

Kyle
FINDS HER
WAY

Susie Salom



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Chapter One



Girl Houdini.

That's the name my older brother Roger gave me for my freaky ability to find my way out of crud-bomb situations like this one. But I mean, look at this place!

Georgia O'Keeffe Middle opens up like the beak of a giant octopus and my heart drops into my Vans as a wave of sixth and seventh graders squishes me through its man-eating doors. Wish I could shoot a harpoon to the ceiling and shimmy the rope to scout from on high for my best friends Sheroo Malagares and Brooke Jeblanco. Instead, I just stand there with my feet glued past the entrance like a couple of chunks of chignitrium.

Some Houdini.

“Constantini!”

(Hey, that rhymes.)

Sheroo and Brooke bubble up from the crowd like life

preservers and I barely stop myself from flinging my arms around their shoulders like a drowning woman.

“Heart attack *city!*” Sheroo screams. Sheroo’s madly in love with screaming. “*Where* did you get your hat?”

I touch the front of my blue fedora. Not to act cool or anything. My fingers just sort of fly up there.

“Sasha Poblansky has a hat just like that today only hers is a *li*-ttle bit cooler since it has zebra stripes,” Sheroo says. “I think I might want a hat like Sasha Poblansky’s only mine will be, like, with a peacock design. Because I totally hate people who copy.”

“Then you must hate everyone,” Brooke tells her.

Sometimes it’s like Brooke and Sheroo are from two totally different planets. Here it is, first day of school, and Sheroo’s in swirly tights and a denim romper with a tiny rhinestone Pegasus on the pocket. Meantime, Brooke’s busy being swallowed up by this enormous, dark-green army-coat thing. Not that it’s bad. Brooke’s always had her own way of making strange things kind of cool. Except for maybe that one time when her mom bought her these stripy pants that made her look like she’d been working on the railroad.

“There is *so* much potential at this school,” Sheroo says all out of breath. “A ton of the guys from Rosa Parks and Aspen Heights.” She stretches her neck to look down one of the halls. “He’s gotta be here.”

“Who’s gotta be here?”

Sheroo looks at me and Brooke. “My first boyfriend.”

Brooke sticks a finger down her throat and that, right there, is the moment I realize I’m somewhere in between. Not like I’m all, gimme a boyfriend or I’ll evacuate to China! But I’m also not all, sick, boys are boba with a hair in it and make me need to hurl.

First bell rings and something hot blocks the entrance to my throat.

Panic, is that you?

“Quick,” I say. “What homeroom are you guys?”

“6D,” they both answer.

6D! 6D? How on God’s green earth can my two best friends since birth, practically, be assigned to 6D?

“Which one are you in?” Brooke asks me while Sheroo checks out every guy that rushes by.

“Not 6D,” I tell her. Then I try not to hate 6B with all of my heart.

“Tough break” — Brooke claps my shoulder — “but see you at lunch.” Then she nods at me and says, “Godspeed,” which who even knows what that means. I watch the two of them kind of fast-walk to a classroom close by.

Why couldn’t I have gotten 6D?

I stuff the paper with my locker combo in my back pocket and look around the huge, new middle school they built just like a year ago. It’s super clean with about fifty jillion halls. One of them’s gotta lead to 6B.

I grab the arm of the nearest kid as he hurries past.

“Hey, are you in sixth?”

He glances down one of the halls. “First year of secondary, yeah.”

His voice is different. Like he comes from Australia.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” I ask.

“Look, I’d love to have a proper chat but now’s not the best time. I’m a bit late and so are you.”

Is he English? I think he might be English.

“Okay, but are you in 6B?”

He nods. Relief!

“Great. Where is it?”

Second bell rings. Cuckoo for crappo puffs. We lift our eyes to the ceiling where the sound is coming from and he snags my elbow.

“C’mon, Fedora.”

We squeeze past a group of bigger kids who look like they couldn’t care less that they’re gonna get a tardy. Then he leads us into a hall which has almost no one in it so we sprint neck and neck down the center. Our backpacks slap against our sides and our sneakers squeal against the Fruity Pebble tiles when all of a sudden he brakes. I slide a few feet past the door before stopping. He twists the knob and it gives—thank God—and we sneak into 6B homeroom.

