A week later they still hadn't gone into the girls' bathroom. Jeff always had a good reason why it wasn't the right time. Recess was the wrong time, because it would be better to wait until after lunch, after the girls had eaten. Lunch was no good, because they hadn't had time to digest their food. Listening to Jeff, it would seem that girls never had to go to the bathroom.

But Bradley had never been happier. He was thrilled to have a friend. He even was beginning to like school.

Jeff had two gold stars next to his name. Bradley felt proud when he looked at them, almost like he had earned them himself.

“What do you want to do?” Jeff asked.

“Nothing,” said Bradley.

It was lunchtime. They had finished eating and were sitting out on the grass.

“Did the counselor say anything stupid today?” Bradley asked.

Jeff hesitated. He looked down at the ground, then boldly stated, “I like her.”

Bradley was shocked.

“She said that I can like her even if you hate her,” Jeff asserted. “It doesn’t mean that you and I can’t still be friends. We don’t have to agree on everything. She said friendships are stronger when everyone has different opinions to share.”

“You told her I hated her?” Bradley asked.

Jeff nodded.

“Good.”

“Except she didn’t believe me,” said Jeff.

“She’s weird,” said Bradley. “She never believes anything anyone says. I’m not going to see her anymore.”

“She said you don’t have to. I told her you wouldn’t show up today and she said that was okay. She said you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Bradley turned and looked back toward the school, in the direction of the counselor’s office. “That’s one of her tricks,” he said.

“So what do you want to do?” Jeff asked.

“Nothing.”

A basketball bounced away from the basketball court and rolled toward them. Jeff jumped up and grabbed it.

“Hey, Fishnose, over here!” called Robbie, a boy from their class.

“Kick it the other way,” urged Bradley.

Jeff threw the ball all the way on a fly to Robbie.

“You should have kicked it onto the roof,” said Bradley.

“Maybe they’ll let us play,” said Jeff. “Let’s ask them.”

Bradley shook his head. “No, I don’t want to.”
Jeff watched the boys play basketball for a moment, then sat back down with Bradley.  
"Uh-oh," Bradley said. "Here come those girls again. Try not to say hello to them."
"Hello, Jeff," said Lori.
"Hello," said Jeff.
"Hi," said Melinda.
"Hi," said Jeff.
"Hi, Jeff," whispered Colleen.
"Hi," whispered Jeff.
Lori laughed as the three girls walked away.
Jeff shrugged. "I can't help it," he said sadly.
"Let's go beat them up!" said Bradley. "Then they won't say hello to you anymore." He started after them, but Jeff didn't follow. "C'mon," Bradley urged.
"Girls are easy to beat up. You just have to hit them once, and they cry and run away."
"Not now," said Jeff.
"Why not?"
"Everyone will see us. We'll get in trouble."
Bradley stopped. "You're right," he agreed. "We'll get them after school."
"I can't," said Jeff. "I've got to go right home after school and do my homework."
Bradley was beginning to get fed up. "How come you're always doing your homework?" he asked, hands on hips. He said the word homework the way other people might say the word manure.
Jeff shrugged.
"Do you like doing it?" Bradley asked.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind too much.”
Bradley kicked at the ground. “Do you think if I did my homework, Mrs. Ebbel might give me a gold star?” he asked.

“I don’t think she gives gold stars just for doing homework,” said Jeff. “But she might!”

“Maybe I should do it sometime,” said Bradley.

“Why don’t you come over after school today?” Jeff asked. “We can do our homework together.”

Bradley’s face twisted in anguish. “Today? I don’t think today’s a good day to do homework.”

“I can help you—” Jeff started to say, then stopped.

“You can help me with the stuff I don’t understand.”

“All right!” said Bradley. “I’ll do it!”

“Good!” said Jeff.

“First, we’ll beat up those girls,” said Bradley, “then we’ll go to your house and do our homework.”
Just before the end of the lunch period, someone knocked very lightly on the door to the counselor’s office.

