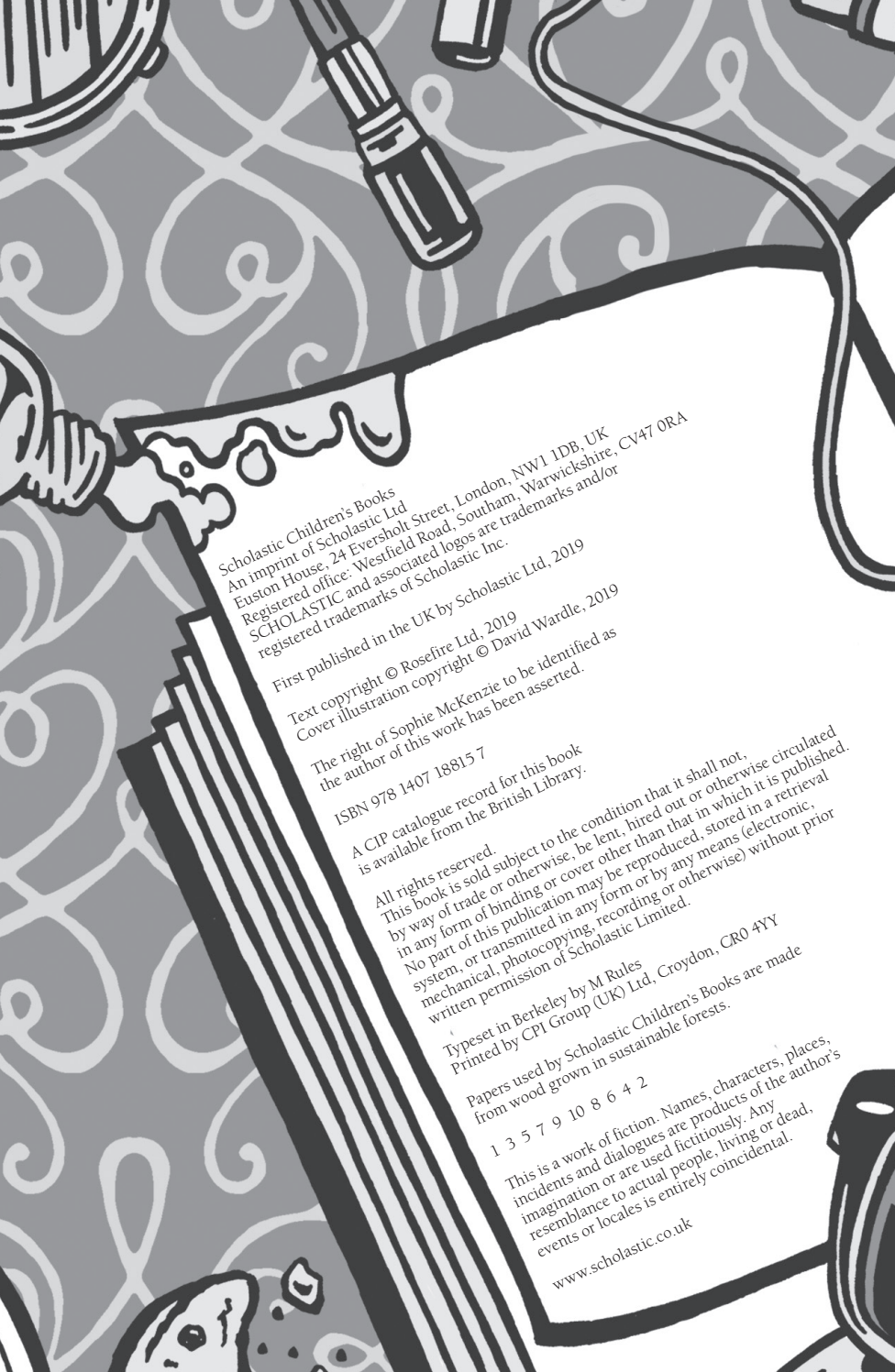
A modern re-telling of Little Women

Becoming Jo



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