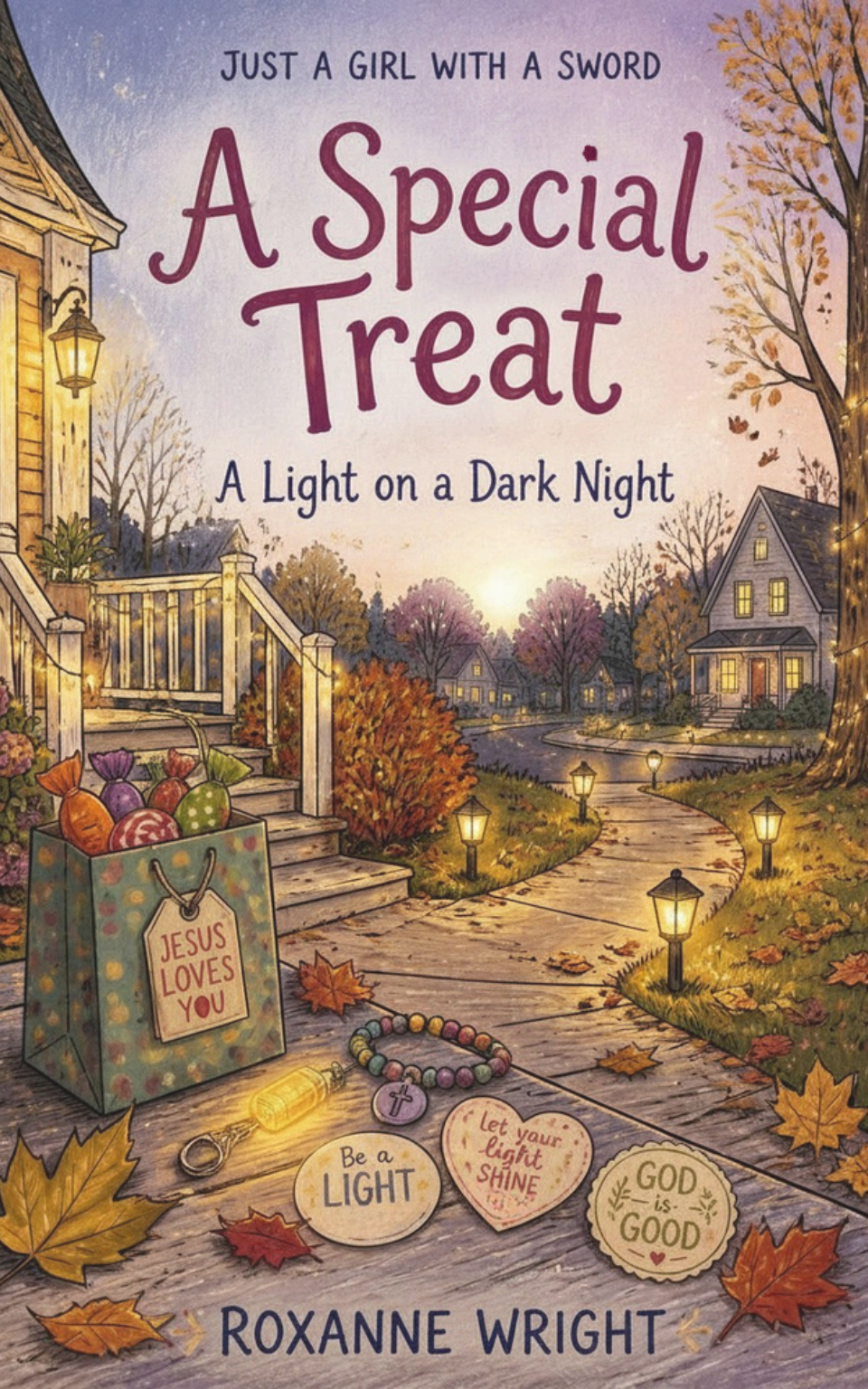


JUST A GIRL WITH A SWORD

A Special Treat

A Light on a Dark Night



ROXANNE WRIGHT

A Just a Girl With a Sword story

A Special Treat

A Light on a Dark Night

by

Roxanne Wright

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CHAPTER ONE

Are you for real right now?!” Janine looked like she’d just bitten into a lime. Her half-eaten pizza slice hung forgotten in her hand.

“I’m being for real. We don’t go trick-or-treating.” Mary shrugged, trying to sound casual. She nudged the few grapes left in her lunchbox from one side of the container to the other. “We just don’t do Halloween.”

Janine blinked, her pale eyebrows drawing together.

Mary sat across from her friend in the Oakview Elementary cafeteria, where the usual lunchtime noise filled the air. Conversations buzzed around the tables, punctuated by the occasional squeal or burst of laughter from the other students. Even after a few months at her new school, Mary still wasn’t used to all the noise. She’d been homeschooled her whole life, after all. But she could hear Janine just fine.

Mary glanced at the friend sitting beside her. Joy Aketch was nibbling on the spout of her juice pouch, unusually quiet for someone who normally had plenty to say.

Then there was Nate. Mary was used to him being quiet. He usually ate his lunch before pulling out a notebook or sketchpad to draw. Unless someone asked him a direct question, he rarely joined in the girls' chatter.