There are only three seats left, all in totally different spots. He takes the one in the very back by the pencil

sharpener which I never would have picked in a hundred thousand years. You always get pencil dust blown all over your desk and your hair that way. I pick the one in the middle, bobbing in a sea of faces I have never seen before in my life.

A tall lady in square pink spectacles that looks like she's from the sixties is at the head of the classroom.

I've never had a teacher with dreadlocks.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm Mrs. Arceneau."

She dives into taking roll and, for a second, all I can think is how do you make your hair into a dreadlock? But then I sneak a look around my new class and start to wonder which homeroom Chris Dixey is in.

I *kind* of had a tiny crush on Chris Dixey last year but not really. Well, I mean kind of. It's just that he had this freckle on his neck, right at the collar, and it would peek over his shirt when he stretched across the table in art to get a paper or something. Like it was saying hi to me.

Hellooooo, Kyle! I'm Chris Dixey's freckle and I loooooove you.

"Constantini, Kyle."

"Here!"

"Diamond, Marcy."

The girl in front of me lifts her hand. She doesn't say, 'here.'

"Donahue, Donna."

"Yo." Donna's voice booms from the back of the class

and I pop a look over my shoulder. She's sitting next to English Boy with one of her legs *banging over the desk*. Last year, Donna had long red hair that dangled to her waist in two perfect braids. Now, her hair's in a greasy bob and—are those combat boots??

“Miss Donahue, kindly place both feet on the ground,” Mrs. A. says.

Donna lets her leg slump to the floor with a thunk and I gape at her for a few seconds. I'm not trying to be rude or anything but it's kinda hard not to stare. Donna has always been so . . . pink. Now, she's all . . . punk.

Her eyes meet mine and she does this nasty smirk. Can this *seriously* be the same person who wore jeans with rainbows on the pockets and was super into dolphins? I sit up straight in my desk and face back to the front.

There's something on Marcy Diamond's desk. It looks like an electric snail. She lifts it and tucks it into her ear.

Marcy Diamond wears a hearing aid.

“All right, everyone,” Mrs. A. says. “Today is the day you will take your first steps down an important new road. Middle school is very different from everything that's come before because in middle school—”

Someone cuts a presidential fart. I think for sure Mrs. A.'s gonna be the type who ignores it when people go all Grody McGrodersen on her but then she surprises me.

“Part of my job this year,” she says, “is to ensure that

the skills we develop in this classroom go beyond throwing sound effects out the window.”

“That wasn’t a sound effect,” someone says. “That was a smell effect.”

A second fresh ’n’ fruity rips through the aisles and everyone cracks up. Somewhere, a mother must be so proud.

“Mr. Nevarez,” Mrs. A. says, “if you need to excuse yourself to use the facilities, now would be an excellent time.”

A huge boy with squinty green eyes and brown hair that sticks straight up behind his ears says, “It’s all gravy, miss. Think I’m done.”

A crazy-loud horn explodes through the hallways and a bunch of us jump a kilometer.

Fire drill!

Mrs. A. tries to get everyone to keep their cool as she lines us up by the door but people are still shoving and pushing. Because maybe they’re all thinking what I’m thinking. I mean, what are the chances of it *just* being a drill when we haven’t even made it through homeroom on the very first day? We pile into the hall and I sniff the air for the smell of destruction but make out only enchiladas.

Marcy Diamond is standing next to me. I stare at her for like ten seconds and send a command at top brain volume.

LOOK AT ME, MARCY DIAMOND.

Most people don’t know this but you really don’t need

anything more than a powerful brain to talk in ESP. It's better if you're a twin—like me and my other brother, Meowsie—but non-twins can do it, too, if they just work it a little.

I only call my brother Michael 'Meowsie' when it's just me and him. Hardly anyone knows we're twins anymore because he's been a year behind me since first. That happens sometimes when you're twins born in July. As my class walks down *another* new hall to get outside, it feels weird knowing he's in a whole different building. I wonder if he can sense that I'm in a fire drill here at Georgia O'Keeffe while he's still snug as a pug back at ol' Dickinson Ele-ments.