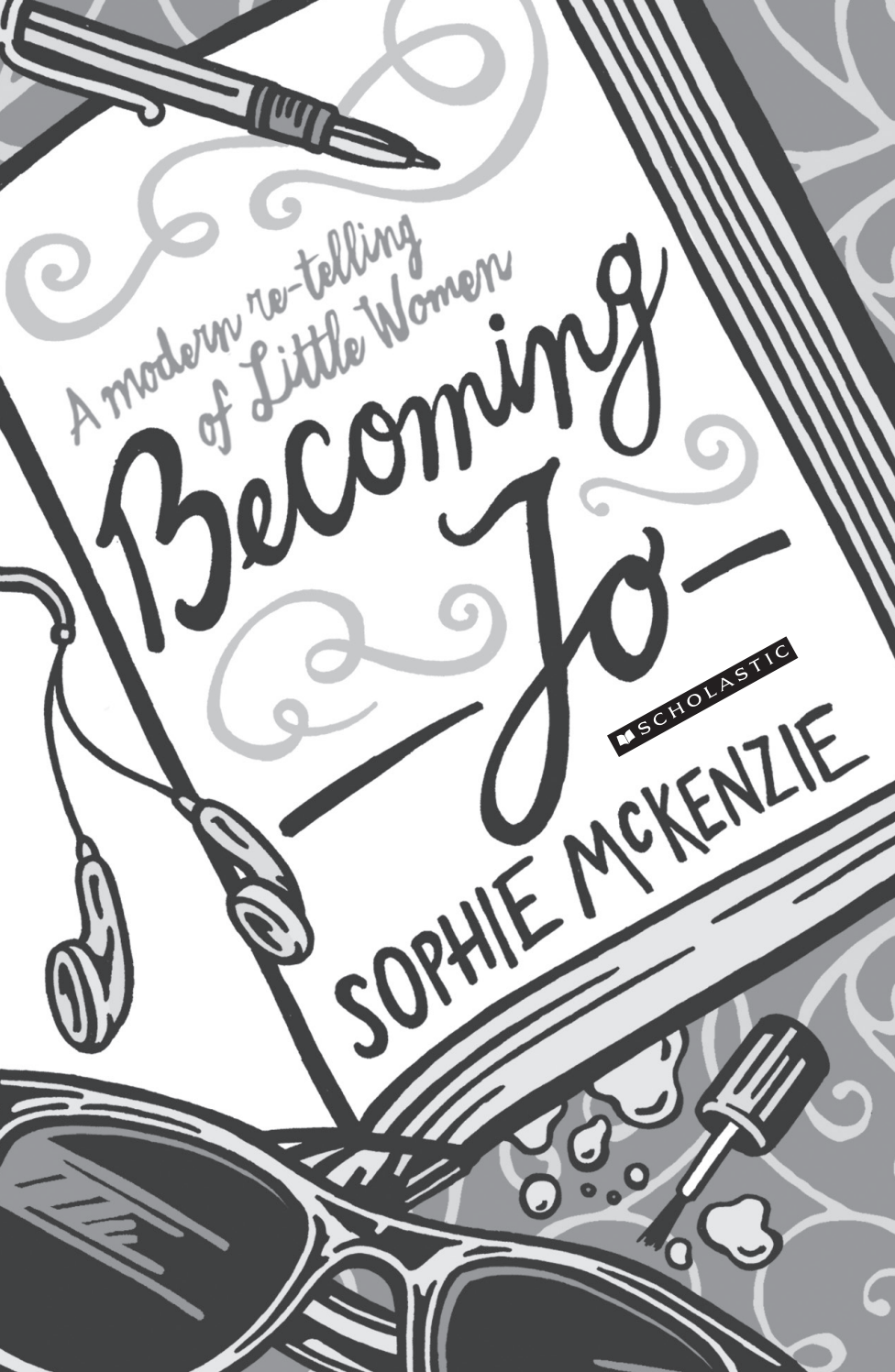
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SCHOLASTIC
SOPHIE McKENZIE



For Meg, a true friend.