Nate was a newer friend. Mary and the others had gotten to know him after witnessing him being bullied. She'd learned that he used to hide beneath the low bleachers outside or in empty classrooms to eat his lunch. Thankfully, he now seemed comfortable sitting with them in the cafeteria. With October nearly over, the weather was getting pretty cold, anyway.

"So, like, never?" Janine asked. "You know it happens every year, right?"

She gestured around the cafeteria, making her pizza slice flop against her wrist. Finally noticing she was still holding it, she dropped it onto the paper plate on her tray and wiped her fingers with her crumpled paper napkin.

Mary glanced around the cafeteria. Plastic banners decorated the walls with pumpkins, ghosts, and colorful fall leaves.

She gave a wry smile. "Yeah, it's kinda hard to miss!"

“So why don’t you go?”

“Because...” Mary shrugged again. She was beginning to get annoyed with all Janine’s questions. “It’s not Christian.”

She glanced at Joy again. Her friend was still gnawing on the spout of her juice pouch.

“Humph.” Janine stuck out her bottom lip. “So what do you do instead? Turn off all the lights and pretend you’re not home?” She curled her lips. “That’s just dumb! And super mean!”

“No!” Mary protested, feeling her irritation rise. “We still put out some candy for the neighborhood kids!” She paused, searching for the right way to explain. “Our parents just don’t let us join in, you know? And we don’t put up those witch and devil decorations.” Her voice trailed off.

“That’s so sad!” Janine said, though her exaggerated pout suggested otherwise. “I really feel for you.” She reached across the table and patted Mary’s hand with mock sympathy.

Mary had had enough. She pulled her hand away. “Well, at least I’m not celebrating demons and witches and...” Mary searched for a word that could cover all the bad things she associated with Halloween, but nothing came to mind. “And all that bad stuff!” She turned to Joy. “Right, Joy?”

Joy pulled back slightly, her eyes widening.

“Whoa, relax, Mary. Janine was just joking around. Right?” Joy added, turning to Janine.

“Yeah, Mary, chill!” Janine laughed. “No need for the fun police to show up just yet!”

“What?!” Mary and Joy exclaimed at the same time.

“All right, all right!” Janine held up both hands. “Whatever!”

Mary pressed her lips together. Her irritation was growing by the second.

“How about you, Nate? At least tell me you like Halloween. The Christians,” Janine added with a sneer, “are trying to gang up on me!”

Nate had been watching the girls quietly, his eyes moving from one face to another as the tension at the table grew.

He twirled his pencil between his fingers. “Uhhh, I dunno. I mean, I guess it’s okay.” He paused. “When we were little, we used to dress up and go around the block collecting candy. By the end of the night, we’d have a whole bucket of it!” He grinned at the memory.



“Right!” Janine said enthusiastically. “Who wouldn’t want to dress up and have fuuun?” She drew out the last word while looking pointedly at Mary and Joy.

Mary opened her mouth to respond, but Joy spoke first.

“What kind of costumes did you wear, Nate?” Joy asked.

“Oh, um, nothing special most years.” Nate rubbed the back of his neck. “My mom was pretty busy, so I usually just wore a superhero T-shirt or something.” He gave a small shrug, then seemed to remember something. “But one year, I got to wear a skeleton suit. And we even went to a haunted house!”

“Really?” Janine leaned forward.

Nate nodded, a little color creeping into his cheeks. “Yeah. I was much, much littler then, though. I got lost inside, and I thought I was going to be trapped there for the rest of my life!”

He tried to laugh, but his ears had turned red.

“It was full of those fake cobwebs and creepy looking things,” Nate continued. “And late in the night, when I was trying to sleep, I kept seeing those spooky things in my head!” He shook his head at the memory.

“Oh, no!” Joy’s eyes widened.

“Thankfully, I had a whole bucketful of candy.” Nate added with a grin. “I ate so much that night! I think I was finally exhausted from eating because I don’t even remember falling asleep. I woke up the next day with candy wrappers all over the bed!”

The girls burst out laughing. Nate laughed along with them.

Mary smiled, but she kept thinking about what he’d said. It sounded awful to be so frightened that you couldn’t even fall asleep in your own bed.

She glanced at Joy. Her friend had managed to steer the conversation away from the argument, at least for now.

Mary let out a quiet breath. She was glad Joy had stepped in. She wasn't sure what she would have said, but she knew it wouldn't have been kind.

CHAPTER TWO

And then she said Christians were no fun!” Mary’s indignation rose again as she recounted the lunchtime conversation to her mom. The small knife in her hand came down with a loud *thwack* as she chopped the bok choy.

“Did she really say that?” Mom raised an eyebrow.

Mary knew that look. Her mom was probably wondering whether she was making the situation sound worse than it had been.

“Well, that’s what she meant!” Mary grumbled.

“So you’re judging her based on how you interpreted her words?”

“Mom! No! She said it in a really nasty way, and she gave us this look.” Mary lowered her head and curled her lips, doing her best imitation of Janine’s expression. “When she

said, ‘Who wouldn’t want to have fun at Halloween?!’” Her face began to ache from holding the expression, so she gave up.

Mom was still busy cutting carrots.

Ugh! Why can’t Mom just take my side for once?

“Uh-huh,” Mom replied.

Mary rolled her eyes.

“So what did you tell her when she asked why you don’t participate in Halloween?” Mom asked.

“Well...” Mary nudged a piece of bok choy with the tip of her knife. “I told her it’s because we just don’t, you know? And that we don’t celebrate demons and witches and stuff.”

