency, Inc., P.O. Box 1069, White Salmon, WA 98672.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

The Orchard House is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com or call 1-800-323-9400.

ISBN 978-1-4964-3472-2 (HC)

ISBN 978-1-4964-3473-9 (SC)

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Mom.

*Thank you for not only giving me your beautiful poems for
this story, but for always believing in this dream for me.*

I love you.

Acknowledgments

As I SIT DOWN to write this thank-you note to the many beautiful people who have had a hand in this novel, I am once again overwhelmed by the collaboration of such an amazing team.

First, a huge thank-you to my mother, Donna Anuszczyk, for coming to my rescue with the beautiful poems contained within this story. I was an author (one who does not consider herself a poet) with a deadline and in need of poems. More than willing, you graciously gave me your best and amazingly enough, several of them fit my story line perfectly. Thank you, Mom!

Thank you to another one of my big champions, my agent, Natasha Kern. Your belief in my stories means so much to me. Thank you for your faith when things might look a bit bumpy. I learn something from you each time we talk, and I'm so very grateful for your support.

To the beautiful team at Tyndale—my amazingly talented and gracious editors, Jan Stob and Caleb Sjogren, and also to Karen Watson, Elizabeth Jackson, Andrea Garcia, Mariah León, and Jackie Nuñez. I can't imagine a better publishing

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family to be part of. Thank you for making this writing dream possible.

Thank you to my critique partner, Sandra Ardoin, for keeping me sane. Also to my sweet writing friends who I know I can reach out to whenever this journey feels like a lonely one—Melissa Jagears, Melanie Dobson, Tessa Afshar, and Amy Sorrells.

Thank you to the staff at Orchard House for such an amazing tour and for answering my questions. You made *Little Women* and Louisa May Alcott come alive in an entirely captivating way. I don't think I could ever get enough!

To the many readers, bloggers, and reviewers who are enthusiastic about my books and have taken the time to write a review or give a shout-out, you all rock. Thank you!

Thank you to the three most important men in my life—my husband, Daniel, and my sons, James and Noah—you put up with crazy deadlines, skimpy dinners, and weepy moments. Thank you for always loving me and for giving me the inspiration and support to do this thing I love.

Lastly, thank you to the greatest Author of all, the Author of life and hope. Do with these words what You will.

*Dear Father, help me with the love
That casteth out my fear,
Teach me to lean on thee, and feel
That thou art very near,
That no temptation is unseen,
No childish grief too small,
Since thou, with patience infinite,
Doth soothe and comfort all.*

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, AGE 12

CHAPTER ONE

*I used to imagine my mind a room in confusion,
and I was to put it in order.*

~ LMA

Taylor

CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS

JULY 1995

Thirteen isn't quite grown-up, but it's old enough for a girl to realize that hope can be a dangerous thing.

The first time I realized this I was no more than four. My mother had dropped me off with Uncle Rob. This wasn't unusual, but this time, she was gone more than two sleeps. Longer than she had ever been gone.

When I asked my uncle when she'd be back, he only shrugged and said, "You better hope soon, kid."

Hope.

I did that a lot back then. Each morning when I woke, throwing my threadbare blanket off my shoulders and rolling off the couch to search the small rooms of Uncle Rob's apartment, but finding the woman in his bed was not my mom.

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Each night, when I fell asleep, thinking if I only *hoped* hard enough, and maybe held my breath real tight while I did it, my mother would appear by morning.

But time and time again, hope failed. And still, it seemed, I didn't learn. Not after I found my mom's obituary on Uncle Rob's fold-up kitchen table, where I'd left my precious copy of *Little Women* when I was eight, not after the police came and hauled him off to jail when I was eleven, and not when I found myself in the vicious grip of the foster care system a short time later.

And then, a year ago, the Bennetts took me in. And I found hope again. Only this time it was a fragile, frayed thing—a lot like the toothbrush I had growing up that Uncle Rob never remembered to replace.

Victoria Bennett had been my best friend since we were seven years old, and now she was my sister. Her parents gave me new toothbrushes and Nike sneakers and love as much as they were able. They gave me a chance to go to Jo March Writing Camp at Orchard House, a place Victoria and I had become obsessed with. All those years of immersing myself in the world of Jo March, imagining what it would be like to have a family, to have even just one sister . . . to belong.

And now I was here, in the very room where Louisa May Alcott had written her best-loved classic. In the very house where she had set the adventures of her “little women.” Dipping my toe in those dangerous waters of *hope* once again.

