

Three's a Crowd

Annie had always believed that three was the perfect number for a friendship group. With three people, there was always someone to laugh with during break, someone to partner with in science and someone to walk home with after school. At least, that was how it had been when she, Daliah and Susie first became friends at the beginning of Year 5. Now, halfway through Year 6, something had changed, although Annie couldn't quite explain what it was.

At first, the differences were so small that she convinced herself she was imagining them. Daliah and Susie had begun whispering to one another more often, lowering their voices whenever Annie wandered over. Sometimes they would suddenly stop talking altogether, exchanging quick glances before changing the subject completely. Whenever Annie asked what they had been discussing, one of them would smile awkwardly and say, "Oh... nothing important."

It never felt like *nothing*.

During lunchtime, Annie noticed other changes too. Daliah and Susie often seemed to walk a little further ahead, chatting excitedly while Annie hurried to catch up. They laughed at jokes she hadn't heard and smiled knowingly at comments she didn't understand. Although neither of them was ever deliberately unkind, Annie couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that she no longer quite belonged. She was still standing with them, but somehow she wasn't really *part* of the conversation anymore.

One rainy Tuesday, the three girls sheltered beneath the covered walkway while waiting for the bell to ring. Annie watched as Daliah quietly handed Susie a folded piece of paper. Susie slipped it into her blazer pocket before noticing Annie looking in their direction.

"What was that?" Annie asked.

"Oh... just homework," replied Daliah rather too quickly.

Annie frowned. Since when had homework needed to be passed around in secret?

That evening, as she sat completing her maths homework, the questions in her head seemed far more complicated than the ones on the page. Had she done something to upset them? Had she become boring? Perhaps she talked too much. Perhaps she talked too little. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became that Daliah and Susie simply preferred each other's company.

Over the next two weeks, the strange behaviour continued. Whenever Annie entered the classroom, conversations seemed to stop. Daliah and Susie frequently disappeared together during break, claiming they needed to speak to teachers or visit the library. One afternoon Annie even spotted them carrying several colourful shopping bags through the town centre before they hurried into a gift shop, laughing as though they were sharing an exciting secret. When they noticed Annie across the road, both girls looked momentarily startled before waving rather too enthusiastically.

That was the moment Annie decided she would stop trying so hard.

If Daliah and Susie wanted to spend time together without her, then perhaps that was their choice. She began sitting with other classmates during lunch, joined a different group for PE and even discovered that she quite enjoyed chatting to Emily and Grace, two girls she had never really spoken to before. She still smiled politely whenever she saw Daliah and Susie, but inside she felt quietly disappointed. Friendships, she realised, sometimes changed, and perhaps this one had simply run its course.

The following Friday was Annie's birthday.

She wasn't expecting much. Her parents had promised takeaway pizza that evening, and her grandparents were visiting over the weekend. School, she assumed, would be an ordinary day.

As she walked into her classroom that morning, everything looked perfectly normal. Chairs were tucked neatly beneath desks, the whiteboard displayed the day's timetable and the room was unusually quiet.

Then the lights flicked on.

"SURPRISE!"

The classroom erupted with cheers.

Bright balloons floated from every corner, colourful bunting stretched across the walls and a huge banner reading Happy Birthday, Annie! hung above the whiteboard. The tables were covered with party food, games and neatly wrapped presents. Even Mrs Carter was wearing a glittery birthday hat.

Annie stood frozen in the doorway.

Daliah and Susie walked over, both looking slightly nervous.

"We're so sorry," said Daliah. "We hated keeping it a secret."

"Every time we stopped talking," added Susie, "it was because we were planning this."

"The notes..."

"Were shopping lists."

"The library visits..."

"Were meetings with Mrs Carter."

"The shopping bags..."

"Were your presents."

For a moment, Annie didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I thought..." she began quietly.

"We know," Daliah said gently. "Looking back, we should have realised how it must have looked."

"We were trying to surprise you," Susie agreed, "not make you feel left out."

Annie smiled.

"I suppose you succeeded in surprising me."

The three girls laughed together, and suddenly the awkwardness of the past few weeks seemed to disappear.

Later that afternoon, Mrs Carter gathered the class together.

"Today," she said, "we've learnt something quite important. Sometimes, when we don't know the full story, our minds fill in the missing pieces for us—and they don't always get it right. That's why it's always better to ask questions than to make assumptions."

As Annie looked across at Daliah and Susie, she realised how true those words were. She had spent weeks believing that her friends no longer cared about her, when in reality they had been working incredibly hard to make her birthday unforgettable. Their secret had been kept out of kindness, not cruelty.

Walking home that afternoon with her arms full of presents and balloons dancing in the breeze, Annie decided that friendships were rather like books. If you stopped reading halfway through the story, you might completely misunderstand the ending.