Part One

Winter



Chapter 1

The central heating isn't working so we've gathered around the fan heater in the living room. The window is frosted from the cold and the skies outside are heavy and dark, like the headaches I get sometimes when I've been writing for too long.

We're talking gifts.

Or, rather, the lack of them.

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," I grumble from our faded armchair.

"I know," groans Meg. She's sitting on the sofa opposite. Both the sofa and the armchair came from our old house but are really too big for this room, which is cluttered with a bookcase at one end (Mum sold the one that matched it), a TV in the corner

and a long coffee table in front of the sofa. "There's a Celine knock-off on Asos, and a maxi dress that would be sooo perfect for me. But it's fifty quid more than Mum said we could spend."

I shrug. Trust Meg to be thinking about clothes. She loves poring over celebrity pictures, studying their style. I don't get it myself. Though I'd never say it directly to Meg, I kind of think the whole world of designer products is a bit of a waste of time. It's like this house we're living in – I know Meg and Amy hate how the kitchen table is chipped and the sofa is shabby and the chairs and the carpet are threadbare, but to me it seems comfortable enough, if a bit small.

"Are you sure that dress would really work on you, Meg?" Amy asks, one eyebrow raised. She's perched on the sofa too, one foot dangling over the end, her pink-cased phone in her hand. "I mean . . . you know, maxi dresses can be a bit, er, swamping unless you've got quite long legs. . ."

"Shut up!" Meg and I speak together, rolling our eyes in unison. However different my older sister and I are, there's one thing we definitely have in common, and that's how epically annoying we sometimes find our youngest sister. Amy might be the baby of the family, but she's got a sharper tongue than the rest

of us put together, not to mention nuclear levels of self-absorption.

She's also – and I know this gets to Meg a *lot* – extremely pretty. So's Meg, as far as I'm concerned. They've got the same kind of looks, in fact – fine blonde hair, rosy cheeks and big blue eyes – but whereas Meg worries about being short and dumpy and moans that she has a "splodge of a face", Amy's features are delicate and her face is heart-shaped like a pixie's.

And me? Well, I'm dark-haired and tall and skinny, with large hands and a tendency to clumsiness. Nothing like Meg and Amy and not much in the looks department either, though I do have long, shiny hair which Mum says I'll be grateful for one day. Luckily, not being pretty doesn't bother me at all, though I do wish I owned at least one piece of clothing that didn't have a food stain on it.

"Going back to presents," Amy says, giving me and Meg a typically haughty look. "As an artist it's really important I have access to the best tools available. Like Photoshop Lightroom."

I snort. Loudly.

Amy casts a withering glance in my direction. She sticks out her chin. "You just wish you had my talent. And my artistic senile-bilities."

"Your *what?*" Meg asks.

"She means *sensi*-bilities." I laugh.

Meg stiffens. She hates my laugh. Says it's too big, too hearty.

"*Jo.* You sound like a man."

"Looks like one too," mutters Amy.

I suck in my breath. "Better than looking like—"

"I'd just like Daddy to come home," Beth says. We all stop and look at her. "For Christmas," she explains. "I'd just like Daddy to be here."

She's cross-legged on the floor beside my armchair, busy with her knitting. I'd half-forgotten she was in the room. This happens a lot to Beth. She's actually thirteen and three-quarters, over a year older than Amy, but she seems much younger somehow. I wish she would toughen up. Not because I don't love her just as she is, but for her own sake. She's so shy, a lot of the time it's like she's invisible.

"I know," Meg says gently. "But Dad's tour doesn't end for months."