“Come in,” said Carla.

“A girl timidly stepped inside. “Are you Miss Davis?” she asked.

“Yes, but I prefer to be called Carla.”

“No, not if you don’t want to.”

“Colleen Verigold,” said the girl. She sat down in one of the chairs around the round table and said, “I don’t know who to invite to my birthday party.”

Carla remained standing.

“See, there’s this boy I want to invite,” said Colleen. “Do I have to tell you his name?”

“No.”

“Jeff Fishkin.”

Carla smiled.

“But if I invite Jeff, then I’ll have to invite another boy, because I can’t invite seven girls and only one boy, can I?”

“I don’t—”

“Except Jeff has only one friend and he’s the most horrible, rotten boy in the whole school! I can’t invite Bradley Chalkers to my birthday party, I just can’t!”

She took a breath. “So what should I do?”

“You want me to tell you whom to invite to your birthday party?”

“Lori says you’re good at solving problems.”

“Lori solves her own problems. I just help her think for herself.”

“But I don’t know what to think!” Colleen exclaimed. “I can’t invite seven girls and only one boy. And I can’t invite Bradley!”

“When’s your birthday?”

“November thirteenth.”

“Then you still have plenty of time,” said Carla. “Let me give you a form for your parents to sign. Right now, I’m not even allowed to talk to you without your parents’ permission.”

“That’s dumb!”

“No it isn’t,” said Carla. “Some parents don’t want strangers giving advice to their children.”

“But my parents won’t care,” said Colleen. “They said I can invite anybody I want to my birthday party.”

“That’s not the point,” said Carla. She handed her the form.

Colleen reluctantly took it. “Can’t you just whisper it to me?” she asked.

Carla shook her head.

Melinda and Lori were waiting for Colleen when she came out. “Who are you going to invite?” asked Melinda.

“Not Bradley,” said Lori. “Please, not Bradley.”

“I don’t know yet,” said Colleen. “She won’t tell me until my parents sign this form.”
Bradley dragged his feet as he walked to Carla’s office.

She was waiting in the hall for him. “It’s a pleasure to see you today,” she said. “I appreciate your coming to see me.” She held out her hand.

He stepped past her and sat down at the round table. She sat across from him.

“The reason the President doesn’t wear a hat is because the doorways are too low,” he said. “He used to wear one, but every time he walked through a door, he’d hit his hat and it would fall on the floor.”

“That makes sense,” Carla agreed. “Thank you for sharing that with me. But,” she whispered, “I thought you weren’t allowed to tell me such top secret information.”

“The President says he trusts you,” said Bradley.

“Thank you, Bradley,” said Carla. “I’m glad you trust me.”

He looked at her as if he thought she were deaf. He hadn’t said he trusted her. He had said the President trusted her, but he decided to let it go.

She was wearing a yellow shirt with large green triangular buttons all the way down the front. On one side of the buttons was a big white exclamation point. On the other side, there was a big white question mark.

“Jeff trusts you too,” he said.

“I understand you two have become friends,” said Carla.

“We’re best friends.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Carla.

“Today, after school, we’re going to do our homework together. At his house! I’m going to help him with the stuff he doesn’t understand.”

“That’s very nice of you,” said Carla. “I’m sure Jeff appreciates having you as a friend.”

“I’m his only friend,” said Bradley.

“But even if he had other friends—”

“He won’t have any other friends,” Bradley interrupted.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes I do. I’m his only friend.”

“But suppose he makes new friends?”

“I don’t want him to.”

“But if he made new friends, then his new friends could become your friends too.”

“He won’t,” said Bradley, shaking his head.

“Just because you and he are friends, that doesn’t mean he can’t have other friends too,” said Carla.

