

Sophie McKenzie

Six Steps to a Girl

by the Richard and Judy's Children's Books Winner

Author of
award-winning
bestseller

**GIRL,
MISSING**



Six Steps to a Girl

By Sophie McKenzie

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1. MY GIRL

For what is a brat, what has he got

When he finds out that he cannot

Say the things he truly thinks

But only words, not what he feels

MY WAY

Sex Pistols

(anka/revaux/francois/thibault – arr. s jeffes)

The first time I saw her was at my Dad's funeral.

I know what you're thinking – his dad dies of cancer and a few days later he's eyeing up some girl.

It wasn't like that.

Well. It was. But it's not like I was on the pull or anything. And it wasn't as if I could see much of her, either. She was wearing an enormous overcoat. Just a flash of blonde hair showing over the top.

I didn't notice her at first.

I was sitting there, front row of the crematorium, between Mum and Chloe. I knew the place was packed – I'd turned round a few times and had a look. Lots of black clothes and pale faces. It was January – dead cold with ice on the roads so Mum was worried people wouldn't turn up. But they did – masses of them. All Dad's family. Friends. Even a couple of ex-girlfriends who made a big show of coming up to Mum, arms outstretched, trying to hug her.

Mum was hating it. I could hear her teeth grinding. And she was gripping my arm tight with her fingers.

Then Uncle Matt stepped up to the front. He's not my real uncle, just Dad's best mate. The crematorium went quiet.

Uncle Matt talked about Dad – how he'd know him since they were at school. How my dad was this great guy. Loved punk music.

Played the guitar when he was younger. Always in trouble as a kid. *Blah, blah*. Loads of laughs. *Blah, blah*. Spirit of adventure.

I'd heard it all before and it still didn't make sense. I mean, Uncle Matt was making out like Dad was this real rebel when he was young. But *real* rebels don't give it all up for a nine-to-five job and a mortgage.

No way.

Not that Dad couldn't be a laugh sometimes. But he was ordinary. Just an ordinary, middle-aged guy with an ordinary, boring, office job.

"But in those last few weeks," Uncle Matt went on, "what he told me he would miss most of all was the chance to see his children grow up."

Mum's grip on my arm tightened even further. I could hear lots of sniffing behind me. I glanced sideways at Chloe. Tears were streaming down her face. She was always closer to Dad than me. I mean, it's not like Dad and I had lots of rows or anything. But he'd been ill for so long. And we'd never had much in common. I don't think he had any idea who I was.

Maybe that's why I didn't feel like crying. Maybe that's why his dying didn't feel real.

Uncle Matt sat down and a couple more people stood up. Someone read a poem. After that Chloe started bawling loudly and Mum leaned right across me to hold her hand. I wanted to get up and switch seats but it would have been too embarrassing. So we all stayed there, in what must have looked like this massive, miserable cuddle.

At last it was over. At the end they played *My Way*. Not the classic Frank Sinatra everyone's heard of – but this punk version. Apparently Uncle Matt reckoned my Dad would've loved it.

It just sounded stupid.

Getting out of the crematorium building took ages. Mum was still clutching my arm, stopping as person after person came up to her.

"...so sorry..."

“...a release...”

“...miss him so much...”

As we reached the door I caught sight of Chloe. She was standing near all the flowers laid out on the ground, surrounded by girls from her class.

I recognised most of her friends. Chloe’s a year older than me but we get on quite well. So long as I stay out of her room she’s pretty cool. Anyway, right now she and her friends were all crying their eyes out. The other girls were hugging her and patting her on the shoulder, each of them jostling for the position of Most Important Friend at the Funeral.

All except her. The girl in the enormous overcoat.

She was standing slightly on the edge of the group. I was sure I hadn’t seen her before, even though at that point I could only see her big coat and the back of her head. I stared at the way her smooth blonde hair curled onto her back.

And then she turned round.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I just stood, transfixed by her face.

She was beautiful.

Not attractive. Not pretty.

Massively, awesomely beautiful. Like a model or a film star. Heart-shaped face. Big eyes. And these incredibly sexy, pouty lips.

I’d never seen a real person who looked that good.

“Luke,” Mum hissed.

“What?” I said.

“Uncle Matt was just speaking to you. Why didn’t you say something?”

I shook my head. I was dying to look at the girl again. I hadn’t even heard Uncle Matt.

“Can I go and see if my mates are here?” I said.

Mum sighed. “Of course,” she said. “But don’t go far away. I ...I.” Her voice cracked and she looked down.

I felt a stab of guilt as she let go of my arm. But Uncle Matt was instantly at her side, taking her hand and drawing her over to talk

to some other people. I sighed with relief. Then turned round to look for the girl.

She was still there. I wanted to see what she looked like under that huge black overcoat. It was way, way too big for her. The shoulders hung half-way down her arms and the sleeves dangled below her hands.

With a jolt I realised it was a man's coat. It was January. It was cold. Somebody must've lent it to her to keep her warm. *Let it be her father, I prayed. Or her brother. Please.*

One of Mum's friends came up to me, clucking about how sad it was that Dad had died, asking how I was coping. I answered in grunts, hoping she'd get the message and leave me alone. I still hadn't seen anyone from my class. I knew some of them were here. They were probably too embarrassed to come and speak to me after all Chloe's noisy crying in the service.

Chloe was blowing her nose now. The skin around her eyes was red and streaks of make-up were smeared down her cheeks. She was talking to the girl in the big overcoat. My girl.

I was thinking about going a bit closer. Chloe was my sister, after all – surely it wouldn't look too obvious?

And then this guy wandered over to them. He was tall. Older. I vaguely recognised him as a sixth-former from school. He said something to Chloe, then slipped his arm round the girl. My heart beat faster. I mentally measured the overcoat against his broad shoulders. *Bastard.* It was his coat. Had to be. *Please let him be her brother.*

It was my one remaining hope. Then the girl looked up at him, gave him this dead sexy grin, and my hope was dashed.