# The Forgotten Friend

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It was my tenth birthday. I would have the biggest party ever. The guest listbegan with a few close friends. But in the two weeks before that special Friday night, it had quickly grown from seven girls to a whopping total of seventeen. Nearly every girl in my fifth-grade class had been invited to sleep over at my house for a big celebration. I was especially happy when each guest I invited excitedly accepted the invitation. It would be a night of scary stories, pizza and lots of presents. But as I later realized, I would truly treasure only one gift I received that night.

The family room was a flurry of shouts and bursts of laughter. We had just finished a game of Twister and were lining up for the limbo when the doorbell rang. I hardly paid attention to who might be at the door. What did it matter, really? Everyone I liked from school was there, in my family room, preparing to lean under the stick held by my two sisters. "Judy, come here for a minute," Mom called from the front door.

I rolled my eyes and shrugged to my friends as if to say, 'Now who would dare bother me at a time like this?' What I really wanted to say was, 'It's tough being popular!' I rounded the bend toward the front door, then stopped. I know my mouth dropped open and I could feel my face turning red, for there on the front porch stood Sarah Westly - the quiet girl who sat next to me in music class - and she was holding a gift.

I thought about the growing list in the back of my assignment folder. How had I forgotten to invite Sarah?

I remembered that I only added a name to the list when someone had shown an interest in me (like kids do when they know someone is having a party and they don't want to be left out). But Sarah had never done that. Never once had she asked me about my birthday party. Never once did she squeeze into the kids surrounding me at lunch time. And once she even helped me carry my backpack while I lugged my science project to our third-floor classroom.

I guess I had forgotten to invite her simply because she wasn't pushing to be invited. I accepted the gift from Sarah and asked her to join the party.

"I can't stay," she said, looking down. "My dad's waiting in the car."

"Can you come in for a little while?" I nearly begged. By now I felt pretty bad about forgetting to invite her and really did want her to stay.

"Thanks, but I have to go," she said, turning toward the door. "See you Monday." I stood in the foyer with Sarah's gift in my hands and an empty feeling in my heart.

I didn't open the gift until hours after the party had ended. Hours after the games, the food, the ghost stories, the pillow fights, the pranks on those first to fall asleep and the snores.

Inside the small box was a ceramic tabby cat about three inches tall with its tail in the air. In my mind, it was the best gift I had received, even though I was never really into cats. I later found out that the figurine looked exactly like Sarah's cat, Seymour.

I didn't know it then, but now I realize that Sarah was my one true childhood friend. While the other girls drifted away, Sarah was always there for me, ever loyal and supportive. She was an unconditional friend who stood by me, always encouraging and understanding me.

Although I'll always feel bad about forgetting her, I also realize that I might not have discovered Sarah as a friend had I remembered to invite her to that unforgettable tenth birthday party.