“Yes it does.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said proudly. “So long as Jeff is friends with me, nobody else will like him!”
Homework. After school Bradley Chalkers was going to go to Jeff Fishkin’s house, and they were going to do their homework together. Bradley couldn’t believe it. Homework. It was all he thought about as he sat at his desk—last seat, last row—and waited for school to end. Maybe it won’t be too horrible, he reasoned. After all, Jeff always does his homework. He must like it.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Homework: Work you do at home. Except he wouldn’t do it at his home, he would do it at Jeff’s home, and that was even better. It would be his first time ever at Jeff’s house.

And after he did his homework, Mrs. Ebbel might give him a gold star. Instead of scribbling, he drew little stars, one after another until the bell rang.

But first they had to beat up those girls.

“C’mon, let’s go,” he said, hopping out of his seat.

“Just a sec,” said Jeff. He got a book from his desk.

“Oh, do I need one of those?” Bradley asked. He hadn’t realized that in order to do his homework, he would need to bring his book home.

“That’s okay, we can share mine.”

They walked outside. There was a light drizzle.

“They’re in Mrs. Sharp’s class,” said Bradley. “We can wait here until they come out, then sneak up behind them.”

“Who?”

“Those girls. We have to beat them up so they won’t say hello to you.”

“We should probably get started on our homework right away,” said Jeff.

“It won’t take long,” Bradley assured him. “You just have to hit them once, and they cry and run away.”

“But it’s raining,” said Jeff. It was barely misting.

“Good! We can push them in the mud and get their clothes dirty. Girls hate it when their clothes get dirty.”

They stood about ten yards away from Mrs. Sharp’s door and waited. Several kids came out, but they didn’t see Colleen, Lori, or Melinda.

“Maybe they’ve already gone home,” Jeff said hopefully.

“No, girls always take a long time to leave class,” Bradley explained. “First, they have to put their papers neatly in their notebooks. Then they have to mark their places in their books and put all their pencils in their pencil holders. Then they put everything away, neatly, in their desks.” He said it as though it was the most disgusting thing anyone could do. “Shh! Here they come.”

Melinda, followed by Colleen and Lori, came out of Mrs. Sharp’s room.

Bradley put his finger to his lips, then he and Jeff
walked after them, keeping their distance. They followed the girls around the side of the building and along the sidewalk away from the school.

"Let's just go home," said Jeff. "The homework might take a long time."

"Girls kick," warned Bradley. "They don't know how to punch, so they try to kick you." He quickened his pace until he was just a few steps behind the girls. Jeff lagged a little behind.

Lori was the first to turn around. "E-uuu, Bradley Chalkers!" she said, making a face.

"Lori Loudmouth," snapped Bradley. "The ugliest girl in school!"

Melinda and Colleen stopped walking and turned around too.

"Grow up, Bradley," said Melinda.

"Make me," he replied.

"Hello, Jeff," Colleen said very quietly.

"Hello," said Jeff.

"Quit saying hello to him!" said Bradley.

"It's a free country," said Lori. "We can say hello."

"Not to us!" said Bradley.

"We didn't say hello to you!" said Lori. "Just him! Hello, Jeff."

"Hello," said Jeff.

Lori laughed.

"Why don't you just leave us alone, Bradley," said Melinda.

"No. You leave us alone first!" Bradley said, and he pushed Melinda.

She pushed him back. He pushed her again. She shoved him off the sidewalk.

He slipped on the wet grass and fell to the ground.

Lori laughed hysterically.

Bradley scrambled angrily to his feet. "You got my clothes dirty!"

"Bradley wet his pants!" teased Lori, hiding behind Melinda.

"Shut up!" he yelled.

"You started it," said Melinda.

"I'll punch your face in," said Bradley. He shook his fist at her.

Melinda raised her fists in the air.

He charged toward her, then kicked her in the leg. She slugged him in the face with all her might.

Bradley stumbled backward and almost fell again, but caught his balance.

He glared at Melinda as his eyes swelled with tears.