Thwack!

“Hmm,” Mom said thoughtfully. “It doesn’t sound like you really know why we don’t celebrate Halloween.”

“Is it because it’s sinful?”

Mom hummed as she scooped the chopped carrots into a bowl. Then she turned to Mary.

“For thousands of years, Christians have lived in places where sin was happening all around them. As believers, we have to think carefully about how we interact with people who don’t share our faith.”

Mary looked down at the cutting board.



“Even though we don’t celebrate Halloween because of its sinful roots, some Christians consider ways they might use the day to honor God. They believe Halloween hasn’t been redeemed for Him, but they may still look for opportunities to share His love.” Mom continued.

“Like what we do when we leave out candy?” Mary asked.

“Yes, that’s one example. And others might take it a step further.”

“Like what?”

Mom turned to the fridge, taking out more vegetables as she spoke. “They might use the day as an opportunity to minister to people. But to do that, they have to be willing to enter places where others are actively celebrating Halloween. You can probably understand why many Christians choose not to go into those spaces.”

Mary gave a small nod.

“Of course, not everyone who celebrates Halloween believes in the devil, witchcraft, or black magic,” Mom walked to the sink, putting the veggies in bowl. “For some people, it’s just a chance to dress up, have a party, eat candy, and spend time with friends.”

“Like kids who dress up because it’s fun and they get candy?” Mary asked.

“Exactly.”

Mary considered that for a moment, then glanced up at her mom. “So... how come we can’t just do that part, too?”

Mom set down the bowl of veggies and faced her. “Sweetie, just because something looks fun doesn’t mean we have to join in. Especially when we don’t fully understand its background. If something goes against what we believe honors God, then the fun part doesn’t automatically make it right.”

Mary turned back to her cutting board.

“For some people, Halloween is all about costumes and candy. But for those who practice witchcraft, the day can mean much more. Some believe they’re closer to the spirit world and try to communicate with spirits. That’s opening a door to evil.” Her mom explained.

“Oooh.” Mary studied the uneven pieces of bok choy.

Mom went back to washing the vegetables. After rinsing her hands, she dried them with the kitchen towel.

“It can be challenging sometimes,” Mom said. “When we engage with the culture around us, we also have to be ready to stand against sin. Christians who choose to participate should be prepared to turn away from things like Ouija boards, tarot cards, or palm reading. They shouldn’t take part in attempts to communicate with evil spirits.”

Mary went back to chopping the already chopped bok choy.

“But I don’t get it. Why even try to participate if you could so easily get pulled into that sinful world?”

“The truth is, Bug...” Mom paused as she arranged the zucchini on her cutting board. “Halloween is a dark day. It’s going to happen whether we acknowledge it or not, and it will continue to influence our culture, including children. Some Christians try to use that day to share the love of Jesus. They hope to bring His light into a dark place.”

Mary thought about Nate and the haunted house he’d mentioned visiting when he was younger.

“Nate said he visited a really scary haunted house once,” she said, her eyes widening.

Mom nodded. “For some children, Halloween can be frightening. They see decorations everywhere that promote fear and death. We can choose to show love to those children and help them feel less afraid.”

Love is the best way to fight darkness, Mary thought.

She made another small cut in the bok choy. Mom had finished chopping the zucchini and moved on to the tomatoes.

“The point is, Mary,” Mom continued, turning toward her, “no matter how we approach that day, we should

choose to honor God.” She halved a cherry tomato, then looked at Mary. “And we shouldn’t cause division just because someone else has a different conviction from ours.” Mom raised her eyebrows.

Mary recognized that look, too. She realized her mom had brought the conversation full circle, right back to her little tiff with Janine.

Maybe I hadn’t handled that very well, she thought.

She made another cut in the bok choy, avoiding her mother’s gaze. The smell of freshly chopped onion drifted over from the other side of the counter. Mary blinked rapidly and blamed the onions for the sudden sting in her eyes.

When she looked down at the bok choy, she almost groaned. The green leaves were finely minced, and the white stems had been chopped into tiny, uneven pieces. Mom had told her to give each stem only one or two chops.

Oops.

“I’m finished,” Mary announced.

Her mom glanced at the cutting board. Her lips pressed together, but the crinkles around her eyes gave away her amusement.

“Looks good! Thank you, Mary.”

Mary glanced at the mangled bok choy, then at her mom.

Well, at least I got one thing done today.

She set the knife aside, thinking about what her mom had said. She still wasn't sure she understood everything, but one thing was becoming clearer: she didn't have to agree with everyone else's choices, and she didn't have to make them feel bad about theirs, either.

CHAPTER THREE

Mary finished brushing her teeth, rinsed her mouth, and patted her face dry. She stuck a pimple patch onto her chin, then pulled her bonnet over her braids.

There. Ready for bed.

She stepped toward the bathroom door, then reached back to switch off the light.

Darkness filled the room.

For a moment, her mind returned to Nate's story about the haunted house. He'd been so little when he got lost in all those cobwebs and creepy decorations. Later, he'd had trouble sleeping, too. Thankfully, he'd had some candy to keep him occupied until he was so exhausted that he finally fell asleep.

Mary shivered at the thought.

The bathroom wasn't completely dark, though. A little light filtered through the small window from the outdoor light beside the house. She could still make out the sink and the pale shape of the bathtub.

It's not really dark in here, she thought.

