



WELCOME
BACK,
MAPLE
MEHTA-
COHEN

KATE MCGOVERN

**Welcome Back,
Maple Mehta-Cohen**

**Welcome Back,
Maple Mehta-Cohen**

Kate McGovern



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2021 by Kate McGovern

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, taping, and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

First edition 2021

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 2021938546
ISBN 978-1-5362-1558-8

21 22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Crawfordsville, IL, USA

This book was typeset in ITC Slimbach.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

www.candlewick.com



A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

**For Priya Alice and Kavya Belle,
my rare birds**

Chapter 1

Normally, I'm not a morning person.

On normal mornings, Dad has to wake me for school. “*Maaaaaapple*. Rise and shine,” he says in a whisper at first. Then, when I barely stir, he says it again, louder.

“Miss Maple, rise and shine! Places to go, people to see!”

Mom says I was always like this, even as a baby, even though most babies are awake and screaming at five a.m. “We used to have to wake you for day care,” she says, shrugging. “You were a sleeper.”

Not today, though. Today, my nerves are buzzing like an alarm clock. My eyelids don't even feel heavy.

From one of my bedroom windows, I have a beautiful view of a garage wall. It belongs to the next-door neighbors, who don't even have a car anyway. They just use it to store things—air conditioners and bicycles they don't ride, boxes of old books, toys their son has long outgrown. There's nothing very useful about that view.

From my other window, though, I can see sky. Just a sliver, because that's what you get when you live on the first floor in a city, surrounded by other houses and garages and a few scraggly trees. But it's enough sky to tell me things about the day ahead.

Today, the sky is the darkest blue a sky can ever be, the color that only appears in the short time between night and day. When it's no longer yesterday but it's barely today. It's just *right now*. I wish it could stay *right now* forever, so I wouldn't have to live through the rest of today.

Because today is the first day of fifth grade. Again.

Chapter 2

“We’re holding Maple back.”

Those were the four little words that ruined my life.

It was last April. Ms. Littleton-Chan called a meeting with my parents and me. She said it was “quite important,” and my mouth was already dry when we sat down in front of her desk. I’d never had a “quite important” meeting with my parents and a teacher before.

Look, under normal circumstances, I love Ms. Littleton-Chan. Last year was her first year teaching at the Barton, and she was different from all the other teachers I’d ever had. I loved her right away, from the first day of fifth grade. It wasn’t just because she also has a bicultural last name,

although I appreciate that. It matches my Indian-Jewish hyphenated situation (Hin-Jew, my parents call me). More than that, it was that she seemed so *interested* in all the things she taught us. Like when we did a unit on ocean ecosystems, she could barely contain herself telling us about how the blue whale eats up to 40 million krill per day. Those are like little shrimp. *Forty million shrimp!* I'm telling you, she was practically levitating with enthusiasm. Ms. Littleton-Chan cares about things, about us, in a way that felt new. She notices things.

Which, in retrospect, might be why she was the first person to notice the real me. The me I'd been hiding in big and small ways, every day, since I don't remember when.

I can't read.

Or, I mean, I can't *really* read. Not well. Not easily. Here's what it feels like to look at a page in a book, if you're me: Some of the letters look sideways or upside down. Sometimes the letters flip around. Or they swim around on the page and won't stay still long enough for me to grab them with my brain. There might be a picture of a dog and I know the word should say *dog*, but I'm

looking at it and it says *odg*. So I can read it, kind of, but it's confusing. And if the word *odg* is next to a picture of, like, a cat or a rainbow, then I'm extra confused. And on their own, the words look less like sentences and more like a puzzle. A whole page is like an ocean. When I look at it, I feel like I'm drowning. I can swim really, *really* slowly. But it hurts my brain to try.

When I hear a story out loud, I understand *everything*. But when I have to read to myself, it all goes out of whack. I can sound words out, sure. But it takes me a long time. Too long. So long that by the time I get to the end of a sentence, I've practically forgotten what happened at the beginning. It's hard to put it all together. It's frustrating to spend that much time on what seems so easy to everyone else. I usually just give up.

Up until Ms. Littleton-Chan came along, I kept it a secret. We almost always work in groups at my school, and I'm really good at looking at other people's papers without *looking* like I'm looking. Or when we talk about the book we're reading, I'll listen for a while, and then add an idea that builds on someone else's.

But Ms. Littleton-Chan watched us carefully. She *saw* us. And with those four words—“We’re holding Maple back”—my love for her exploded like sodium when it hits water. (Which, by the way, I learned about in fourth grade from Mr. Nolan. I don’t need Ms. Littleton-Chan for *everything*.)

“We’re holding Maple back.”

To my left, Mom shifted in her chair. “Sorry, what do you mean?”

Ms. Littleton-Chan looked uncomfortable. She observed both my parents, and then her eyes landed on me. “Maple, have you told your parents what happens when you look at a book?”

My parents’ heads swiveled in my direction. I shrugged.

“Maple, what’s going on?” Dad looked concerned. He’d been up late working; I could tell from the way his face was all dark shadows and deep creases. Besides, when I got up to pee, I saw the light on in the kitchen. He always works in the kitchen at night, hunched over his sketch pad or pounding on his laptop keys, crunching numbers and keeping his business running. My parents are both artists. They work really hard at it. My dad has his own company,

putting his custom designs on T-shirts and baseball caps and phone cases and basically anything you can imagine. My mom designs jewelry. She's kind of famous. The mayor once wore one of Mom's necklaces at a building dedication.

"You can tell us, kid," Dad said. "Anything."

But I couldn't. I couldn't explain why I wasn't able to make sense of the words on a page in front of me, because I didn't even understand it myself. The thing is, I *love* books. I love books when Dad reads aloud to me in bed, even though eleven is maybe too old to be reading in bed with your father. I love the way books look on my shelves, and the way they feel in my hands. I love the way the pages smell.