I closed my eyes and soaked in the near magic of Louisa's bedroom. Beneath my bent knee and through the thin nylon of my string bag I felt the hard edges of my nine-year-old copy of *Little Women*. In some ways, I regretted bringing it

today. Mom had sent it to me that first Christmas after she had left. There'd been no note within, just a thick manila envelope with my name on it, the book naked of any red-and-green holiday wrappings.

The present wasn't really suitable for a girl who hadn't even entered kindergarten. Yet while I knew deep down she had probably grabbed it up as a last-minute thought at some secondhand store, I couldn't help but imagine and hope that she had spent hours pondering the perfect Christmas present for me, that she had wanted me to have this gift and this message—the story of a family that fiercely loved and went through hard times together—even when she couldn't bring about that reality in my own life.

I cherished it more than I ought. Still did. And I couldn't resist bringing it along today. Hoping that the old would somehow make way for the new. That maybe, just maybe, the wounds of my past would be covered over with perfection.

Victoria and I had looked forward to this for months, and I couldn't wait for this moment—the moment when I was certain some grand story would strike my consciousness, when time might cease to exist and the brilliance that had inspired Miss Alcott would descend upon me in a magnificent cloud of glory.

I looked down at what I'd written, more journal entry than inspired glory.

There's something funny about being the one on the outside looking in.

Not funny ha-ha, and not funny strange, because strange means out of the ordinary, and for me, not

*belonging is more normal than out of the ordinary. So
what kind of funny am I talking about?*

Funny lonely.

Funny I've-gotten-good-at-hiding-my-tears.

Funny I-wonder-if-it-will-always-be-this-way.

I hastily flipped to a fresh page, feeling the press of time squeezing tight. I poised my pen over the paper, but nothing came. I peered out the window beside Louisa's half-moon desk, wondered if she'd glimpsed the same elm more than a hundred years earlier.

I sighed and pressed the pen on the page until a small dot of black ink expanded beneath it. A dot, but no words.

A warm hand fell on my shoulder and the scent of mothballs enveloped me as our instructor, Mrs. Hayes, leaned over my shoulder.

"There's no wrong answer in writing, dear. It seems the spirit of the muse was upon you a page back. Perhaps entertain it. You never know where it might lead."

I gave her a small smile but hoped she wouldn't linger. I had only another ten minutes to start my literary masterpiece.

She left, but instead of concentrating on the birth of words, I looked across the room at my best friend, perched in front of the fireplace. Victoria scribbled furiously in her notebook, not seeming to come up for a moment of air. Story ideas seemed as plentiful to her as daffodils in spring, and although most of them involved Zack Morris or a New Kids on the Block love triangle, at least she had ideas—and guts enough to write about them.

I swallowed down my jealousy and forced my pen to move

across the paper, scratching out a sentence that described a beautiful old English house. When Mrs. Hayes told us our writing time was nearing an end, I looked down at the flowery words I'd painted—beautiful, but without character or conflict within sight.

When it was time to file out of the room, I took the last place in line and discreetly ran my hand over Louisa's painted desk. For a fleeting second, the whisper of something extraordinary floated up to me . . . something that felt like possibility and hope and excitement. But before I could grasp it and claim it as my own, it vanished.

I pressed my hand harder into the white paint, searching, willing some trace of talent to seep into my being. If I concentrated hard enough, perhaps I would become someone special, perhaps a gift would be given to me, perhaps I would be able to support myself so that I would never again have to depend on the state or the foster care system, or even the Bennetts, to do so. If I could just find this secret *something*, I knew I would find where I truly belonged.

As the line moved forward, I let my hand fall from the cool wood of the desk. The girls made their way downstairs, their footsteps loud on the ancient staircase. Mrs. Hayes stopped me from following them.

"Please don't be discouraged, Taylor. Do you know that both Louisa and Jo had many false starts and even rejections before finding their voice?"

"They did?" I couldn't help the curiosity that crept into my tone.

She nodded. "Why, one of Louisa's stories was considered so sensational, no one would touch it. But guess what? It's

being published—finally—later this summer. Your time will come, dear. Stick with it, and maybe your sister can help you.”

My sister.

For the first time I felt something shut down within me at the mention of Victoria. I supposed we were sisters in a sense. And yet sometimes—times like these—our differences seemed so apparent that I thought I was just kidding myself. Maybe it was a lie—me being a Bennett, me pretending I could be like all these other girls here.

For once, I felt a need to reveal the truth and set things straight, or it might wrap its cold fingers around my throat and strangle me.

“She’s not my sister,” I whispered and followed the rest of the girls down the stairs of the old house.