Silence falls as an icy rain drives against the window. We've only been here in this little three-bedroom brick house for a couple of weeks and so far it's rained every day. We're on the outskirts of a town called Ringstone, near the south coast of

England. We had to move from our bigger house nearer London because Mum lost her job as a social worker and Dad's money wasn't enough to cover the rent. He's a humanist – that's a non-religious – minister embedded with British troops in Syria. He's been away for nearly a year now. We speak on Skype whenever we can, but the lag is always terrible and it's hard to know what to say. Mum doesn't like us to tell him anything negative, which I get, but it does means the conversation can get a bit awkward as we stop ourselves mentioning all the bad stuff that's happened recently: the move and the weather and the fact that Amy's so annoying, for instance.

"I wonder what Dad will do on Christmas Day," Beth says.

"Do you think the soldiers give each other presents?" Amy asks.

I open my mouth to tell her that I'm certain the army hands out shiny wrapping paper and pink ribbons for this very purpose. Then I catch sight of Beth's face and press my lips together.

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for Dad at Christmas except hope that he's OK," Meg says, and she sounds so sad that a lump rises in my throat.

"Actually, there is one thing we could do," Beth

ventures. "Something he asked us to do while he was away."

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "What's that?"

"He said we should look after Mum," Beth says softly.

"Which we do," Amy says. "Duh, Beth."

I shoot her an exasperated look, then turn to Beth. "Go on. What do you have in mind?"

"Well. . ." Beth glances round, her expression timid but her eyes shiny with hope. "I was thinking maybe instead of dividing Mum's Christmas budget between the four us, perhaps we could pool it and buy something really nice for her instead?"

I'll be honest. My first thought is that I don't want to give up my own present. I've been saving up for ages for a new laptop, and I was hoping my share of the Christmas money would finally mean I could buy one. I want to be a writer. I write every day: homework obviously, when I have to, but also poems and, for the past few months, I've been working on a story which basically started out as a fan-fiction piece inspired by my favourite set of books – Rowena Riddell's *Blacktower* series – and has now taken on a life of its own. Having a new laptop for myself,

instead of the ancient one of Dad's with the sticky *r* key, would make all the difference.

But then I think about Mum, and the year she's had: losing her job and having to move without Dad being around to help and worrying all the time about how he is and about money. . . Beth is right: we should give her a nice Christmas after all that stress.

Plus it's clear from Amy's frown that she *totally* hates the prospect of not getting a gift herself. And that's enough to swing it for me.

"Awesome," I say. "Mum deserves it."

"Yes," Meg says, with just a touch of hesitation in her voice. "Yes, Mum would really appreciate that and I can't afford that Asos dress anyway."

"Amy?" Beth asks.

We all look at our youngest sister. She purses her lips and shrugs. I grin. At least Amy knows when she's beaten.

"So what shall we get her?" I ask. "Some books? She loves reading and she never gets the chance these days."

"I was thinking a nice scarf," Meg muses. "Maybe blue, like her eyes."

"No," Amy says. "It's got to be perfume. She

finished that bottle of Acqua di Parma that Aunt Em got her months ago."

"What about a cashmere dressing gown?" Beth suggests. "Mum said she loved the one on the Aspen's website *and* it's reduced right now. If we put all our money together we can easily afford it."

Which is so obviously the best idea that within half a minute it is decided. Meg goes online straightaway to make it happen, while Amy tries to look pleased and Beth beams with delight.

"This gives me an idea for a new scene for my Rachel and Rodriguo story," I say, leaping to my feet and sending the cushion on my lap skidding across the floor, narrowly missing Beth's mint tea. "Let's try it out."

"I'm not being the dog again," Amy mutters, bending over her phone.

"Ooh, Jo, what's it about?" Beth asks. "Is it a Rachel scene? Or a Rodriguo?"

"A Rodriguo, and it's about Christmas," I explain.