Most of all, I love stories. I'm constantly telling them in my head. I'll get an idea for a story, and it'll be running through my brain, no matter what else I'm doing. I'll even tell myself stories out loud sometimes. For my tenth birthday, my parents gave me a digital voice recorder. It's a little machine I can keep in my pocket and use to document my stories, anywhere, anytime. I'll pop it out of my pocket, hit record, and just start talking.

Which is convenient, because actually writing my

stories down on paper . . . That part is harder for me than anyone knows. My parents included.

“I don’t know,” I said finally. That was the truth. More or less.

“What do you mean, *you don’t know?*” Mom said. She sounded frantic.

“Honey.” Dad reached over me and put a hand on Mom’s knee. “We’ll figure this out.”

Ms. Littleton-Chan cleared her throat. “Maple, listen. You’re an exceptionally smart girl. You’re curious and persistent. You’re creative. You’re kind to your classmates.”

I started feeling a little indignant at that point. (Have I mentioned that I know a lot of long words? Dad is always explaining the long words to me when we listen to the radio, and I never forget what they mean. Indignant means *feeling or showing annoyance at what is perceived as unfair treatment*. Which sounds about right at the moment.) I *am* curious and persistent and kind. I was ready for sixth grade!

Technically, fifth grade is our last year of elementary school. Even though they’re in the same building, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades are considered the middle school. And two other elementary schools also send their

kids to the Barton Middle School, so the middle-school grades are bigger. They even switch classes for math and English, and go on an overnight trip to New York in the spring. It's major. I had plans for all this with Marigold Harris and Aislinn McIntyre, my best friends since day care and first grade, respectively.

“We need to make sure your reading skills are ready before we send you on to the next grade.” Ms. Littleton-Chan turned back to my parents. “The longer we let Maple go without addressing her reading fluency, the more learning she's going to miss. And it's not just English class she'll miss out on—it's math and science and history. I don't want that. Do you, Maple?”

It felt like a trick question. Of course I didn't *want* to miss those things, did I? But wasn't this kind of, like, the school's fault? They're the ones who let me down, and now I was getting punished for it. I bit my lip and kept quiet.

“It wouldn't be responsible of me to send Maple to sixth grade right now,” Ms. Littleton-Chan continued. Apparently, there was still more to say. “Her reading skills aren't ready for middle school yet or for everything that comes next. The pace of the work really picks up from now on. Maple,

I just don't want you to be left behind. If we keep you in fifth another year, we can get your reading challenges sorted out. Then you'll really be ready to soar."

Panic was rising in my throat. It tasted sour and made my stomach churn. Next to me, Mom sighed deeply. "Why is this just coming to light now? I mean, she reads all the time at home. *All the time.*"

I listened to books. I looked at books. I turned the pages. I sounded out word by word, so slowly that the story would get lost. But my mother didn't know what was going on in my head.

Ms. Littleton-Chan seemed kind of sad all of a sudden. She tucked a strand of long hair behind one ear. "I'm truly sorry this wasn't addressed earlier. It seems that there was some . . . Well, frankly, in her previous classrooms . . ." She trailed off. It sounded like she wanted to say something bad about my other teachers, but then stopped herself. "Maple has always been very engaged in class."

The truth was, we'd never had very much homework before this year. And I usually worked with Marigold and Aislinn on our assignments. In class, we were always in small groups. No one ever seemed to notice that I never

wanted to be the one to read the instructions out loud. Plus, I had plenty of tricks. I'd use the pictures to figure out what the story meant. I recognized a lot of words just from memorizing them, especially the common ones. That helped, too. I asked to go to the bathroom at just the right moment. Mostly, I just pretended.

“Don’t you have to screen kids for these kind of things?” Mom demanded to know. “What about all the testing I’m always hearing about?”

Ms. Littleton-Chan squirmed in her seat. “Well, yes, actually, the Department of Education has recently started recommending that all children be screened for reading disabilities, but . . . well, we aren’t quite there yet in terms of getting it done. And, you’ll recall, most of the children do take standardized assessments to help us measure their progress. But you’ve withheld Maple from those tests.”

This was true. My parents didn’t believe in what they referred to as “bubble tests.” They’d kept me home on those days. While the other kids marched into school with their sharp number two pencils, Mom made pancakes. On one occasion, I remember her saying, “You are more than a test score!” as she drenched the pancakes in real maple syrup.

Ms. Littleton-Chan went on: “So, unfortunately, we missed some opportunities to build a full picture of Maple’s foundational reading skills—things like phonemic awareness and so on.”

Mom and Dad exchanged looks. “Well,” said Mom, “we knew Maple was a bit of a slower reader.”

This was news to me. They’d never said anything. Never asked me if I was worried. Never seemed worried themselves.

“But, you know, children learn at their own pace,” Mom continued. “We don’t want to assume there’s something quote-unquote *wrong* with Maple or put a label on her. When it might be a mistake.”

“It’s not a mistake,” I said.

I said it quietly, with my eyes locked on the ground. The classroom floor, speckled linoleum, looked suddenly very dirty.

“What, lovey?” I could feel Mom’s eyes on me, even while I stared at my feet. My shoes, someone else’s used Toms in red canvas, came from the two-dollar bin at the thrift store, but the price didn’t matter. I loved those shoes.

“It’s not a mistake,” I said, louder. I dragged my eyes

up to meet Mom's. "I can't read. I mean, not well. I can't read well."

They all got very quiet. I could hear Mom's breath, in and out, next to me.

Finally, Dad spoke up. "Why didn't you say something?"