After we said goodbye to our classmates and teachers, I gave one last look at the beautiful, gabled house. Drapes decorated the sides of each window. A grand old chimney topped the historic house and I reminded myself again how lucky I was to be here, where my favorite book of all time had been written. No matter if the words didn’t come today—perhaps they would tomorrow.

Turning, I joined Victoria on the walk back home, skipping over the cracks on the sidewalk, my backpack bumping against me with each jump as I listened to Victoria prattle on about the story she’d started that morning. Her words were as plentiful in speaking as in writing, and I listened with rapt attention as we passed the imposing white colonial that used to be Ralph Waldo Emerson’s home.

“I’m sick of writing about surface stuff, you know? Being at Orchard House, it was like I felt Jo speaking to me, telling me about a new kind of story . . . a story she would have written.”

I marveled at her imagination, her confidence in her story. Was it because she’d grown up with two loving parents? If I’d been with them from the beginning, instead of living in the house of an absentee uncle, would I have Victoria’s surety?

“What’s it about?”

She kept walking but I noticed the faraway look that took over her expression. Her blue eyes turned bright and she absentmindedly pushed aside a stray lock of hair. “It’s about a girl—I named her Sophia—isn’t that the most beautiful name? Anyway, Sophia falls in love with a rich man named Logan, who will only love her if she changes herself. He wants her to cut her hair and only watch football and refuses to let her write her stories because he thinks it’s a waste of time and in the end, it’s about her finding who she is, not about what some boy wants her to be. Don’t you think Jo would love it?”

“Wow. That’s . . . good. I think she would love it.” We kept walking up Lexington Road, the center of town just in the distance. “How do you come up with all your ideas?”

She shrugged, flung her hair over her shoulder. “I don’t know—they just come. Yours don’t?”

I shoved my hands in my pockets and concentrated on my feet.

Victoria squeezed my arm. “You’ve been through a lot. Don’t be so hard on yourself, okay?”

I wriggled from her hand. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop borrowing lines from your mom.”

“I’m trying to help, Taylor.”

“Then be my best friend, like you used to be.”

Victoria quieted before answering. “I’m trying,” she whispered.

I ignored the throb of guilt that pulsed through my middle. I had no right to lash out or be anything but grateful to the Bennetts, and that included Victoria. “I’m sorry. I—I know you want to help.”

We were almost to the middle of town, and she stopped walking. “We always said we wanted to be sisters, and now we are. Aren’t you happy?”

I was a horrible person. Wretched, as Jo March might say.

“Of course I’m happy.”

But something was missing. Not on the surface, but right underneath. Something that made me feel like an intruder within the Bennett family, an intruder even on this new life I got to live. On this side of things, I felt that I owed Victoria, that we were no longer equals. And worse, I knew . . . knew that her parents, Paul and Lorraine, had invited me into their family not so much because they loved me, but because they loved their daughter.

Even so, how could I be ungrateful? They’d saved me from the foster care system, a place where young teens like me floundered and flopped until they aged out. At least I belonged somewhere now, if only in name.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. My complicated feelings on family didn’t matter. What mattered was that I showed my gratitude, that Victoria or her parents didn’t ever—ever—regret taking me in. I held out my hand to her and she took it. I squeezed. “Best friends forever, right?”

She squeezed back. “Best friends *and* sisters forever.”

We walked, our hands swinging between us. “Now,” she said. “To help you come up with your brilliant story idea, I say we reinstate the Pickwick Club.”

I laughed. “We’re too old.”

“Tell that to the March sisters!” Victoria raised a fist in the air, clearly fired up by our day at the Orchard House camp. And when she got an idea in her head, nothing was known to stop her.

We’d modeled our Pickwick Club after that found in *Little Women*, and though neither I nor Victoria had ever read Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers*, it didn’t seem to matter. Our club had originated five years ago as a simple exchange of short stories and ideas—what some more professional writers would call a critique group. We met once a week in the room above the Bennett garage and encouraged each other in our endeavors, taking turns reading stories. I’d always come up with an idea because I never wanted to show up empty-handed and because Victoria was always willing to help me out when my characters got themselves stuck.

But somewhere along the way we’d stopped our club. Sometime after Victoria had told me that Brad Lincoln had kissed her at our first middle school dance. Sometime after the Bennetts had decided to “try me out” as a foster child. Sometime after boy bands and *Beverly Hills, 90210* had become more the fabric of our lives than a classic nineteenth-century story.

But here, today, it seemed to resurrect itself, and I couldn’t say I wasn’t happy. This was what I longed for: a return to the past, a return to a simpler time when happiness didn’t hinge

on a boy's attention or how well—or not so well—my chest was growing, but on the simplicity and pleasure of creating a story.