"No fair! Four against one!" he shouted, then ran home crying.
“My poor baby,” said Bradley’s mother as she wrapped her massive arms around him. He had stopped crying shortly after he ran away from Melinda, but started again when he saw his mother. “They beat me up and threw me in the mud,” he sobbed.

His mother wiped his face with a tissue she kept rolled up in her shirt sleeve. “Come on,” she said, and led him by the hand, down the hall to the bathroom. “You’ll take a nice warm bath, put on clean clothes, and feel good as new.”

Claudia was in the bathroom, combing her hair. “What happened to him?”

“Some bullies picked on him after school.”

“There were four of them,” said Bradley. “And they ripped up my homework too!”

“You’ve been crying!” Claudia accused.

“That’s the rain,” said Bradley.

Claudia started to say something but her mother told her to leave the bathroom. She laid out clean clothes on the bathroom counter, then started the water.

After his bath, Bradley went into his bedroom. He was just in the nick of time!

Ronnie the Rabbit was romping across the bed, singing “doo de-doo de-doo,” when suddenly she was lost! “Where am I?” she asked.

Suddenly, three bad guys were chasing her. They were the Two of Spades, the Nine of Hearts, and the King of Diamonds. The King of Diamonds was the leader of the bad guys. “After her!” he yelled.

“Help!” called Ronnie. She ran to the edge of the bed—the cliff! She was trapped. The floor was a thousand feet below. The bad guys moved in for the kill. “Let me go!” she shouted, then fell off the bed onto the floor, but that was an accident. Bradley picked her up and put her back on the edge of the bed. It never happened. There was time out.

“What are you going to do to me?” asked Ronnie, trembling on the edge of the cliff.

“We are going to kill you,” said the King of Diamonds.

“Oh no you’re not!” said a voice from behind. It was Bartholomew.

“Get him, boys,” ordered the King of Diamonds. The cards attacked.

Bartholomew punched the Two of Spades in the stomach, then flipped him over his head and over the cliff. “Aaaaaaaah . . .” the Two of Spades yelled as he fell a thousand feet to his death. Next, Bartholomew beat up the Nine of Hearts. “Go join your friend,” he said as he threw him over the cliff too. “Aaaaaaah,” cried the Nine.

Now only the King of Diamonds was left. He came
at Bartholomew, swinging an axe. "I'll chop off your head!" he sneered.

Bartholomew ducked, then kicked the axe out of the King's hand and punched his face in. He threw the King over the cliff too.

Ronnie ran to Bartholomew. "You saved my life," she said.

"I know," said Bartholomew.

They kissed.

Claudia walked into the room. "Mom's making cookies because you got beat up," she said. "Ooh, you're going to have a black eye."

"I didn't get beat up," Bradley declared. "I beat them up. I gave one kid two black eyes, and another boy three."

"You can't give somebody three black eyes," said Claudia.

"Shut up!" said Bradley. "Or I'll give you four black eyes."

Claudia shrugged and left his room. Bradley got up from his bed and went into the kitchen, where his mother was making chocolate chip cookies. She let him lick the spoon.

"I want to know the names of the boys who did this to you," she said. "I'm going to call your school principal."

Bradley thought for a moment. "I don't know all their names," he said.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," said his mother. "They won't hurt you anymore."

Bradley thought a moment. "Jeff Fishkin!" he declared. "He was the leader of the gang."

"I'll call the school first thing in the morning," said his mother.

"Good!" said Bradley. "I hope he gets in trouble. I hate him."
Bradley walked slowly, holding his hand over his eye so nobody would see it. His mother would have let him stay home from school, but his father said he had to go.

"He's scared," his mother had said. "Some bullies have been terrorizing him."

"Babying him will not solve the problem," said his father. "He has to learn to stand up for himself and fight back. The only reason the bullies pick on him is because they know he's afraid."

Bradley was afraid, but not of bullies. He wasn't scared of Melinda, either. It was little Lori Westin who scared him. He could picture her standing in the middle of the playground with her big mouth shouting for the whole school to hear: "Melinda Birch beat up Bradley Chalkers and made him cry!"

