

The Jacket

An artistic illustration of two young boys' faces in profile, overlapping each other. The boy in the background is white with light brown hair and rosy cheeks, looking towards the left. The boy in the foreground is Black with dark hair, looking towards the right. The style is painterly with visible brushstrokes. The background is a warm, textured orange-brown.

An innocent mistake . . .
or something more?

Andrew Clements

Author of the award-winning two-million-copy bestseller **FRINDLE**

Part I

COLLISION COURSE

It was Thursday morning right before first period, and Phil was on a mission. Hurrying through the fourth- and fifth-grade hall, he waded through groups of younger kids. His little brother, Jimmy, had left the house early so he could ride to school with a friend, and he had forgotten his lunch money on the kitchen counter.

Phil was tall for a sixth grader, so most of the younger kids got out of his way. Which was good, because he had

no time to mess around. If he got one more tardy during December, he would have to serve two detentions. The pressure made Phil's imagination run at full throttle. *Like, if I'm late for math today, then I might not be allowed to take the test—and then I could flunk math! I might even flunk sixth grade and get left back! And when Mom and Dad yell at me, I'm gonna get so mad, 'cause, like, it's not even my fault! I'll say, "Hey, know what? Forget about school, that's what!" And I'll just drop out and turn into a bum—or maybe even a criminal. My whole life's gonna be a mess, and it's all on account of my stupid little brother! Where is that punk?*

Phil was about to stick his head into a classroom to look around. Then up at the corner of the hallway he thought he saw the back of his brother's jacket. It had to be Jimmy.

No one else in the whole city had a jacket like that one.

He called, "Hey, Jimmy!" but his brother didn't stop, and Phil pushed his way forward and rushed around the corner. "Hey, idiot, you forgot . . ."

But it wasn't Jimmy. It was someone Phil had never seen before, a black kid. Wearing Jimmy's jacket.

Phil grabbed the collar and said, "Hey! This is my brother's jacket! Where is he? How'd you get this from him?"

The other boy struggled, trying to pull away. "What're you talkin' about? Let go of me! This is my jacket! I don't even know your brother!"

The kid twisted and turned to break free, but Phil was a lot bigger and stronger. "You tell me where my brother's at, or I'm gonna—"

"Boys! You stop it, right now!" Mrs. Atkin came striding through the

crowd that had gathered, pushing kids out of her way with her left hand and pointing at Phil with the other one. "You let go of him, and I mean it!"

Drawn by Mrs. Atkin's voice, three or four other teachers stepped out into the hallway.

Phil let go of the jacket, and the younger boy jerked around to face him, his fists up, his eyes narrowed.

Mrs. Atkin stepped between them and said to the younger boy, "Daniel, you put your hands down. And all the rest of you kids, go on about your business. Get your things put away and get to your rooms. Go on, there's nothing happening here." Then, glaring at Phil and the smaller boy, she said, "You two, come with me."

The other teachers were moving around in the hallway now, talking to kids, quieting everyone down.

Phil and Daniel followed Mrs.

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When Phil sees another kid wearing his brother's jacket, he assumes the jacket was stolen. It turns out he was wrong, and Phil has to ask himself the question: Would he have made the same assumption if the boy wearing the jacket hadn't been African American? And that question leads to others that reveal some unsettling truths about Phil's neighborhood, his family, and even himself.

"An excellent story to open honest group discussion."

—*Booklist*, boxed review

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