Victoria pushed me lightly with her shoulder. “Come on, sis. If we're going to be famous authors one day, we need to get serious about our writing. I'm talking meeting more than once a week. I'm talking word counts, critiques, contests.” Her clear complexion was flushed, excitement making her ten times prettier. “Why couldn't we start submitting to agents? Dream big, you know? Start reaching for those castles in the air?”

I smiled at the reference. The March sisters often talked of their dreams—their hopes—as “castles in the air.”

But it was one thing to have dreams, another to start acting on them. Victoria didn't realize how hard it was for me to bare my words even to her, my closest friend. Yet I couldn't stomp on her enthusiasm. And I wanted to succeed, to find that elusive *something* that had whispered to me from Louisa's desk. “Okay. I'm in.”

She rewarded me with a toothy grin. She was getting braces next month. I needed them, too, but I couldn't expect Paul and Lorraine to spend the money.

“Let's start right away!” She ran ahead and I chased after her, the warm air brushing my hair back, my backpack slapping my rear as I pushed my spindly legs forward. We ran past the center of town, past Holy Family Parish and the town hall, past the Colonial Inn and North Bridge Inn, and up Monument Street to the Bennetts' massive, gabled three-story colonial. I remember the first time I saw the home, how I'd come off the bus with Victoria, the note my uncle had written giving his permission for me to go home with

my new friend clutched tight in my hand. We'd chosen one another for art partners that day. I remember Victoria telling me over plastic palettes of watercolors that her mom made the best banana oatmeal cookies in the world and how she'd have some ready for us when we came home.

Now I followed Victoria up the driveway and, for the hundredth time, tried to accept what the Bennetts occasionally reminded me: that this was *my* home. *My* driveway.

Victoria held the screen door open for me and I followed her in, grabbing my notebook from my bag before hanging it above the large bench in the foyer. We went into the kitchen, where a plate of fresh cookies awaited, as always.

We grabbed a couple before heading through the back door toward the garage. We traveled beneath the portico, spotted Lorraine in her flower beds, and walked toward her.

"Hi, girls!" Victoria's mother waved and stood, brushing the knees of her pants. "How was camp?" She put an arm around Victoria and kissed her forehead, then, with only the slightest bit of awkwardness, squeezed my shoulder.

I imagined those arms around me in a hug, the light scent of her Elizabeth Arden perfume, all roses and jasmine and cedar, enveloping me in a freshness that matched the flowers she loved so much. Still, at the same time that I longed for them, those gentle arms also frightened me. An embrace was giving part of yourself away, making yourself vulnerable, exposed. An embrace would mean I had that much more to lose. An embrace was risky.

I took a step closer to the garage. My relationship with Lorraine was . . . funny. In this case, funny-strange, because it was definitely out of the ordinary. She'd gone from being my

best friend's mom, whom I was distantly fond of, to being my guardian and foster mom, to being the realest mom I would likely ever have. Before her, I knew very little of mothers, and most of that was by way of television shows. Clair Huxtable and Jill Taylor and Maggie Seaver. Where did Lorraine fall into my life? The Bennetts had done so much—attending foster classes, wading through lawyers and state regulations and piles of paperwork—all to adopt me.

But I was thirteen. I seemed to have missed the boat on the proper time period in establishing myself with a new mother. Now, even as I longed for and feared the prospect of Lorraine's arms around me, I realized the impossible awkwardness of the situation. I never invited physical contact with the Bennetts—with anyone. My uncle had never touched me, which I suppose I should be grateful for when listening to the stories of some of the other girls in foster care, and yet quite simply, I didn't understand the world of physical love. Victoria thought nothing of squeezing my hand or slinging an arm around my shoulder, and by now I was nearly comfortable with it. But to initiate such a gesture? To Lorraine, who took me into her home and cared for me? Quite simply, I didn't know how, even if I wanted to.

I stood quiet as Victoria chatted on about our day, gushed about the story she was writing, and told her mom about our plan to reinstate the Pickwick Club.

"You sound inspired. How about you, Taylor? Did you have fun?"

I nodded vigorously. "Very much. Thank you so much. I really am grateful." My words gurgled out like a clumsy, bubbly stream.

She smiled and I noticed how the creases around her mouth and eyes were pleasant on her pretty face. “You’ve thanked us quite enough, honey. We’re glad to do it. Just enjoy, okay?”

I blinked fast. Once, then twice, then looked with longing at the garage. Victoria skipped out of her mother’s arms, said we’d be back down to set the table for supper, and pulled me along to race up the outside stairs to the room above the garage.