I shrugged. Why *didn't* I say something? When I started to notice that the other kids could read a lot faster than I could, I just figured it would fix itself eventually. I mean, everyone is a good reader by the time they're a grown-up, right?

But that wasn't all. Every time I looked across the classroom and saw another kid tearing through a chapter book, it hurt. Back in second grade, when Marigold and Aislinn were reading the latest Junie B. Jones by themselves, I had to pretend I'd read it on my own, too—even though my dad was really reading it aloud to me before bed. It was the same with *Wonder* in third grade. *Aru Shah and the End of Time* last year. The Harry Potter books still. (We just finished *The Order of the Phoenix*.) I'd take books out of the school library and tote them around with me, flipping the pages at what seemed like appropriate intervals during independent reading hour. Then I'd return them the day before their due dates and give the librarian a big thumbs-up.

It all hurt. It hurt too much to say out loud. Plus, if I said it out loud, it would become real.

I chewed my lip. Then I took a breath. “I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

No one said anything. Mom kneaded one hand with the other, massaging her palm so hard it looked like she might break the skin. After a long, quiet moment, Dad put an arm around me.

“It’s okay, kid. You couldn’t disappoint us if you tried.”

Looking at Mom, though, I wasn’t so sure that was true.

Chapter 3

After that meeting with Ms. Littleton-Chan, the school arranged a bunch of screening tests for me. I sat in a room with Ms. Fine, the reading intervention teacher, for what felt like hours. In the end, all those tests told us what I already knew: Listening skills? *Excellent*. Speaking skills? *Hello*. Reading skills? *Less than great*. Ms. Fine said this would give us a “baseline,” so they could track my progress. It also gave me a word to put on the thing that made reading hard for me: *dyslexia*.

Well, “*characteristics* of dyslexia.” That’s what they said I had.

“So she’s not *dyslexic*,” I heard Mom say to Dad the night after Ms. Fine called them to explain my results. They were talking in their bedroom after they thought I was asleep. They always think I’m asleep for the important conversations.

“Lou,” Dad said. He sounded tired. “That’s pretty much what this means.”

“I hate putting that label on her.”

“It’s not a label, babe. It’s a . . .” He paused or said something I couldn’t hear. “If it will help them help her . . .” He said something else too muffled to make out.

Mom cleared her throat. “I just don’t want it to define her. She’s so much more than this diagnosis.”

My heart swelled to hear Mom say it, but then it shrank again. I *was* more. But what difference did that make? I was still going to be stuck in fifth grade again, and everyone would know why. My life as I knew it was over.

I waited all summer to tell Aislinn and Marigold that I wasn’t moving on to sixth grade with them. It wasn’t hard to keep it a secret. It was just one more thing to hide. When they pulled out the sixth-grade school supplies list,

I pretended I'd left it at home. I scanned Marigold's and felt a pang of jealousy that I would have no need for a daily planner, which is only required for middle schoolers. I could ask Mom to get me one anyway; she probably would. But it would be a waste of money.

When they gushed about the annual spring trip to New York City, I pretended to be *really* excited, too. I've always wanted to see a Broadway musical, so that part wasn't a lie.

And when they chattered away about getting to sit at the best spots in the cafeteria—the tables by the windows, which are unofficially reserved for the middle schoolers—I just nodded. Yup. That'll be super cool. Can't wait.

In spite of the fact that I was keeping a kind of major secret from them—which we were not supposed to do, per our Lifelong Best Friends Contract (signed by the three of us back in fourth grade)—summer felt almost normal. We went to the pool, or the library when it rained. Marigold's mother, who has a cousin up on the North Shore, took us to the beach twice on the commuter rail.

But as the start of the school year was barreling toward us, I started having weird dreams: One night, I got chased by a huge dog with razor-sharp teeth and drool-encrusted

jowls. I woke up in a pool of cold sweat. Another night, I was in a play, but right before I went onstage, I realized I'd never been to a rehearsal. I had no idea where I was supposed to stand or what I was supposed to say.

I knew what the dreams were about, of course. It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to know an anxiety dream when you have one. I was scared. I wanted to keep living in this in-between space, where I was still going on to sixth grade with my friends, for as long as possible. It was like that old saying: If a tree falls in a forest and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? If I was getting held back but no one knew about it . . . was I really getting held back?

Finally, though, the start of school was a week away. I had to come clean.

We were at Aislinn's house, hanging out. Ash has a finished basement, known to her family as the "den," with wall-to-wall carpeting and a plush sectional facing a huge flat-screen. There's even a mini-fridge stocked with sodas—which never set foot in my house—and a glass jar of sour

gummy candy. Aislinn still has an au pair, which is like a nanny who lives with you, even though Aislinn doesn't really need to be nannied anymore. The au pair, Amelia, brings us more snacks whenever Aislinn calls up the stairs to her. Orange slices on a plate, hummus with triangles of pita bread, chips and salsa—whatever we want. Stepping into Aislinn's house is always like crossing the border into another country, a fancier one, even though I've been visiting for as long as I can remember

It was drizzling, which is why we were in the basement instead of outside on the back porch or down the street at the pool. Aislinn was lying on her belly on the carpet, flipping through an issue of *In Touch Weekly*. Marigold was sitting on the couch, scrolling aimlessly on Aislinn's phone. (Aislinn was the first kid in class to get a cell phone of her own, in fourth grade.) And I was pacing.

"What are you doing?" Marigold asked, looking up. "You're making me dizzy. Hey, what's happening in our mystery these days?"

I'd been working on a new story about a supersleuth named Mira Epstein-Patel. She was very popular and very

smart (a sixth grader, of course), and she solved crimes all over her neighborhood with her extremely well-honed observation skills. Aislinn and Marigold had been helping me come up with ideas all summer.