Then another thought came to her. *What about the kids who really are scared on Halloween? What if we could give them a little light?*

Mary stood still for another moment, turning the idea over in her mind. Her family wasn't going to celebrate Halloween, but that didn't mean they couldn't do something kind for the children who came to their door.

Jesus is the Light of the world. Maybe we could remind people of that.

She hurried out of the bathroom, suddenly eager to find her Bible.

The living room was quiet, but she could hear clattering from the kitchen. Dad was puttering around, putting away a few things before heading to bed.

Mary checked the living room shelf first. Then she looked beside the armchair where she sometimes sat to read. She even peered under a small stack of books on the coffee table.

Nothing.

“Looking for something, Bug?” Dad asked from the kitchen, using Mary’s nickname.

“My Bible. I want to check something.” She came to stand in the doorway. “I was thinking about how we could shine God’s light on a dark day. I wondered if there’s like a verse about that.”

Dad turned from the counter, his bushy eyebrows coming down over his eyes. “A dark day, huh? Are you thinking about Halloween?”

Mary nodded. “I know we don’t celebrate it. But I was thinking about the kids who get scared by all the spooky stuff. What if we could give them something that reminds them Jesus loves them?”

“That’s actually a thoughtful idea,” Dad said. “And it’s good to think about how we can show God’s love to people, even when we make different choices from them.”

Mary waited, hoping he’d tell her exactly what to do.

“You know Paul wrote about something related to that,” Dad continued. “He explained that Christians need to think about their own conscience, but also about how their choices affect other people and whether those choices bring glory to God.”

“Where’d he write that?” Mary was eager to check.

“In First Corinthians, I believe.” Her father rubbed his chin. “But rather than just telling you what it says, why don’t you get your Bible and we’ll read it together?”

Mary brightened. “Okay! One sec, I just need to find it...”

“I put it in your mom’s office earlier. I think she moved some things around on the living room shelf.”

Mary hurried down the hall and returned a moment later with her Bible tucked against her chest. She flipped through the pages until she found First Corinthians.

“Here it is,” she said, settling beside her dad.

“Look around chapter ten,” Dad told her.

Mary flipped through the pages finding chapter 10.

Her father leaned down, looking over her shoulder. “Start around verse twenty-seven.”

Mary ran her finger down the page and began to read aloud.

27 If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.

28 But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience.

29 I am referring to the other person’s conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another’s conscience?

She paused to catch her breath, then continued through the rest of the passage, including Paul's instruction to do everything to the glory of God and to avoid giving offense to others.

When she finished, she looked up. "I think I understand some of it. But why is Paul talking about food offered to idols?"



Dad leaned back slightly. “Back then, some people were concerned about eating food that had been offered to idols. Christians didn’t all have the same understanding or the same feelings about it. Paul was helping them think about their own conscience and how their actions might affect someone else’s faith.”

“So he wasn’t just saying everyone had to do exactly the same thing?”

“That’s right. He wanted them to honor God, but he also wanted them to consider other people. If someone believed eating that food was wrong, they shouldn’t go against their conscience. And if someone else understood the situation differently, they shouldn’t automatically be judged for it.” Dad explained.

Mary thought about Janine’s face when she’d tried explaining why her family didn’t celebrate Halloween. She could still hear Janine calling her and Joy the fun police.

Mary sighed. “So does that mean we’re supposed to let everyone do whatever they want?”

“No,” Dad said gently. “Paul wasn’t saying that right and wrong don’t matter. We still need to follow God’s Word. But when Christians have different convictions about something, we should be careful not to look down on one another. We should ask ourselves whether our choices

honor God and whether we're showing love to the people around us."

Mary traced the edge of her Bible with one finger. "So our family can decide not to celebrate Halloween, but we don't have to be mean to people who do?"

"Yeah Exactly. You can explain what you believe without making someone else feel small. And you can even look for ways to show kindness without doing something you believe is wrong."

Mary thought of the candy bowl her family set out each year. She'd always thought of it as a way to be kind to the neighborhood children, but maybe they could do a little more.

"What if we gave the kids something that reminded them Jesus loves them?" she asked. "Like a little light, with a sticker that says, 'Jesus loves you?'"

Dad smiled. "That sounds like something you and your friends could think about. Just remember that the goal isn't to make people feel bad about Halloween if you're trying to share God's love."

"I'm getting it..." Mary looked down at the verse again. "Do everything to the glory of God."

"Yep, that's a good place to start," Dad said.

Mary closed her Bible, holding it against her lap as she thought about the next day. She still didn't know exactly how she'd explain her family's choices to Janine. And she couldn't promise she wouldn't get annoyed if Janine teased her again.

But she could try to answer with kindness instead of snapping back.

Maybe she and Joy really could find a way to share a little light with the kids who came to their door.

And maybe that light could remind them of Someone even brighter.

CHAPTER FOUR

I've been thinking about Halloween," Mary said, turning toward Joy, her seatmate on the school bus.

"Everyone is, Mary Mary!" Joy grinned. "Halloween is on Friday, you know."

"I mean, I've been thinking about how we could participate." Mary explained.

Joy narrowed her eyes. "You mean, like, dressing up and stuff?"

"No... Well, not exactly like that." Mary fiddled with the strap of her backpack. "You know how we're going to give the kids candy?" Mary continued. "I was thinking, what if we added little lights, like the ones on those chains?" She

paused, picturing the idea in her mind. “And we could put a Jesus Loves You sticker on each one!”

