



"Andrew Clements set the standard for the school story."—*New York Times*

Andrew Clements

Bestselling author of *Frindle*

READING GROUP GUIDE INCLUDED

IN THE HILLS ABOVE KABUL

Sadeed knew he wasn't supposed to be listening to the men talking in the next room. He also knew he wasn't supposed to be peeking through the crack near the bottom of the old wooden door. But they had to be talking about him in there—why else would his teacher have invited him to the home of the headman of the village?

His teacher, Mahmood Jafari, had not told him much. "Please come to Akbar Khan's house this afternoon at four. He and his councillors meet today, and I have to speak with them. And I may need you to be there."

Sadeed thought perhaps his teacher was going to recommend him for a special honor. That

wasn't hard to imagine, not at all. Perhaps the village elders would award him a scholarship to one of the finest new schools in Kabul. He would wear blue trousers and a clean white shirt to classes every day, and he would have his own computer, and he would take his place as one of the future leaders of Afghanistan. His father and mother would be very proud of him. It would be a great opportunity. And Sadeed was certain he richly deserved it.

Through the crack in the door, Sadeed could see all seven men, sitting on cushions around a low table, sipping tea. An electric bulb hung overhead, and two wires ran across the ceiling to the gasoline generator outside. Mahmood was talking to Akbar Khan, but the teacher's back was toward the door, and Sadeed couldn't hear what he was saying.

When the teacher finished, someone Sadeed knew—Hassan Jaji—began to speak. Hassan stopped by his father's shop in the village bazaar at least once a week, and he sometimes stayed awhile, telling stories about his time as a freedom fighter during the war with the Soviet Union. One day he had shown Sadeed where a Russian grenade had blown two fingers off his right hand.

And as the man spoke now, that was the hand he used to stroke his chin.

"I am only a simple man," Hassan said, "and I would never try to stop progress. But our traditions protect us. And they protect our children. And I believe that the schoolteacher has asked us to allow something that would not be proper."

The eyes of the men turned back to Mahmood. The teacher looked around the circle and cleared his throat, speaking more forcefully now so that Sadeed could hear every word he said. "What Hassan says about our traditions is certainly true."

He paused, and Sadeed saw him hold up a bright green envelope with three stamps on it, each one a small picture of an American flag. The front of the envelope was decorated with two pink butterfly stickers.

The teacher said, "But it is also a tradition that we are a courteous people. And therefore one student from our village school must answer this letter from the girl in America. And I believe it would be *most* courteous if our very best student writes back, the one student who is most skillful with the English language. And that one student is Sadeed Bayat."

A pang of disappointment cut through Sadeed.

ABBY CARSON IS FAILING SIXTH GRADE.

It isn't that Abby can't do her schoolwork, it's just that she doesn't like doing it. When a warning letter is sent home, Abby realizes that all of her slacking off could cause her to be held back—for real! Unless she meets some specific conditions, including taking on an extra-credit project: find a pen-pal in a foreign country. Simple enough (even for a girl who hates homework).

When Abby's first letter arrives at a small school in Afghanistan, Sadeed Bayat is chosen to be her pen pal . . . Well, kind of. He is the best writer, but he is also a boy, and in his village it is not appropriate for a boy to correspond with a girl. So his younger sister dictates and signs the letter—until Sadeed decides what his sister is telling Abby isn't what he'd like Abby to know.

As letters flow back and forth between Illinois and Afghanistan, Abby and Sadeed discover that their letters are crossing more than an ocean. They are crossing a huge cultural divide and a minefield of different lifestyles and traditions. Their growing friendship is also becoming a growing problem for both communities, and some people are not happy. Suddenly things are not so simple.

WINNER OF THE CHRISTOPHER AWARD

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