

Maple Mehta-Cohen is gifted at many things, including spinning tales full of mystery and suspense. But when Maple has to repeat the fifth grade to work on her reading skills after being diagnosed with dyslexia, she is mortified. After telling her new classmates that she was asked to stay behind as a special assistant to the teacher, Maple finds herself struggling to keep up with the lies while trying to fit in with her new fifth-grade friends and worriedly watching her old ones slip further and further away.

★ “Adventure abounds. . . . Ultimately this is a story to share with all.”

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“Frank and quirky. . . . A layered, utterly readable novel!”

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“Warmly compassionate and often funny, *Welcome Back, Maple Mehta-Cohen* is an inspiring and comforting read.”

—*BookPage*

“Poignant. . . . Maple is a welcome protagonist.”

—*School Library Journal*

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**Welcome Back,
Maple Mehta-Cohen**

Kate McGovern



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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.

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

A JUNIOR LIBRARY GUILD SELECTION

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.