Cautiously, he walked across the schoolyard, hand over eye, and entered Mrs. Ebbel's class. He sat down in the last seat of the last row.

Jeff's chair was empty.

Good, he thought, still covering his eye. He probably got kicked out of school.

Out of his uncovered eye, he looked at the chart full of gold stars on the wall next to him. He was glad he didn't have any. He thought gold stars were ugly.

Mrs. Ebbel was in the middle of teaching the difference between adjectives and adverbs when she suddenly stopped and asked, "Bradley, is there something the matter with your eye?"

"No."

"Then please take your hand away from it."

"I can't," he said.

"Why can't you?"

He quickly tried to think of a reason why he had to keep his eye covered. His mind raced through a hundred ideas. "My hand's stuck," he said.

"It's stuck?" asked Mrs. Ebbel.

"I was gluing something and got glue on my hand, and then I accidentally touched my face with my hand and it got stuck."

"Bradley, take your hand away from your eye."

He grabbed his wrist with his free hand and pretended to try to pull it away. "I can't. It's stuck."

"Do you want to go to the principal's office?" she asked. "He's good at unsticking things."

"Wait, I think it's starting to loosen now," he said. He pried his hand away.

There was a blush-black circle around his eye. For a few seconds nobody said anything, then everybody started talking at once.

"What happened?" asked Mrs. Ebbel, but then quickly said, "Never mind, I don't want to know." She told the class to turn around, and started again on adverbs and adjectives.

Jeff walked in late. He said something to Mrs. Ebbel, then sat down next to Bradley.

Bradley looked the other way, at the chart full of
gold stars. Of all the stars, Jeff's were the ugliest.

For once, he wished he sat in the front of the room. Then only Mrs. Ebbel would have been able to see his face. Where he was, everyone could turn around and stare at him. All morning, Mrs. Ebbel had to keep telling kids to turn around and face front.

When the bell rang for recess, he put his hand over his eye and hurried outside. He went to the far end of the playground where nobody would bother him. But the word quickly spread that Bradley Chalters had a black eye and kids kept wandering past him trying to get a peek.

"Melinda fights dirty," said Jeff, coming up behind him. "She hit you when you weren't looking. And you couldn't hit her back because it's impolite to hit a girl."

"Right!" said Bradley, turning around. "I would have punched her face in, except it's impolite. Melinda probably told the whole school that she beat me up, she's so stupid."

"No, I don't think she told anybody. After you left, she asked me not to tell anyone what happened. She made Lori and Colleen promise not to tell too."

"She's probably afraid I'll punch her face in," said Bradley.

"Probably," said Jeff. "Then, this morning I was called into the principal's office. He thought I was the one who hit you."

"Wha'd you tell him?" Bradley asked.


Jeff and Bradley ate lunch together around the side of the building, where nobody would bother them. Jeff stood up. "I'll be right back," he said. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"Which one?" Bradley asked.

"Boys'," said Jeff.

"Oh," said Bradley. "I'll wait for you here."

It was a very long wait.

"Hey, Jeff!" Robbie called as Jeff stepped out of the bathroom.

"Me?" asked Jeff. It surprised him because Robbie had always called him Fishnose or Fishbrain.

"Come over here," said Robbie. "A group of boys was with him. Jeff recognized some from his class, but didn't know them all. One of the boys had a basketball.

"Hi, Jeff," said Brian, a boy from his class.


"Okay."

"This is Jeff Fishkin," Robbie told the boys who weren't in his class. "He's the guy who gave Chalters the black eye."