Her face brightened as she turned to Joy. “It would be like sharing Jesus’ light with kids who might be scared of all the spooky stuff on Halloween.” Mary nodded enthusiastically. “So what do you think?”

Joy’s eyebrows drew together, and her lips pursed.

Mary’s stomach sank. *Does she think it’s a bad idea?*

Then Joy’s face split into her familiar wide grin.

“I’m in!” she squealed, loud enough to make a few students on the bus turn and look at them.

Mary let out a relieved breath, and the two friends burst into laughter. They huddled closer as they lowered their voices.

“And we could add scripture stickers, too!” Joy’s eyes lit up. “oooh, I wonder if we’d have time to make some bracelets too?”

Mary could practically see her friend’s imagination taking off.

“Do you think our parents would go for it?” Mary asked.

Mary had planned what she would say.

She and Joy had talked through their ideas on the bus, and Mary had spent the rest of the day rehearsing how she would explain their plan to her parents. But every time she'd tried to bring it up with Mom that afternoon, she'd lost her nerve. Now, at dinner, she was still trying to find the right moment.

Then her brother Josh mentioned that he'd be hanging out with his high school basketball team on Friday.

Mary looked up from her plate. Maybe this was her chance.

"Mom? Dad?" She started "So...Joy and I have been talking about something we'd like to do for Halloween."

She explained their idea, outlining how they hoped to give out little lights with Jesus Loves You stickers, along with the candy their family already planned to hand out. They could add Scripture stickers, too, and maybe even make a few bracelets if they had enough time.

"So that's what we plan to do." Mary cleared her throat. "Ahmm, I mean, if we can. That's what we'd like to do. Could we, please?" She looked from Mom to Dad.

Her parents exchanged a glance.

"That does sound like a lovely idea, Mary," Mom said. "But let me ask you something. Are you doing this because of what Janine said to you?"

“No!” Mary denied immediately. “Well... maybe a little at first.” She picked at the edge of table cloth. “Honestly, I didn’t like how she made fun of us for not celebrating Halloween. But I’ve really thought about what you said, Mom, and what Dad told me about Paul’s instructions.”

Dad raised his bushy eyebrows. “So what’s your motivation, Bug? You’ve told us all the creative ways you and Joy want to share the Gospel. But why do you want to do it?”

Mary took a breath. She’d expected the question, but answering it aloud was harder than she’d thought. Especially when Dad brought out his interrogation voice.

“I guess I want to look at Halloween as an opportunity to do something good instead of just focusing on what we don’t do.” She glanced at Mom, who was listening with a small smile. “You said that whatever we do, we should honor God. And we shouldn’t cause division just because other people make different choices. We should show them love.” She paused, gathering her thoughts. “And I keep thinking about kids who might be scared by all the spooky stuff. Like Nate.”

“Nate?” Josh asked, finally pausing long enough to look up from his food.

Mary nodded. “He told us about going to a haunted house when he was little. He got lost inside, and he was so scared he thought he’d be trapped there forever. He even had trouble sleeping afterward.” She pictured Nate’s embarrassed smile as he’d told them story.

“And I know not every kid is scared of Halloween, and I’m not saying everyone who celebrates it believes in the same things. But some kids really are afraid. I thought maybe we could give them a little something and remind them that Jesus is with them.” She blew out a breath then hastily added “and loves them!”

Mary’s shrugged as her words came more easily now. “And who knows? Maybe the lights or the stickers could start a conversation. We could tell people about Jesus if they wanted to know more. We wouldn’t be celebrating Halloween ourselves. We’d just be trying to share God’s love.”

Mom nodded, her smile growing.

Dad’s expression remained thoughtful. His eyebrows together as he studied her.

Mary swallowed. Had she explained it badly?

Josh, meanwhile, had returned to his dinner. “I think that’d be pretty cool, Bug,” he said between bites. “Being a light and pointing people back to God.” He shrugged and

grinned at her. “Besides, every day belongs to God. No day belongs to the devil!”

Dad gave an amused harrumph.

Mary tried to read his expression. *Come on, Dad. Please say yes.*

“I like the idea, too, Mary,” he said at last, looking at mom. “Light always shines in the darkness.”

Mary sat up straighter. “So we can do it?”

“We’ll talk about the details,” Mom said slowly. “We’ll need to work out what supplies you’ll need, and check with Joy’s parents about what they’re comfortable with, too.”

A smile spread across Mary’s face. Joy had already called earlier that afternoon, and her parents were on board.

It looked as though Operation Light Up the Dark might actually happen. Or maybe it should be Operation Jesus Is the Light?

Mary pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh at herself. *I’m terrible at coming up with names.*

She’d have to brainstorm with Joy tomorrow.

CHAPTER FIVE

The hallway at Oakview Middle School was bustling with students. Some stood chatting and laughing before class, while others hurried between lockers. The clanging of locker doors was barely audible over the buzz of voices.

Mary and Joy wove through the crowd, talking excitedly about their plan to meet at Joy's house that afternoon for a craft-making session. They were so busy talking over each other that they almost missed Janine standing at her locker.

Almost.

Mary's eyes met Janine's for a brief moment. Then Janine turned back to her locker and opened the door, effectively blocking her face from view.

She'd been giving them the cold shoulder for days.