Marcy Diamond turns to look at me. She looks at me and smiles! I knew it could work with normals! Even though twin ESP *is* around seven times stronger than regular. She slides her hair behind her shoulders and I try super hard not to see if she has electric snails in both ears but, of course, I end up checking.

She does.

I smile back but then can't think of anything to say. Except that I wonder what it would be like to turn down the volume on the whole world.

Once we're out on the blacktops where there's all this construction going on, Sheroo comes running over.

"Sheroo, you're gonna get busted." I glance at Mrs. A.

“Just shut up a minute and let me tell you what I found out!”

“Scuse me, Fedora.” English Boy strolls past and stands behind us in line. Sheroo eyes him up and down like a 3 Musketeers before looking back at me.

“Guess who moved to Montana.” She grabs both my hands. “Chris Dixey!”

My mouth opens and something inside my chest—my heart?—gets all pretzely.

“Chris—”

“Dixey!” Sheroo yells again. “*God*, remember how cute he was?”

I swallow and look at English Boy, whose nose is in a comic book.

“Chris Dixey.” I screw up my face. “Was he the one with the—”

Freckle. The freckle of love, Kyle. Gone. *Forever*.

“—dark-blue backpack?”

“I don’t know what color his stupid *backpack* was,” Sheroo says. “The point is he’s moved”—she shakes my shoulders—“to freakin’ *Montana*! Like there isn’t already a shortage of hotness at this school.”

English Boy flicks his gaze at Sheroo. Then he actually rolls his eyes!

I’m glad she didn’t notice.

“What do you have second period?” Sheroo leans in.

“Have to check my schedge. Why?”

She grins. “Wanna cut?”

“What?” I say. “No!”

“Why not? I’ll cut with you.”

“Sheroo, it’s the first day!”

“Well, what are fire drills for? Think about it, we’re in middle school now. Practically *high* school.”

“We are not practically in high school,” I tell her. “And besides, what does our grade have to do with it anyway?”

The bell that lets us know we can come back inside rings. That was the cheapest fire drill in the history of false alarms.

Sheroo holds me back as the rest of 6B starts to follow Mrs. A. English Boy shrugs past us to follow our class. The second he’s out of earshot, Sheroo mutters, “There he is.”

“There who is?”

“The one.” She stares at English Boy’s back then turns to point at me all suspish. “He called you Fedora. Do you know him or something?”

“No, I don’t *know* him or something. He’s just a guy in my class.”

Sheroo studies him as he gets closer to the school.

“You’re so stupid lucky,” she tells me. “He’s, like, so much better looking than any of the guys in 6D. And that accent. So, ‘Hul-*loo*, I’m from *Ing*lund.’”

Sheroo's English accent is horrible. Sounds like she's getting ready to puke up a petrified meatball. I picture him rolling his eyes when she wasn't looking and all of a sudden feel a little protective of her.

"He is cute," I agree. "But are you sure he's the right guy for you? I mean, he might be a little *too* British."

She narrows her eyes. "What are you getting at?"

I look back to the entrance right as English Boy turns his head and makes lightning-fast eye contact with me. Which, btdubs, is the first step to doing ESP: establishing the connection.

"Nothing," I tell her. "Just erase what I said. We should get back to class."

She does this big huff.

"You're still a *total* baby," she tells me. "You know that? You're worse than Brooke. Maybe you should've been held back with Michael, after all."

I squeeze both fists at my sides. She knows darn well it bugs me when anyone picks on Meowsie. I mean, sure, everyone knows he's kind of quiet and dreamy but that doesn't mean he's not smart. Believe me, he's like the smartest person there is.

"He wasn't held *back*," I remind her. "It's always a choice which grade you'll be in when you're born in the summer and your parents make that decision. No one else. So why

don't you go find Sasha Poblansky and her zebra stripes and ask her to cut class with you?"

"Well, maybe I wi—"

The last bell from the drill chops off the end of Sheroo's sentence. I turn my back to her before walking to the entrance where all of my class has already gone in. A blast of air conditioning slaps me in the face as I step through the doors and suck in a breath.

Crappuccino.

How do you get back to 6B, again?