"Way to go, Jeff!" said one of the boys he didn't know.
“All right, Jeff!” said another.
“Oh, man, would I have liked to have seen that.”
“Man, when I saw Chalkers’ eye today,” said Robbie, “I just smiled. And then when I found out you got called to the principal’s office, I thought, ‘Way to go, Jeff.’”
“You didn’t get in trouble, did you, Jeff?” asked Dan.
Jeff shook his head.
“They probably gave him a medal,” said Russell, laughing.
The others laughed too.
“You like to play basketball, Jeff?” asked Andy, the boy with the basketball.
“Sure!” said Jeff.
They chose teams. Robbie and Andy were captains.
Robbie had first pick. “I got Jeff,” he said.
Jeff beamed.
They played basketball for the remainder of the lunch period. Jeff’s team won, but it was also the team with five players. The other team had only four.
Everyone told him he played a great game.
“I always wondered why a guy like you was hanging around with Chalkers,” said Robbie. “I guess it just took you a while to find out who your real friends were.”
Jeff smiled. These were the kind of friends he had had back in his old school in Washington, D.C.
Of course, it meant he couldn’t be friends with Bradley anymore, but . . . He shrugged.

From around the corner of the brick building, Bradley watched the end of Jeff’s basketball game. Every time Jeff took a shot, Bradley prayed he’d miss. When the bell rang, he hurried back to class ahead of Jeff and the other boys.
He sat at his desk—last seat, last row—and took out one of his books; it didn’t matter which one. He stared at it very intently as Jeff sat down next to him.
Well, maybe it was okay for Jeff to have other friends, he decided as he turned a page. I’m still his best friend. That’s what he told the principal. Jeff wouldn’t lie to the principal! Maybe I’ll get to play basketball with his new friends, too, like Carla said.
“Jeff,” he whispered.
He wanted to tell Jeff that everything was still okay, that they could still be friends.
“Hey, Jeff!”
Jeff didn’t look up from his work.
Jeff works hard, Bradley realized. That’s how he gets all the gold stars.
He had to wait until after school.
“Hey, Jeff,” he said as soon as the bell rang.
Jeff picked up his books and started out the door.
Bradley hurried after him. “Jeff!” he called. “Wait up.”
Jeff stopped and slowly turned around.
Bradley suddenly felt very nervous. "Do you want to do our homework together?" he asked. "I can come over to your house if you want, or you can come over to mine. We can use my book. See." He showed Jeff his book.

"Hey, out of our way, Chalkers," said Robbie as he and Brian pushed past him.
"Chicken Chalkers," said Brian.
"Yeah, Chalkers," said Jeff.
Bradley walked away. He heard Jeff and his new friends laughing behind him.
But when he got home, his own friends were very glad to see him.
"We're so glad you're home," said Ronnie. "We missed you. We're glad you didn't go over to Jeff's house."
"You're our best friend," said Bartholomew.
"Hooray for Bradley!" shouted the wooden hippopotamus. "Hip... hip..."
"Hooray!" yelled all the other animals.
"Hip... hip..."
"Hooray!"
"Hip... hip..." said the hippo one last time.
"Hooray!"
"Let's play a game," said the donkey.
"What do you want to play?" asked Ronnie.
"Anything but basketball," said Bartholomew. "I hate basketball."
"Basketball is a stupid game," Ronnie agreed.

"It's the worst game in the world," said the hippopotamus.
"Why would anybody want to play basketball?" laughed the ivory donkey.
All the other animals laughed too.
Everything returned to normal.

Bradley scribbled, cut up bits of paper, and taped things together. He hated everyone and everyone hated him. That was the way he liked it.

He shuddered whenever he remembered that he actually had almost done his homework. He couldn't imagine anything more horrible than that!

And he was glad Jeff wasn't his friend anymore. He realized he was better off without friends. In fact, he never was friends with Jeff! I was just pretending to be his friend.

He decided he'd never pretend to be anybody's friend again.

Jeff was normal now, too. That was what he told Carla. He walked into her office and announced, "I don't need any help anymore. I have eight friends now. We play basketball every recess and lunch, and I'm the best player."

"Good for you, Jeff," said Carla. "I'm very proud of you."

"How many friends have you made?" he asked.