Mary's steps slowed as they approached their lockers. Joy nudged her with a elbow, catching her in the ribs.

"Oww!" Mary protested under her breath.

Joy gave her a meaningful look, then tilted her head toward Janine.

Mary sighed and nodded. She didn't need Joy to spell it out. *Girl, you better step up and make things right!*

And Joy was right. Mary missed Janine. Besides, it wasn't right to keep letting Janine have her space, as Mary had started calling it, just because apologizing felt awkward.

She flicked the What Would Jesus Do? bracelet around her wrist, took a breath, and turned toward Janine.

"Hey, Janine," she tried to sound casual as she moved closer to her friend's locker.

Janine shut the door with a sharp clang and spun the lock dial quickly, expertly. "Hey," she replied in a flat tone.

"Uh, yeah. Hey!" Mary said again, immediately regretting how awkward she sounded.

Janine narrowed her eyes at her, then glanced at Joy. Joy rolled her eyes, giving Mary a look that clearly said, *Just say it already!*

“Um, I’m sorry I got mad at you the other day,” Mary blurted.

There. The apology was out.



Mary took a deep breath and tried again, more slowly. “I shouldn’t have gotten so defensive just because you had a different opinion. I mean, it wouldn’t be right for you to get mad at me for how I was raised, either.” She shifted her backpack on her shoulders. “I know you were curious and wanted to understand why Christians don’t celebrate

Halloween. I just... I don't want us to be divided over it.” Mary stopped, suddenly aware of how much she'd said.

Great. Now I sound like I'm giving a speech.

Janine's expression hadn't changed much, and Mary couldn't tell whether her apology had made any difference.

Well, at least I tried, she thought. The rest is up to her.

Janine looked from Mary to Joy, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “So you're not mad anymore?”

“I don't think I was really mad,” Mary admitted. She tugged at the sleeves of her hoodie. “Well, maybe a little. I think my feelings got hurt when you said I wasn't fun.”

“Oh, gosh! That was so mean, wasn't it?” Janine's face softened, and Mary caught a glimpse of the friend she knew. “I didn't mean it like that, Mary. I'm sorry. And you too, Joy. I shouldn't have called you the fun police.”

Joy stepped forward and slung an arm over Janine's shoulder.

“No worries, girl! We all say silly stuff sometimes.”

Janine let out a small laugh. “I missed you guys yesterday.”

Mary knew what she meant. They'd all been at school, in the same classes and the same hallways, but they'd barely spoken. Whenever their eyes met, someone looked

away. They'd acted like strangers who just happened to be in the same room.

Thinking about it now, Mary almost laughed. It was silly, really. They'd spent a whole day pretending the others didn't exist, yet it had felt awful.

Middle school was hard enough, especially for Mary, who was still getting used to public school. She didn't want to spend her days avoiding someone who used to make her laugh. No one should have to feel that alone.

"Us too!" Mary said, grinning.

Joy's face lit up. "We've been dying to tell you what we're planning for Halloween!"

CHAPTER SIX

Everything was all set! Their house didn't have any Halloween decorations, but the driveway path would light up once it got dark. They would also switched on festive fairy lights wrapped around the tree trunks and hanging from the front porch.

A collapsible picnic table stood in the driveway, covered with rows of little plastic baggies. Each one held an assortment of mini candies, Scripture stickers, a light-up keychain, and a handmade bracelet.

They'd even lucked out at the Dollar Store and found some keychains shaped like little lights with *Jesus Loves You* printed on them. That had been the best find of all!

Mary and Joy had made the bracelets from colorful beads and thread. Some spelled out *Jesus Loves You*, while others had little hearts. Well, Joy and Mrs. Aketch had made most of them. Mary had decided that supervising and being in charge of snacks were much more helpful jobs.

She winced at the memory of the glitter disaster. One careless bump had sent the entire container tumbling across Mrs. Aketch's carpet, coating the floor, their supplies, and just about everything else in a sparkling layer of silver. Mary suspected there would be glitter in that carpet until the end of time.

Still, the bracelets had turned out beautifully.

And the stickers! Those were Mary's favourite part of the goodie bags. Some said *Fear Not, Walk by Faith, I Am Always with You*, and *With God All Things Are Possible*. She and Joy had spent ages reading them aloud to each other as they packed the bags.

Mary hoped the words would bring the same joy and comfort to the children who took them home.

It was still a little early, and no trick-or-treaters had come by yet, but Mary could hardly wait.

She and Joy chatted excitedly as they watched Skip romp through the leaves in the front yard. Nate chased after the

little Havanese pup, pretending to stumble and making silly noises until Skip bounced around him in delight.

Nate's mom had dropped him off earlier, and he'd helped assemble the goodie bags before joining Skip's games. Mary smiled as Nate pretended to be defeated by the tiny dog.

They wondered whether Janine would be able to stop by, too.

"Oh! Here come some kids!" Mary exclaimed.

A colorful parade of costumes was turning onto their street. She spotted a princess, Spider-Man, and a unicorn among the little group.

Mary and Joy straightened behind the table, ready for their first visitors.

"What do you girls have here?" the adult accompanying the children asked.

"Well, um, we have Reese's Cups and M&M's and..." Mary trailed off. Why was she listing all the candy? The clear bags made it perfectly obvious!

"And some stickers," she continued, determined to get through her explanation. "They have Bible verses on them, and there's a little light keychain in each bag, too!"

"Cool!" Spider-Man exclaimed.