I chewed my lip. “Oh, I don’t know. I kind of stalled out with that one.”

“I was listening to the radio with my mom the other day, and there was a story about a kid who discovered that her father wasn’t her real father, because when she went in for some kind of medical treatment, they did a blood test and *DUN-DUN-DUN!*” Marigold used her most dramatic storytelling voice. “Her blood type could not have been produced by her two parents. What do you think? That could make a good mystery for Mira to solve.”

It actually sounded kind of interesting. I was intrigued. “Just finding out that the mother had had an affair would be a little dull, though,” I said. “What if . . . ooh, I know! What if the parents had done that medical thing to have her, you know, like Rosie Gaitskill’s parents did?” Rosie was forever bragging about being “made in a lab,” like it gave her superpowers. Which, honestly, it might have, because Rosie was exceptionally good at math. “So what if the mom

had given birth to this baby, but she was actually someone else's baby and the parents didn't even realize?"

Marigold nodded enthusiastically. I pulled out my voice recorder, clicked it on, and started talking.

It was barely six a.m. when Mira Epstein-Patel's phone rang. She didn't like to be awake so early, but why would someone be calling her if it wasn't an emergency? And when she answered, she knew immediately that it was an emergency.

"Make it someone in her class—like, it's a girl she knows," Marigold whispered.

"Mira? Hello? This is Mrs. Applegate. Josie's mother? I need your help. It's urgent."

Mr. and Mrs. Applegate were in the hospital with Josie. She might need a kidney transplant. Or a heart

transplant—maybe it would be heart failure. And they were blindsided to learn that their beloved daughter was not, in fact, their flesh and blood.

“Ash, what do you think?” Marigold asked when we paused to consider what would happen next. Aislinn wasn’t always the best at plot ideas, but she usually had a lot to say about the characters and how to make them more interesting. She’s pretty good at thinking of ways to make fictional people seem like real people, with back stories that are more complicated than you expect them to be. But at that moment, Aislinn was being uncharacteristically quiet. I glanced in her direction. She was still sprawled out with the magazine.

“Eh,” Aislinn sighed, barely looking up. “Don’t you think that telling stories is getting a little . . . babyish?”

I froze. It had never occurred to me that we might “out-grow” storytelling, like when we’d stopped building towers with blocks or having tea parties with dolls. Storytelling wasn’t like that. It wasn’t a thing you got too old for. Was it?

I mean, it wasn’t even a month ago that Aislinn, Marigold, and I were sitting in this very room, coming up with new ideas for local crimes that Mira Epstein-Patel

could get to the bottom of. Ash hadn't seemed to think it was so babyish then. What happened?

I looked to Marigold, who shrugged but didn't say anything.

Aislinn rolled over onto her back and tossed her magazine, which was open to a glossy nail polish ad, in our direction. "What do you guys think about this color for the first day of school?"

Aislinn is the best soccer player in our grade. I don't mean she's the best *girl* soccer player, like girls are some subcategory of soccer players that are automatically inferior and should only be compared to each other. No, I mean she's the best soccer player. Period. When she's the captain, everyone wants to be on her team—but she always picks me and Marigold first, even though we're not that great. In fact, part of the Lifelong Best Friends Contract states that we would never let each other get picked last for anything, as long as we could help it. We've kept that rule.

Aislinn is still really into soccer, but in the last year or so, she's also gotten more and more interested in makeup, and how to wear her hair, and how to "dress to impress," which I think is a thing her mother says. We've been friends

for so long that it doesn't really matter to me if she changes. But it's still kind of weird.

I clicked off the recorder and tucked it in my pocket, trying to swallow back the word *babyish*, which was still stinging. I had to tell them the truth today, and what was Aislinn going to have to say about being a fifth grader again? There was nothing more babyish than that.

Marigold frowned at me, then shifted her eyes over to Aislinn's magazine. The nail polish in the photo was a super-pale shade of blue, like an icicle. "It's okay," she said. "I think your skin looks better with bright colors, though."

Aislinn reconsidered. "Yeah, good point. This would look nice on you, though."

"If I had any nails, you mean!" Marigold bites her nails constantly. She refuses to quit, even though her mother has repeatedly tried to bribe her to do so.

I wandered over to the kitchenette and shoved a handful of sour gummies into my mouth. It wasn't even noon yet.

"Maple?" Marigold stared at me. "What are you doing?"

Aislinn looked up from her magazine. "You don't even like sour worms. Are you okay?"

I swallowed. Aislinn was right—the worms made my tongue hurt. My friends waited, watching me. Finally, I cleared my throat.

“I need to tell you guys something.” They kept waiting. Marigold looked nervous. “Um, so, I’m not going to be in your class this year.”

They looked at each other first, confused. “What do you mean?” asked Marigold. “Are you moving? You can’t move!”

“School’s about to start,” added Aislinn. “I mean, how can you move *now*?”

“No, I—I’m not moving.”

“Oh, *phew*.” Marigold exhaled. Then she got a confused look on her face. “Then what do you mean? Of course you’re in our class. I mean, we might be in different math classes, but hopefully we’ll at least be in the same homeroom . . .”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I mean, I’m not going to be in sixth grade.”

Now they both looked really confused. Aislinn frowned, then crossed her arms. “Wait a minute. Are you *skipping* a grade?”

I knew I had to just come out and say it. I was making it worse by dragging it out like this. “No. Not skipping. I’m being held back.”

Boom. There it was. The four words that ruined my life, now out in the open for my friends to hear. I wasn’t a tree falling in an empty forest anymore. Now I was crashing to the ground in front of a bunch of hikers.

Marigold screwed up her face. “What do you mean, you’re being held back? Like in fifth grade again?”