Victoria’s father had finished the space long ago. It had a bathroom, an array of exercise equipment, a pool table, and a small sitting area with a television. I placed my stash of cookies on an end table alongside my notebook and headed to the bathroom. Victoria opened one of the huge windows, sprawled out on the area rug near the couches, and opened her own notebook, the cap of her pen already off.

When I had flushed the toilet, I washed my hands, staring at myself in the mirror. I wasn’t ugly, but neither was I particularly pretty—not pretty like Victoria, anyway, who pulled off a fawn-like, alluring quality with her petite frame and dark looks. She reminded me of Winona Ryder. I, on the other hand, was too tall and gangly to pull off anything fawn-like. Giantlike, maybe. Aside from my thick auburn hair, there wasn’t much beauty to me.

I pressed my lips together to hide my crooked teeth from the mirror before opening the door but stopped short at the sight of Victoria holding my black-and-white composition notebook, open to the first page. Blood rushed in my ears, a silent whooshing sound that quickly spread to the rest of my body, traveling with tunneling force until it throbbed at the edges of my fingers and toes.

“What are you doing?”

Victoria looked up, something like pain written on her face. “I—I wanted to see where you were headed . . . to help . . .”

I snatched the notebook from her. “You shouldn’t have done that.” My hot hands gripped the cover of the notebook, their warmth making the cardboard damp. I wanted to take the notebook and run back to the main house and upstairs to my room. I wanted to forget the Pickwick Club and Victoria and even Jo March Writing Camp. But I couldn’t. Such a display would make me look spoiled, ungrateful.

And what did I have to be sulking about, anyway? I lived in one of the most beautiful homes in Concord with my best friend—my only friend, really. Her parents were providing for my every need—they sent me to writing camp, for goodness’ sake! How many times had I longed to simply visit Orchard House? Now I got to write there.

I hadn’t a right to be unappreciative. And there was no place for me to go. Nowhere else I even wanted to go. Uncle Rob wouldn’t be out of jail for at least five years. I needed the Bennetts. And I needed them to not regret taking me in. No matter what.

And that started here. With not running back to my room and locking myself in, as I so desperately wanted to do.

Instead, I turned to the treadmill and hopped on, pressed the buttons until I had to run to keep up. Fast.

“What are you doing?”

“Running.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to run, but I don’t want to run *away*.” I

had trouble talking around my breaths, wasn't even sure if my words were true. Sometimes, crazy as it was, I *did* want to run away.

Victoria leaned over the treadmill and pushed the Off button. The belt slowed to a stop.

"I'm sorry you're lonely," she said.

I swiped at my nose, ordered tears to stay put.

"I wish I could help more."

I shook my head. "You do. You have. If I didn't have you, I don't know what I'd do. It's me. I—there's something wrong with me."

She didn't deny it, and somehow that made me feel better.

Without warning, her eyes lit up. She grabbed the curved handle of the treadmill. "That's it!"

"What?"

"Your story. *You*. Oh, I'm so deliciously jealous!"

I scrunched my brow. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled me off the treadmill and back toward the sitting area. "You. How many other thirteen-year-olds know what it's like to be in your shoes? How many of us would want to know? You have something all the best writers have—experience. And the emotions to go with it." She opened my notebook to the first page and jabbed her pointer finger into my neatly written words. "This proves it." She thrust the notebook at me. "Write it. Write your story. Like Louisa did in *Little Women*. Write what you know, and it will be brilliant."

I squinted at her, trying to decide if I should give her words any credence. "Are you just trying to make me feel better?"

"I'm serious, Taylor. Readers want to feel. Make them feel. Write your story and make something good come out of it."

Write my story. Make something good come out of it.

That feeling again—the one I couldn't seem to resist at the same time that it often proved unreliable—stirred in my chest. That hope.

Could Victoria be right? Could there be something of worth in my words? In my experiences?

I dragged in a wobbly breath, scooped up my pen, and sat on the rug. I could do this. Write what I knew. Force good from it.

I thought of my copy of *Little Women* and what it had done for me in giving me a connection to my mother. A connection to a perfect life. Even if it was a last-minute thought from a thrift store, that story helped me.

What if, in writing my story, I could one day give hope to another lonely girl?

I swallowed down the intimidation that came with that thought. I caught Victoria's gaze and we shared tentative smiles. I opened my mouth to say "Thank you" but words wouldn't come. She nodded in encouragement and I focused on putting pen to paper.

Maybe I wasn't so alone after all.