

The Birthday LIST

By Donna Price



The flag in front of River Rock School snapped wildly in the wind. I looked up at it and felt shaky. A wildfire had been burning for days. The sky seemed even smokier than yesterday. Waiting for the bus in the shade of the building, we couldn't see the fire in the valley.

"Is it coming closer? Can we go look?" a third grader asked the teacher who waited with us.

"No," she said. "Don't worry about the fire. It's miles away."

Just as the bus pulled up, my friend, Desirae, and her kindergarten brother, Danny, joined the line.

"Teri! Let's do our birthday lists on the bus, since we're both turning 12 next month." Desirae handed me some paper after we found a seat.

"Two pages?" I asked.

"Well, you need to be specific about what you want."

I tried to hand the paper back. "Thanks, we're just not a wish list sort of family."

"Come on, I know you want world peace, but your parents can't buy it for you. This way, you'll save them time."

I held the blank paper and tried to be patient. Being neighbors with the school's most material girl was a test. My parents told me to look for the good in others, and reminded me that as long as I have faith, I have everything. Desirae was friendly, smart, and able to take charge and get things done. I did like her. I just didn't want to *be* like her.

"I have everything," I said to myself, but Desirae heard me.

"That's my plan, too!"

Kids were still jostling for seats when our principal, Mr. Clark, stepped on the bus. "Red Rock Road people, come with me." He checked a note in his hand. "Dorensons and Swensons, let's go!" He turned to the driver and said, "Turtle Rock will be your last stop."

"The road's closed," was all Mr. Clark would tell us. Danny and my twin fourth-grade brothers asked a million questions, but Mr. Clark shushed us. We heard bits of conversation through his walky-talky.

". . . moving the fire line . . ."

". . . chemical drops . . ."

". . . mandatory evacuations . . ."

He led us into the cafeteria. We rushed to look out the back windows. "The wind's changed," my brother R.J. said.

"Helicopters!" Danny pointed out.

"Are they over our houses?" my brother Jake asked.

"There's too much smoke to see," said R.J.

"Our houses?" Desirae asked.

"Oh, no." My earlier unease swelled into a great fear. The house my grandfather built? My art? My violin? My music? My books?

"R.J. and Jake, please put up these tables," Jodi, the custodian, said. "We're organizing a shelter here. The Red Cross is coming." Jodi watched over all the kids at school. I've always liked her.

She turned to us. "Des and Teri, set up a play area for the little kids. Start with Danny." Danny was clutching Desirae, staring wide-eyed out the window.



"It's okay, Danny," Desirae reassured him. She stuffed her birthday list in her pocket, swung off her backpack, and said, "Let's get to work."

But I was frozen. Our house? God wouldn't take our house, would He? But it *is* a material thing. I was just gloating over how I wasn't a material girl. My throat started to choke up. Can you pray for a house? *I have everything*. No matter what happens, *I have*—

A group of grownups came in. "Where are Mom and Dad?" R.J. asked.

"The horse vet, in Carson, remember? They're taking Hero today," Jake answered.

Desirae's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dorenson, were frantic. A police officer was escorting them in. They were pleading with him. Was their house lost?

"The helicopters are looking for them," the officer insisted. "We're doing everything we can. Please stay here!"

Them? Then I remembered Desirae's two high-school brothers, Ben and Mark, who got home before we did.

The officer's radio crackled. "No sign of white truck between the east fire road and the Dorenson fence."

"Mom?" Desirae asked, her voice a little unsteady.

Her mom grabbed her. "Honey, your brothers. They went to look for the dog! And the officers made us leave without them." She was sobbing now. Desirae went completely pale, but she took a deep breath and hugged her mom.

"Perhaps a prayer," Jodi suggested. I looked at Desirae and her mom. The Dorensons did not belong to any religion.

"Yes, please," Mrs. Dorenson agreed, surprising me. And then everyone turned to me. Stunned, I fumbled through my backpack for my prayer book. I turned to the heading "Protection," but I was still too choked up to read it.

Desirae took it from me. She read it for her brothers with strength and conviction. Maybe she had a faith I had never considered. Was I so distracted by her



material side that I never looked any deeper?

Jodi gently took the prayer book from Desirae, read another prayer, and passed the book to the next person.

"Mom, will the prayers save them?" Danny whispered.

"I don't know, honey." A circle was formed, and people just kept praying.

I still didn't think I could read without starting to cry, but I passed the prayer book again for another round. Just as my prayer book had made it back to me for the third time, there was the sound of screeching brakes and a dog barking. Everyone turned toward the door in panic to see what it could be. Then Desirae's brothers burst inside!

Mr. and Mrs. Dorenson, Desirae, and Danny all ran and hugged them. I jumped from my chair, and then I really did start crying.

Desirae rushed over and hugged me. "Oh, thank you, thank you for the prayers," she said. Then she pulled the wrinkled birthday list out of her pocket and threw it in the garbage. "You were right. We're not a wish list kind of family either. We have everything."

"Here," I whispered, handing Desirae my prayer book. "Happy birthday, Desirae."