He reached for a bag, then squatted in the driveway and tried to tear it open.

“Whoa, hold on,” the woman said with a laugh. She took the bag and opened it for him.

Spider-Man pulled out the little keychain and pressed its button. A bright beam of light flickered on.

“Look!” he announced, pointing it at the other children. They giggled and reached toward the light.

“Thank you,” the woman said, taking another bag for the little unicorn, whose pumpkin-shaped candy bucket was already swinging at her side. “This is a great idea.”

“Yeah, because you know, Halloween can be dark and scary for some kids and stuff,” Mary stammered. “So we wanted to share a little light, too.”

“I love that idea! Thanks for thinking of it.”

Mary and Joy exchanged pleased smiles.

Meanwhile, the little princess was staring intently at the bracelet in her bag. Its colorful beads spelled out *Jesus Loves You*.

“Do you like the bracelet?” Mary asked. “Joy made it!” She proudly pointed at her friend.

“I wuv it!” the little girl declared.

Joy crouched beside her and pointed to the letters.

“It says, ‘Jesus loves you!’”

“I wuv the sparkwy!” the princess replied, admiring the glitter that still clung to the bracelet.

Mary covered her eyes with one hand. “Oh, no. Not the glitter again!”

Everyone laughed, including Joy, who was still beside the little princess.

As dusk settled over the neighborhood, more children stopped by. By the fifth or sixth group, Mary and Joy had found their rhythm. They no longer stumbled over their explanations or hurried through what they wanted to say.

Some people asked questions about the stickers or the lights. Others simply thanked them and moved along with their children. Mary didn’t mind. She knew not everyone would want to talk, and that was okay.

She hoped that when the children emptied their bags at home, someone might notice a sticker or ask about the little light. Maybe it would start a conversation they wouldn’t otherwise have had.

The driveway glowed beneath the fairy lights and the little beams from the keychains.

Then Joy’s face lit up for an entirely different reason.

A white van had pulled up beside the curb.

“Dad!” she called, hurrying around the table and waving enthusiastically.

“Did you save any candy for me?” Mr. Aketch called as he climbed out, guitar in hand.

The girls burst out laughing.

The Aketch family believed there was hardly any situation that couldn’t be improved with a little music. And before long, Mr. Aketch had his guitar ready, Joy sang along, and the driveway became a lively walkway of worship songs.

The music carried down the street. Some families lingered a little longer while their children picked out goodie bags. Others slowed on the sidewalk to listen, and a few children clapped along.

Mary joined in, her voice blending with Joy’s as the fairy lights twinkled above them.

She hadn’t even noticed Janine arrive until something tapped her shoulder.

Mary turned to find a red-haired Super Mario grinning at her, an oversized foam hand raised in greeting.

“Janine!” Mary threw her arms around her friend. “You made it!”

“Wouldn’t miss it!” Janine grinned.

“We saved a goodie bag just for you,” Mary told her. “There’s a special bracelet in there, too.”

“Aww, thank you!” Janine admired the bracelet through the clear bag.

Joy came over and slipped an arm around Janine's shoulders, pointing out the beads. There was a cross between the words *Sister* and *Jesus*.

Mary watched as Janine took off her puffy Super Mario Hands to take the bracelet from the bag. Janine turned the bracelet over in her hands, listening to Joy explain what it meant.

They were sisters in Christ.



A warm feeling settled in Mary's chest. A few days ago, she'd been so caught up in defending her choices that she'd almost let an argument push her friends away. Now Janine

was standing beside them, smiling, while songs of praise filled the driveway.

Mary knew not everyone would understand why her family chose not to celebrate Halloween. And she knew that giving out lights and stickers wouldn't answer every question or change every mind.

But that wasn't the point.

They hadn't needed to pretend to believe something different, or make anyone feel bad for making different choices. They'd simply opened their driveway, shared what they believed, and welcomed the people who came.

Mary glanced up at the fairy lights glowing in the trees, then at the little light still shining from a keychain on the table.

Maybe being a light starts with something as simple as showing someone they're loved.

She smiled as Joy tugged her back into the singing, with Janine joining them and Nate clapping along nearby.

The night was far from over, and there were still plenty of goodie bags to give away.

Mary couldn't wait to see who would come next.

Enjoyed spending time with Mary and her friends? Discover where her adventures began! Read an excerpt from *Just a Girl With a Sword: The Word of God* and join Mary as she learns what it means to stand firm in her faith.



Every Battle Starts With A Choice

Mary just traded homeschooling for crowded hallways — and she wasn't ready for any of it. Mean girls. Anxiety that won't quit. Pressure to fit in, even when it means giving up who she really is. Middle school is a battlefield, and Mary feels like she's losing.

Then she watches a kid get bullied — and freezes. Says nothing. Does nothing. Walking away ashamed, she stumbles across an old pocket Bible, tosses aside like it doesn't matter. But the moment she picks it up, it becomes something impossible: a sword.

Now Mary has a choice to make. She can stay quiet and safe, or she can find the courage, and the forgiveness, to make things right. With true friends by her side and God's Word as her strength, Mary sets out to find the kid she let down and finally stand up for who she's supposed to be.

CHAPTER ONE

All the little things...

Have you made your choice as yet, Mary?" Mary looked up at the voice, the figure blurry but recognizable. Mary realized she wasn't seeing her teacher clearly because her eyes had filled with tears.