"I don't keep score," said Carla.

"I've made eight," said Jeff.

"I've always considered quality to be more important than quantity when it comes to friendship," said Carla.

"Eight," Jeff repeated. "And I'm not friends with Bradley anymore either."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why? I'm not. I hate him. In fact"— he looked around the room— "I gave him a black eye!" He quickly glanced at Carla to see if she knew he was lying, then looked away.

"What happened?" Carla asked.

"Oh, you know, he wouldn't stop bothering me. I kept telling him to get lost, but he kept hanging around. I never liked him. No one does. Then he said to me, 'Give me a dollar or I'll spit on you!' Well, no one threatens me and gets away with it! I don't take that from nobody. So he tried to hit me, but I ducked, then punched his face in. I didn't want to do it, but I had no choice."

That was the short version. Jeff had told that same story to his eight new friends, but he usually made it much longer.

"So I don't think I need to see a counselor anymore," he said, "since I have eight friends."

"Okay, Jeff, if that's how you feel," said Carla.

"They might think I'm weird or something," he explained.

"Well, we can't have them thinking that."

"Does that mean I can go?"

Carla nodded. "But anytime you want to talk again, please feel free to come and see me," she smiled. "Even if you just feel like getting out of class for a while."

He left, glad to be out of there.
On his way back to class, he walked past the girls' bathroom. He stopped, shook his head, and chuckled to himself. It seemed like it was such a long time ago when he accidentally went in there. *I used to be such a jerk,* he thought.

He smiled a strange smile. He stretched his mouth so wide, it was hard to tell whether it was a smile or a frown.

Colleen walked into Carla's office.

"I just came to tell you I can't talk to you," she said. "Your parents didn't sign the form?"

"No, and they won't either! You know what they said? They said it was a waste of money for the school to hire you. They said you should get married and have your own children before you start telling other parents how they should raise theirs."

Carla shrugged.

"They said if I have any problems I should talk to them. But when I try to talk to them, they don't listen." She sighed. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. Jeff has lots of other friends now besides Bradley."

"Eight," said Carla with a smile.

"So now I can invite Jeff to my birthday party without having to invite Bradley. I can invite one of Jeff's other friends. Andy's nice. I couldn't invite Bradley even if I wanted to, because Melinda is my best friend, except for Lori, and she gave Bradley a black eye."

Colleen quickly covered her mouth with her hand, then slowly took it away. "That was supposed to be a secret," she said. "Melinda doesn't want anybody to know."

"I never repeat anything anyone tells me," Carla assured her.
“Good,” said Colleen. “Melinda would kill me.”
“Have you asked Jeff to your party yet?”
“No, not yet, but I will. I know he likes me because he always says hello to me when I say hello to him. But then I always get so scared. I never know what to say next. I wish you could help me. Why did my parents say such bad things about you? They don’t even know you.”
“Your parents are just trying to do what’s best for you,” said Carla. “A lot of people think counselors don’t belong in schools.” She shrugged. “I guess they’re afraid I might fill your head with all kinds of crazy ideas.”