“Yeah. I’ll be in fifth grade again.”

“But why?” Aislinn asked, looking suspicious. “They never do that.”

“Well, sometimes they do.” Marigold turned to her. “Andrew Payne got held back in third grade, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, but that was because he couldn’t read.”

They looked back to me. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other nervously. “So, why would they do that to you?” Marigold asked. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Except there is, I wanted to say. *There is something wrong with me.* I wanted to confess the whole thing, tell them all about my very important meeting with Ms. Littleton-Chan

and my parents. I wanted to hear them say that we'd still be friends, that I was smart and fun and the same old Maple, even though I couldn't read. That it didn't matter.

But I didn't know where to begin. Instead, I just shrugged. "I guess I . . . I need some extra help. With my reading, too."

"With your reading?" Aislinn said. She sounded incredulous. (*Incredulous: unwilling or unable to believe something.*) "But you love reading."

"Yeah . . . I . . . I mean, I love books. And stories. But I have trouble with the actual reading part."

They were quiet then. Suddenly, the finished basement felt very empty. I could hear footsteps overhead.

Marigold stared at the floor for a minute. Then finally she looked back up at me. "Well, you do read kind of slow, I guess." She shrugged. So she knew all along. The realization hurt. "We don't care."

Aislinn nodded. "Yeah. Right. Who cares? It's just reading, anyway." She went back to her magazine. Marigold switched on the TV.

"Just . . . guys?" I said. "One other thing."

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t tell anyone . . . like, that I need extra help? Please?”

They barely looked at me. “We won’t,” said Marigold. “It doesn’t matter, Maple.”

I let go of my breath, the one I hadn’t realized I was holding in. Maybe it really *didn’t* matter. Maybe it would be okay. My best friends would still be my best friends. Nothing much would change. I told myself that, and I tried to believe it.

Chapter 4

That was a week ago. Now here I am. Dressing for the first day of fifth grade for the second time in my life.

I put a fair amount of thought into my outfit for today, even though I don't really consider myself someone who cares about fashion. But this is not a normal first day of school. I'm going for a look that says: *Pulled together, intelligent, cool. Definitely not a failure of epic proportions.*

That's not an easy look to achieve.

I've settled on navy-and-white striped leggings, the double-layered black tulle skirt from Target that Mom splurged on for me as a back-to-school surprise, and my combat boots from the secondhand store on Mass. Ave.

where we get most of my clothes. That, and my favorite T-shirt, the one Dad designed especially for me that says *You Do You* in cursive, inside an outline of a maple leaf. It's been washed so many times, there's a hole near the neck and another in the hem, but I don't care.

When I survey myself in the mirror, I'm pretty pleased with my outfit. I look good. Like I'm ready for the second first day of fifth grade. As ready as I can be.

In the kitchen, Mom is trying to convince Dev to eat breakfast while she simultaneously packs his day care lunch and something for her own lunch break at the hair salon. My mother is not a hairstylist; she's a jewelry designer, but she's been answering the phones and checking in clients at Salon Soleil twenty-five hours a week since shortly after Dev was born. Extra kid means they need extra cash, I guess.

I go over to Dev's high chair and pat him gently on his squishy head, making sure to stay an arm's length away from the banana he's shoving around. He throws his head back and laughs maniacally. Babies are so weird. Dev is huge and entirely bald. I was born with a full head of almost-black

hair that never fell out, even though everyone told my parents it would. It just grew and grew, straight up at first and then in curls around my ears and down the back of my neck. Dad's hair. But Dev is seriously bald. Almost a year old and just a light fuzz of brown hair over his scalp. You'd barely know he's got any Indian in him at all. Poor guy.

I back away from the messy human. Most mornings in our house are chaotic like this, at least since the introduction of Dev, but today I need to stay calm. Because inside, I'm panicking.

"Where's Dad?"

"Shower. What do you want for breakfast?" Mom roots around in the refrigerator.

"Mom, I gotta go."

She looks over her shoulder and gives me a sympathetic smile. "You don't want any real breakfast?" She tosses me a juice box across the kitchen.

I catch it and shake my head. I can't imagine putting any food in my stomach right now.

Mom frowns. "I wish one of us could walk you. I'm sorry, lovey."

"It's okay." It's more than okay, actually. I don't want

to tell Mom this, but having an adult walk you to school is *very* fifth grade. All the sixth graders walk themselves; it's a thing. And I can't show up at school looking like a regular old fifth grader. Last year, Marigold's older brother walked us every morning. But now he's going to a private high school, so he catches an actual public commuter rail train to the suburbs. Instead, Marigold and I will meet at the corner, then pick up Aislinn at the traffic light, where she hops out of her mom's car, and go on from there. Just like we always have, but on our own.

Mom kisses me on the forehead. "Maple, my best girl."

"Your only girl, you mean."

"Only and best," Mom said. "Best and only. You'll be fine. You know that, right?" She wrinkles her brow. "You know we're very proud of you, right?"

I hear her words, but something about the way she says them—the way her voice quavers or the look on her face—makes me think it's not quite true. My parents *were* very proud of me. Before they knew the truth about me. Now my mother, at least, is not so sure.

Dev squalls on the other side of the kitchen, and Mom turns away from me to see what he needs.

“I’ll be fine, Mother. One hundred percent.”

Dad appears in his undershirt and jeans. His hair is still dripping. “Hold up, Maple. I have something for you.” He produces a tiny blue box, tied with a polka-dot ribbon. “Back-to-school present.”

My parents have never given me a back-to-school present before. In fact, they’re not big on material presents in general. They have a rule at birthdays and holidays that everyone gets four small gifts: *something you want, something you need, something to wear, and something to read.*

I untie the ribbon and gently lift the lid of the box. Inside, there’s a circle of silver links: a charm bracelet. Hanging from the links are three charms—a horseshoe, a heart, and a maple leaf.

