

Bradley stood at the front door and hollered, "Mrs. Ebbel is a liar! Don't believe anything she tells you."

Bradley's mother got into the car, gritted her teeth, and drove to school. She was just as afraid as Bradley, if not more so, of what Mrs. Ebbel would tell her.

She wanted to believe Bradley when he told her he was getting all A's or was elected class president. She tried to fool herself that it could be true, even though she knew it couldn't. She knew her son. And she knew Mrs. Ebbel wouldn't take the trouble to call her on the phone if everything were really as wonderful as Bradley said it was. Still, she hoped.

She opened the door to Bradley's classroom. No one was there. "Hello?" she called out timidly.

She looked around. There was a bulletin board covered with A papers. She looked from one paper to another and hoped, with all her heart, that she'd see one with Bradley's name on it. She didn't.

In the back corner of the room she saw a chart that listed the name of every student in the class. Next to each name was a row of gold stars. Next to "Bradley Chalkers," there were no stars.

"Mrs. Chalkers?"

Startled, she turned around to see Mrs. Ebbel. "Oh, you scared me," she said, then smiled.

Mrs. Ebbel didn't smile.

Mrs. Chalkers sat at a chair next to the teacher's desk and bravely listened as Mrs. Ebbel told her about Bradley. There was nothing Mrs. Ebbel said that she didn't already know. Still, it hurt to hear it.

"Deep down, he really is a good boy," she tried to tell Bradley's teacher.

"I'm sure he has a lot of good qualities," said Mrs. Ebbel. "However, I have twenty-eight other children in my class, and I can't spend all my time trying to help Bradley. He has to decide whether he wants to be a part of the class or not. And if he doesn't want to be a part of the class, then he shouldn't be here. He just makes it that much harder for everyone else."

"What can I do?" asked Bradley's mother.

"The school has just hired a counselor," said Mrs. Ebbel. "I'd like your permission for Bradley to begin seeing her once a week."

"Anything that will help my son," said Mrs. Chalkers.

"I don't know if she can help him or not," said Mrs. Ebbel. "Bradley has a very serious behavior problem. If he doesn't show improvement soon, more drastic measures will have to be taken."

"Deep down, he really is a good boy," said Bradley's mother.

"Well, let's go meet the counselor," said Mrs. Ebbel. She led Bradley's mother down the halls to the counselor's office. The door was open, but no one was there.

Bradley's mother stepped into the room. Boxes were everywhere. Some were turned over, with their contents half spilled onto the floor. A yellow ladder lay on its side. In the center of the room was a round table surrounded by chairs, but the table and chairs were covered with papers and boxes and games and books. There was hardly room for Bradley's mother and teacher to stand.

"She's just moving in," Mrs. Ebbel explained. "I'm sure she'll have it cleaned up by tomorrow."

Mrs. Chalkers shrugged. She picked up a dolphin puppet from an open box on the table and put her hand inside it.

Suddenly there was a loud grunt and a young woman entered the room. She dropped the box she was carrying, and more than a hundred crayons spilled out across the floor. "Oh, hello," she said.

She was a lot younger than either Mrs. Ebbel or Mrs. Chalkers. She wore blue jeans and a red T-shirt with ROCK 'N' ROLL written across it in light blue letters. She had light brown hair, almost blond, and clear blue eyes.

"I'm Carla Davis," she said, and held out her hand.

Bradley's mother stared at her a moment, then reached out to shake her hand but suddenly realized she was still wearing the dolphin puppet. She quickly removed it and put it back in the box on the table.

The counselor smiled.

"She needs to sign the form so that you can start seeing her son," said Mrs. Ebbel.

Miss Davis looked hopelessly around her office. "They're around here somewhere," she muttered, then began tearing into the boxes.

"Perhaps I'd better come back," said Bradley's mother.

"Found them!" said the counselor, holding up the forms. She cleared a space on the round table by pushing away a box and gave Mrs. Chalkers a form to sign.

Bradley's mother looked around the messy office, then at the young woman with the rock 'n' roll T-shirt. She shrugged her shoulders and signed her name.

Miss Davis took the form from her. "Oh! You're Bradley Chalkers' mother!"

Mrs. Chalkers nodded.

"You would not believe all the horror stories I've heard about Bradley Chalkers," said the new counselor. "I've been here less than three hours but it seems like every teacher in the school has dropped by to warn me about him."

"Deep down, he really is—" Bradley's mother started to say.

"I can't wait to meet him," the counselor interrupted. "He sounds charming, just delightful."

At dinner Bradley's father asked how the meeting with Bradley's teacher went.

Bradley looked down at his mashed potatoes.

"Fine," said his mother. "Bradley is doing very well."

"Good. Glad to hear it," said his father.

Bradley was glad to hear it too.

Later that evening his mother came into his room. "I met Miss Davis, the new counselor," she said. "You're going to begin seeing her tomorrow."

"No," said Bradley. "I won't go!"

"Please, Bradley. Don't be that way. She can help you, if you'll let her."

"I don't need any help. You said I was doing very well."

"Did you want me to tell your father the truth? Do you want to be sent to military school? Maybe he's right. I don't know. Maybe that's what you need."

"You said I was doing very well. I heard you."

"Please, Bradley," said his mother. "Give Miss Davis a chance. *Please.*"

"You should have taken me to the zoo."

It was drizzling the next morning as Bradley walked to school. He wore red rubber boots and a

yellow raincoat. He stamped in every puddle along the way, making big splashes.

He suddenly stopped when he saw Jeff standing next to the school, under the overhang. Bradley's right foot remained in the center of a puddle as he stared at his one and only friend.

He took a deep breath, then slowly walked toward Jeff. "He has to like me," he tried to convince himself. "I gave him a dollar."

"Hi, Bradley," Jeff greeted him.

He didn't answer.

"If you want, I can help you with your homework sometimes," Jeff offered. "I know I'm new here, but I'm pretty smart, and we learned the same stuff at my old school." He shrugged modestly.

Bradley looked at Jeff as if he were from outer space. "I don't need any help," he said. "I'm the smartest kid in class. Ask anyone."

They headed for Mrs. Ebbel's room, side by side but not necessarily together.