“Hello, Bradley,” said Carla. “It’s a pleasure to see you today. I appreciate your coming to see me.” She held out her hand.
“I punched myself in the eye,” he said as he walked past her. He didn’t want her thinking someone else gave it to him. “I’m the only one who can beat me up.”
“Did it hurt?” she asked.
“No,” he said, sitting at the round table. “Nobody can hurt me. Not even me.”
She sat across from him. She was wearing a light blue shirt with yellow mice running all over it. The shirt was the same color as her eyes. The mice were the same color as her hair.
“I wanted to hit somebody,” he explained as he stared at her shirt. “But if I hit another kid, I would have gotten in trouble, so I hit myself.”
“Why’d you want to hit somebody?”
“Because I hate him.”
“Who?”
“Everybody.”
“Is that why you hit yourself? Do you hate yourself?”
He didn’t answer. He thought it was another one of her trick questions.
“Do you like yourself?” she asked.
He didn’t trust that question either.
“Maybe the reason you say you don’t like anybody else is because you really don’t like yourself.”
“I like myself,” he said. “You’re the one I don’t like!”
“Tell me some things about yourself that you like.”
He glared at her.
“I like you,” she said. “I think you have lots of good qualities. But I want you to tell me things you like about yourself.”
“I can’t talk anymore,” he said.
“Why not?”
“I’m sick. The doctor said I can’t talk. The more I talk, the sicker I get.”
“That sounds serious.”
“It is! I’ve probably said too much already, and it’s your fault. I’ll probably throw up.”
Carla nodded. “Don’t say another word,” she said quietly. “We’ll just sit together in silence. Sometimes people can learn a lot about each other just by sitting together in silence.” She locked her mouth shut, then opened it to swallow the key.
“You’re weird,” said Bradley.
“A lot of people tell me that,” she admitted, then put her finger to her lips.
They sat together in silence. Bradley shifted in his chair. His eyes darted restlessly around the room. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back, then brought his hands out in front of him and folded them. Then he unfolded them.

He didn’t like sitting together in silence. He thought she was probably learning too much about him. “I can probably talk a little bit,” he said.
“No, I don’t want you to get sick,” said Carla. “I like you too much.”
“The doctor says I’m supposed to talk a little, just not a lot.”
“All right. Shall we talk about school?”
“No! The doctor says if I talk about school, I’ll die!”
Carla frowned. “That’s a problem,” she said. “See, as part of my job, I’m supposed to help you do better in school. But how can I help you if we can’t even talk about it?”
Bradley put his fingers to his chin and thought it over. “I know!” he said. “Just tell everybody that you tried to help me, but I wouldn’t let you. Tell them that I was too mean and nasty. That’s it. Tell them I said I’d spit on you.”
“Oh no, I couldn’t say that about you,” said Carla.
“You’re too nice.”
“They’ll believe you,” he assured her.
“It doesn’t matter whether they believe me or not,” said Carla. “I’d know it was a lie.”
“So?”
“So when you tell a lie, the only person you’re lying to is yourself.”
He didn’t see anything wrong with that. If you’re only lying to yourself, and you know it’s a lie, then it doesn’t matter.
“I just wish I knew why a smart kid like you keeps failing.”
"It's because Mrs. Ebbel doesn't like me," said Bradley.
"Shhh!" said Carla. "Don't talk about it!"
"Well, I can probably talk about school a little bit without dying," he said.
"O-kay," Carla said hesitantly, "but as soon as you feel even a little bit like dying, let me know and we'll stop."

They talked about school for about fifteen minutes before Bradley felt like dying. Carla pointed out that the same questions that were on the tests were also on his homework assignments. She suggested that if he did his homework, the tests might be easy for him.

"The tests are easy," he told her. "I could get a hundred if I wanted. I'm the oldest kid in the class. I answer all the questions wrong on purpose."

"You want to know what I think?" asked Carla. "I think you would like to get good grades. I think that the only reason you say you want to fail is because you're afraid to try. You're afraid that even if you try, you'll still fail."

"I'm not afraid of anything," said Bradley.
"I think you're afraid of yourself," said Carla. "But you shouldn't be. I have lots of confidence in you, Bradley. I know you'd do so well, if only you'd try. I can help you. We can help each other. We can try together."

It was then that he told her he couldn't talk about school anymore or else he'd die.
She thanked him for talking about it as much as he had. "You were very brave," she said. She suggested that for their next meeting he make a list of topics to discuss so that they wouldn't have to risk talking about school again.

"Is that homework?" he asked.
"No-o-o," she assured him. "You don't even have to put your name at the top."
"Good," said Bradley. He was glad it wasn't homework.

It was time to return to class. "Thank you for sharing so much with me today," Carla said to him. "I enjoyed your visit very much." She held out her hand.
He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked out of her office.