“For luck, and love, and Maple.”

It’s easily the nicest thing I’ve ever owned. I take it from the box, and Dad fastens it around my wrist.

“Mom made the links, and I picked out the charms. You like it?” he asks. I nod. He smiles at me, then at Mom. But for some reason I feel like Mom doesn’t look as excited as he does. I wonder if she thinks that I didn’t deserve such a nice gift.

“Good luck today, lovey,” Mom says. She kisses me, then Dad does. Dev chucks a spoon across the room.

I heave my backpack over my shoulders. The familiar clack of my key-chain collection, all fourteen of them hanging off my bag, gives me a momentary sense of calm. I glance at the charm bracelet on my wrist, close the front door behind me, and take a deep breath. I’m fine. One hundred percent fine.

Outside, the air is warm, like it always is at the start of the school year. You want it to be crisp and cool. But really it’s just summer still, stretching past its fair share on the calendar and rudely crowding out fall.

I walk the familiar route up my street, to the corner where I’ll meet Marigold. My walk to school has been the same every morning since kindergarten. The sidewalk buckles over tree roots in all the same places. The trash bins sit out in front of the buildings because it’s just another Tuesday morning. But I feel different today.

Usually, I’m ready for summer to be over. I spent long days with Marigold and Aislinn, hanging out at the public pool. Sometimes we camped out whole afternoons in the back room of the library, where it’s cool and there’s

a corner where no one ever finds us and we don't have to be too quiet. Usually, after the long, lazy summer, I'm ready to get back to the routine of school. And usually, I'm feeling kind of anxious but excited about the new year, new class, new teacher.

Today, though, there's a painful knot in the pit of my stomach, where there should be good butterflies.

When I get to the corner, Marigold's not there yet. I perch against a fire hydrant and wait, watching some younger kids saunter by with their parents. I wave and smile. A couple of them are newly minted fifth graders, my soon-to-be classmates. They don't know that yet, but they will soon. I try not to think about it and jut my chin toward the sky to feel the sun.

I check my watch. It's 8:39, which means I have exactly six minutes to get to school and into my seat before I'm considered late. Being late on the first day of school is not really a good look. I suppose I should've confirmed with Marigold last night, but I assumed the plan was the same old one. Where is she? I look up the block toward her building, straining to see if I can spot her heading this way.

Frankie Winter's dad crosses the street toward me.

Frankie is younger than me, but her dad is friendly with my dad from being involved in city politics stuff. “Hey, Maple! Happy first day.” Then he gives me a quizzical smile. “You waiting for school to come to you?”

I laugh. “No, just Marigold. She’s running a little late.”

He frowns. “That’s strange. I’m pretty sure I just saw Marigold when I dropped Frankie off. She and Aislinn were hanging out on the tire swings.”

Somehow, my heart manages to sink and race at the same time.

“Oh,” I say, whacking a hand to my forehead. “Right, I forgot! Dummy. They’re waiting for me there. Good thing I ran into you!”

“Sure,” he says, shrugging. “Have a good first day. See you, Maple.”

When he turns the corner, I blink back the tears that rise up in my eyes, threatening to make me look like a real baby.

Then I hustle on toward Clara Harlowe Barton Elementary and Middle School. Alone.

Chapter 5

As I make my way to class, I scan the halls for Aislinn and Marigold, trying not to look desperate. They're nowhere to be seen. Not that this is a surprise; the sixth-grade classrooms are on the third floor, and we're on the second floor. The girls are probably over my head right now, flouncing into their new classroom with their new sixth-grade outfits, forgetting all about me.

"*Gooooo*d morning!" Ms. Littleton-Chan stands by the open door to Room 226, greeting my new classmates just a little too enthusiastically as they flow into the classroom ahead of me. When I get there, she gives me what I can only

describe as a concerned frown-smile, but then she brushes it aside. “Ah, the famous Maple Mehta-Cohen. Welcome back! How was your summer, my friend?”

I shrug. I think back to those aimless mornings at the pool with Marigold and Aislinn, getting there bright and early so we could stake out the best deck chairs closest to the snack bar. My stomach contorts with an involuntary (and unwelcome) pang. “Fine, thanks. How was yours?”

“It was great. We went hiking in the Grand Canyon. It was *amazing*.” She drags out the word *amazing*, like giving it extra vowels makes it that much more convincing. “Ever been?”

I shake my head. “Was it hot?”

“So hot. OMG. Like, a hundred degrees.”

I shudder. Sounds horrible. I’d like to see the Grand Canyon, but only in the winter. I feel similarly about visiting Dad’s grandparents, his ba and bapuji, in India, which he says “we have to do before they die.” I’d like to meet my great-grandparents and see the Taj Mahal and Jaipur, the “Pink City,” and all that, sure. But not in the summer, thank you very much. I require constant access to air conditioning when it gets over eighty degrees.

I take a breath and step inside my same old classroom. They offered to let me switch to Mr. Greenbaum’s class this year—he’s the other fifth-grade teacher—but he’s the *worst*. He’s, like, the polar opposite of Ms. Littleton-Chan: nothing gets him excited. No levitating with enthusiasm over 40 million krill in his classroom. Plus, coffee breath.

If I *have* to be back in fifth grade, I may as well have the good teacher again. Ms. Littleton-Chan has given Room 226 a makeover, so it doesn’t feel entirely the same as when I last saw it. It smells freshly painted. There’s a new rug in the reading corner and what looks like some new chapter books displayed on the shelves. She always faces a few books out, library-style. The desks are the same, but she’s rearranged them in pairs so they make little tables. Each desk is labeled with a name card.