I'm writing a love story about a young couple who are being kept apart by the girl's cruel father. Rachel has been sent away to a glamorous but super-strict boarding school, while Rodriguo is travelling the length and breadth of the land trying to find her. I

sometimes get my sisters to act out scenes which may or may not make it into the finished novel. Mostly they don't work out – Amy, in particular, is very hard to direct, although I can't fault her for commitment to her part – but on a couple of occasions acting out an idea has given me inspiration for an entire chapter.

I clear my throat, eager to explain what I have in mind: "After many delays and setbacks, Rodriguo is getting close to Rachel's boarding school. It's snowing and bitterly cold and he reckons he's going to arrive just in time for Christmas. On the way he meets a peddler who gives him a bowl of soup because he's starving and the peddler's selling jewellery, so Rodriguo buys a beautiful necklace that he's going to give Rachel when he rescues her. He sets off into the woods near the school. All the trees are covered in snow. Night falls and he is so close, but then. . ." I pause for effect. "But then he hears footsteps – and realizes he's being followed. . ."

Beth shivers. Amy is still staring at her phone, feigning disinterest, but I can tell she's listening.

"Rodriguo is afraid, but he is determined to save Rachel. He keeps going – and just then, out of the darkness. . ." I pause again. Amy looks up, despite herself. "A man with mean, hard eyes appears from

behind a tree. He has a monkey with him, a poor, thin, half-starved thing on a chain. He demands money from Rodriguo, who refuses. But. . ."

"Bags be Rodriguo," Meg says. "You always play him, Jo, and it's not fair."

"Fine." I nod impatiently, eager to finish my explanation.

"Who can *I* play?" Amy whines. "And I don't want to be a man or an animal."

"What happens to the monkey, Jo?" Beth asks anxiously.

"Listen." I hold up my hands to quieten them. "Rodriguo gives the man some money but tells him to take the monkey off the chain. He does what Rodriguo asks, then he leaves, but when Rodriguo checks his pocket he finds out the man has stolen the necklace."

Beth's hand flies to her mouth. "Oh no."

"So, what, does Rodriguo take Rachel the mangy old monkey instead?" Amy asks, wrinkling her nose.

"No," I say. "The monkey runs off too."

"Oh, that's sad," Beth says with feeling. "I hope he'll be all right what with all the snow."

"So now Rodriguo is late for Rachel because he stopped to help out a stupid monkey and still doesn't have a present for her," Meg says.

"Exactly." I smile round at them. "I think it's going to be a good one."

"You still haven't said who I can play," Amy points out.

"You can be the peddler who sells Rodriguo the necklace," I say impatiently. "You're very stylish and make this amazing designer jewellery."

Amy says nothing but she's put her phone down.

"I'll be the thief in the forest," I go on. "And Beth can be the monkey."

"Good." Beth sounds relieved. "No lines to remember."

We set up quickly, moving the sofa so that Amy can lay out a tray of rings and necklaces made up of our various bits and pieces of jewellery along the back of it, and Meg, as Rodriguo, can stand on the other side.

I set my phone to record us as Meg mimes taking a bowl of soup from the peddler, then looks down at the tray.

"I'm looking for a necklace," she says in a deep voice. "For the love of my life."

"I have many lovely jewelleries," Amy says, in a flawless cut-glass accent.

"Oh wait." She holds up her hand and turns to

me. “How come Rodriguo can afford one of my necklaces? I thought he didn’t have any money?”

“He’s going to charm you into giving him a good price,” I say, rolling my eyes as I reset my phone. “And don’t say ‘jewelleries’, say ‘pieces’.”

We start again and eventually, after half an hour of arguing, giggling and several debates about whether the monkey should be limping or not, the scene is in the bag. I watch it back, grinning. It’s only barely audible, but there’s something there – and it’s totally inspired me to go and write a chapter of my story on my laptop.

I bound upstairs to get it all down.

Perhaps it won’t be such a terrible Christmas after all.