Just as I’m dropping my bag next to the desk with my name on it, the bell rings, and Ms. Littleton-Chan closes the door behind her.

“All right, my friends, find your seats, please. Welcome to fifth grade.”

We take our seats and wait for Mrs. Murphy to come over the loudspeaker and make the morning announcements.

“Welcome back, Barton Badgers! I hope everyone had a wonderful summer. Reminder that fall sports will not be in session this week. They’ll start next week. Now, everyone please stand for the Barton Anthem!”

We shuffle to our feet. I never really sing the anthem. I hate the sound of my singing voice in my ears. Hand over heart, I mouth the same words I’ve mouthed every morning since kindergarten:

“The Baaaarton School, the Baaaaarton School, the place we love to leearn.”

Only this morning, I’m imagining alternative lyrics. *“The Barton School, the Barton School, the place I’d like to spurn.”*

Once the anthem is over, I sit back down and start arranging my desk. I like my things arranged a certain way. I can’t explain it. It just helps me focus. I put my notebook on the left, with my pencil case above it. One pencil, one eraser, and one pen out and at the ready, the rest tucked away until I need them. My blue tin of Vaseline lip balm next to them, in case my lips feel chapped. And my water bottle next to that (plastic but BPA-free). That’s it. Just the essentials. The rest of the desk is clutter-free and ready for

work. It makes me feel solid inside, like I know what I'm doing. Which, today, I'm going to need.

Fourth graders—I mean, fifth graders now—mill around me. They look so painfully *young*. So immature. And so smug about being in fifth grade. Really, what is *fifth* grade? Was I like this at the start of last year? Who did I think I was, anyway?

“Ooh, hey, Maple. You're in *our* class now?” Sonia Shah floats by my table. She's real Indian—I mean, on both sides (not half, like me) and born there. When Sonia first came to the Barton, I was jealous of her because of it. She has this beautiful Mumbai accent that reminds me of my grandmother's and long, straight black hair, not like my tangle of curls.

I bet no one ever asks Sonia, “So, what are you?” They *know* she's Indian.

Sonia's nice enough, and I always thought I'd probably be friends with her if we were the same age, but now I'm not exactly glad to see her. “Yeah, I'm here again.”

She looks at me kind of quizzically, like she can't figure it out but doesn't want to ask. For that, I'm momentarily grateful for Sonia Shah.

“How was your summer?”

“Fine, thanks.” I look around the room, distracted. I can feel the other kids’ eyes on me as they notice that I’m here. Like I’m a mole, a spy sent from middle school, and I’ve suddenly been made. Sonia hovers for a moment—maybe she’s waiting for me to ask how her summer was, but I don’t—and then she flashes me a smile and bounces back to her seat.

I tap my foot anxiously against the chair leg and stare into the empty space in front of me.

“Hey.”

I look up, startled. A kid I’ve never see before has sat down across from me. He’s got a shock of messy red hair. And the palest, pinkest skin I’ve ever seen, dappled with freckles, not just across the bridge of his nose but all over his face and—I note as he unpacks his bag—his arms and hands, too. So many freckles, you could never count them all (although I would try, if they were mine).

“I’m Jack,” he says.

“Jack who?”

He gives me a funny look, like it’s a strange question. “Jack Wells. I just moved here.”

That explains it, then. I'm curious where he moved from, but I don't want to look overeager. "Who are *you*?" he asks after a moment.

"Maple Mehta-Cohen."

"Cool name."

"Uh, thanks." It comes out less enthusiastic than I intend it to—of course, I *agree* with him. I've just never gotten that response before when I've introduced myself.

I watch Jack as he settles himself in his space. He clearly doesn't have a system for organizing his things, and his desktop is soon awash in clutter: a notebook with loose papers shoved inside the front cover, a mess of dull pencils (no sharpener in sight), one pen missing a cap and another with the end all chewed up, and a bunch of markers, which is silly because you're not allowed to use markers for writing in fifth grade anyway.

I don't say anything. Maybe my organizational system will rub off on him, the longer he sits across from me.

"I was living in DC before we moved here," he goes on cheerfully. "And before that, I lived in Amsterdam. And before that, Amman." He pauses. "Jordan?"

Who is this kid? CIA?

“I’m aware,” I say. I know where *Amman* is. Honestly. My curiosity gets the better of me. “Why’d you live in all those places?”

“My mom’s in the Foreign Service. I was born in Rwanda, actually. But we move every two years.”

“So why are you here now?”

Jack’s face clouds over. For a moment I panic, like maybe his parents were killed in the line of duty and he’s had to move here to live in the attic of an elderly aunt he barely knows. Maybe I just reminded him how depressing his life has become.

“Sorry,” I add quickly. “You don’t have to tell me.”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s fine. My mom is in Syria right now, which is what they call a hardship post, which is basically somewhere where you can’t bring your kids?”

Jack’s voice ticks up at the end of every sentence, like he’s asking a question or maybe is just nervous. “So my dad and I came up here from DC? My dad’s a teacher, and my grandparents are here, so he got a job at the high school, and . . . anyway.” He stops and shrugs. “It’s not that interesting.”

Actually, his life sounds considerably above-average interesting to me.

“Cool. Well, welcome to the Barton.”

Ms. Littleton-Chan, who’s been doing a lap around the room, pauses by our table. “Oh, good, you two have met. Maple, I seated you with Jack so you could help him get settled. I trust you to make sure he knows where he’s going. Show him the cafeteria. You know? Sound good?”

I sigh inwardly. I’m already confined to fifth grade again, and now I have to be the new kid’s tour guide. How am I supposed to find Marigold and Aislinn later if I have to babysit Jack Wells?

But outwardly, I give Ms. Littleton-Chan a smile. “Like a school docent?” (*Docent: a person who acts as a guide in a museum.* I know that one from when Dad read me *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, and I learned a bunch about museums.)

Ms. Littleton-Chan looks momentarily surprised, then laughs. “Sure, I suppose. Thanks, Maple.”

Then she moves on.

Jack blinks at me. “What’s a docent?”

Chapter 6

The morning goes by without incident, mostly because we spend the first hour recapping our summer vacations, and then there's an hour of math review, and then Ms. Littleton-Chan introduces us to our core topics for the first half of the year: In language arts, we'll be studying personal narrative. In social studies, it'll be early American civilizations. At least they won't be a repeat of last year's topics. I don't know if I could take another five months of ocean ecosystems, even if those whales were interesting the first time around.

Other than Sonia, no one particularly seems to notice that I shouldn't be here. Or if they do, they don't say

anything. But as lunch approaches, anxiety starts to creep back into the pit of my stomach.

The cafeteria is a minefield. The fifth and sixth grades always have the same lunch, which means as I make my way down the hall, the drone of a hundred and fifty kids slamming plastic trays on tables and screeching at each other is a warning of what's to come: a hundred and fifty opportunities for humiliation.

Jack, of course, has no idea.

He trails a few paces behind me in the hallway, then periodically does a little skip-hop to catch up and ask me something.

“Hey, so, Maple? Have you been here since kindergarten?”

“Is there a pizza option every day?”

“What’s your favorite subject, Maple?”

“Maple?”

“Maple?”

I give him the shortest answers I can get away with: Yes to kindergarten. No to pizza (only on Fridays, and it’s gluten-free crust). Favorite subject? I ignore that one entirely. It used to be language arts. I used to consider

myself, you know, a word person. But you can't really be a word person if you can't read, so now I'm not sure what my favorite subject is. Do I have to be good at math now? Nothing against numbers—I mean, I like a good fraction—but being a “math person” isn't really part of my personal brand.

In the cafeteria, sunlight glints through the floor-to-ceiling windows and spills bold stripes across the linoleum. It doesn't take me more than thirty seconds to spot Aislinn and Marigold at one of the unofficial middle-school tables at the far end of the room. They're the sun-drenched window seats with a view of the playground. You have to pay your dues before you can sit there. And I *did*. I paid.

My friends already have their trays and are sitting with Lucy Jones and Fatima Ulum. Neither was in our class last year, but they could both be considered “cool”: Lucy plays a team sport every season, and Fatima dances in pointe shoes. You can't *not* want to be friends with them. If I were in sixth grade, I'd already be friends with them by association, thanks to my history with Aislinn and Marigold.

Instead, I'm standing here, on the other side of the cafeteria, holding an empty tray, when Marigold looks up.

We lock eyes, and I freeze. The tray slips from my sweat-slicked hands and clatters to the floor.

For a moment, I think she looks almost sorry. Then she turns away.

They're laughing together, in a way that suggests shared secrets and jokes that aren't funny to anyone else. I see Aislinn twist her thick blond hair into a messy bun and clip it effortlessly to the top of her head. Marigold has new braids, like she said she would, fresh for the start of the school year. "Micros," she called them when she told me her plan. They're long and thin, with the bottoms in loose curls that trail down her back. She's perfect. They all are.

My chest aches.

"Hey. Here." Jack is holding my tray. "You okay?"

I'd almost forgotten my charge. "Fine," I say, grabbing it from him. We make our way through the buffet line, loading up with bowls of chili, limp salad, and green apples. He takes a carton of milk, and I grab a water.

With our trays full, I hesitate. Most of the fifth graders are sitting at the tables closer to the hallway, while the sixth graders occupy the better seats by the windows. No one ever says it's a rule, and obviously it's not, *technically*, but

that’s just how it always is and everyone knows it. I glance again toward Aislinn and Marigold and wonder, briefly, if one of them might toss me a glance that invites me to their table. But I get nothing, so I march toward a spot that seems like Switzerland—an empty table, generally in the fifth-grade zone but in a corner that’s neutral enough.

“You don’t want to sit with people from our class?” Jack asks as he slaps his tray down across from me. Like his desk, his tray is poorly organized: Utensils slide every which way. Chili sloshes over the edge of the bowl, pooling on the red plastic.

“This is fine for me,” I say. “You can sit wherever you want, though.”

He shrugs. “Nah, it’s fine. You’re the docent.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes. I keep my eyes on the tray, willing myself to disappear. Clearly, I don’t succeed.

“Hey, Maple.” Marigold’s passing by on her way to the busing station. “Sorry about this morning,” she says, chewing her lower lip. She looks briefly at Jack, then back to me. “I . . . um . . .”

I decide to be the bigger person. “Your braids look nice.”

“Thanks,” she says with a rush of relief.

“So, how’s sixth grade?”

Before Marigold can come up with an answer, Aislinn appears behind her. “Hey,” she says, giving me a quick half-smile. “Come on, Marigold. We’ll be late for math.”

“Oh, right.” Marigold looks apologetic . . . ish. “You know, we have to switch classes now, so . . .”

“Right. I know.” Switching classes was one of the things I had been looking forward to most—hearing the bell and having to pack your bag up and get out the door. Maybe stopping off at your locker to pick something up. Like a high schooler.

I try to make myself seem very nonchalant, like I’ve barely even noticed that Marigold and Aislinn are living the sixth-grade life without me, when we were supposed to do it together. “See you later.”

Then they’re gone, catching up with Lucy and Fatima and swishing off down the hall.

Maybe he senses my discomfort, but Jack doesn’t say anything for a minute. He just picks at his food. Finally,