Oh no, she thought in horror. She didn't want to have to suffer the humiliation of crying in class over such a mundane activity. Without even seeing her, Mary could picture Mrs. Watson: pursed lips, sharp eyes peering at Mary over her red horn-rimmed glasses. Tap, tap, tap...

Was Mrs. Watson also tapping her sensible low-heeled shoe in disapproval at Mary's indecisiveness? Or that could just be her heart, which had set an irregular pace that made Mary feel almost dizzy.

Mary thought she heard some snickering coming from the room. She couldn't be sure if the kids were laughing at her or if the sound was something her anxious mind had imagined. And she wouldn't dare to turn and face the whole class, with her teary eyes, to check if they were pointing and

laughing at her. Mocking her failure to make such a simple decision. Hearing clearly was difficult. Her heart pounded so loudly in her ears that she thought for sure others could hear it. *Can Mrs. Watson hear it?* Mary's palms were sweaty, the small slip of paper she held in her hand had become damp and crumpled.

Keeping her head lowered, Mary nodded slightly without looking at the teacher. What should she do? She swallowed, trying to ease her dry throat. Her gulp audible, the sound calling to mind the loud roar of the stimulated waves at a Wave Pool she had gone to last summer, like a loud swell crashing down on her. Mary thought of her friends, the choice that they would be making and what they would want her to do. *Yes*, Mary thought, she should follow their lead. She only had a few friends at her new school, and she didn't want to risk losing their friendship.

How could a day that had started out normally turn out to be so horrible for her, making her feel anxious and doubtful? She felt so lonely and confused, with no clue what to do now.

* * *

Earlier that day

“Go get it, boy!”

A small pink toy flew over grass that was turning brown. The early morning sunlight filtered through the trees, dappling the backyard with rays of light.

The toy gave a soft squeak as it landed in the grass, rolling slightly toward the edge of the mulched area, which was separated from the grass by the line of plastic edging. In the narrow mulched area, a few planted shrubs stood in front of the wooden fence.

Ten-year-old, Mary Lamade sat cross-legged in the middle of the lawn as she watched Skip, her best friend and little Havanese pup, pump his little legs, racing to the squeak toy. Reaching the toy, Skip picked it up and gave it a furious shake, as if to admonish the toy for landing so far away from him.

Mary laughed and shook her head.

Skip yipped as he let the toy fall from his mouth. He waddled closer to the edge of the mulched area as something caught his interest. He put his head down and poked it into the bushes.

“Come on, boy!” Mary patted her crossed legs to get Skip’s attention. “Come on, Skip!”

Skip continued to poke his nose into the bush, using his paws to make tiny scratches at the rock.

“What do you have there, boy?” Mary, well used to the hyperactive puppy’s tendencies to pounce on any new

fascination, whether that be a leaf or a bug or the occasional snail, sprang to her feet and moved over to the edge of the lawn to see what Skip was focusing on. She knelt beside Skip, running a hand along the soft fur of his body. “Let’s see what you’ve found...”

Mary peered down at the rocks that lined the edge of the garden and saw a sluglike bug, which was wet with slime. *Probably from Skip’s mouth*, she thought fondly, as she looked over at her dog, who panted excitedly as he tried to move closer to get to the creature.

“Hang on, boy,” Mary chuckled, “any closer, and you’ll crush the little fella.”

Mary wasn’t sure if the creature was snail or not. It had a sluglike body and looked slimy, and its body was in a coil shape, but it had no shell. Perhaps it was a snail who had lost its shell. *Or maybe it’s some new species of bug*, Mary thought excitedly.

Just then, the door leading out onto the deck slid open, interrupting her musings, and Mary’s mom stepped out. “Come on, Mary! No more playing. Time to leave for school.”

Mary, who was doing her morning duties of taking out Skip so he could go potty and exercise a bit before leaving for school, turned her head. “Be right there, Mom!”

Mary tried to coax the creature onto a leaf, but the thing was too slippery and uncooperative.

“Mary, you’re going to be late, you know!” her mother called again.

Mary looked to where her mother stood. Her mother gave her a narrowed-eye look as she sipped from a mug that she knew ironically said, “Start your day with a smile.”

Sensing that her mother was getting impatient and that she was close to getting into trouble for being late again, Mary left the unidentified bug to its morning crawl as she brushed dirt from her palms. She walked back to the house. Today was not the day to be late; Mary was looking forward to the big vote their class would have.

"I know you like animals, Mary. That's why we got you a new puppy after the last one passed away, but you can't spend all morning playing with Skip." Her mom started, “and just look at your hair!”

“Ahmm...” Mary patted her hair, trying to gauge just how messy it had gotten after she’d done it earlier that morning. Mary tilted her chin up to look at her mother with one eye squinted against the rising sun. Mary rubbed the back of her neck. “I think Skip might have found another snail.”

“Oh no, don’t tell me those pesky snails are coming back into my garden.” Her mom groaned.

Mary let out a quiet breath. Mom loved the garden. She always said it was her favorite space where she could let her mind go blank. Mary didn’t really get it. What she did know

was that her mom abhorred (her word, not Mary's) snails. A few years ago, when Mary had spotted garden snails, and had wanted to keep some as pets, the idea grossed Mom out so much that after days of Mary's begging, she'd finally snapped, "I cannot stand them!"

"We'll have to get rid of them." Mom looked out at the edge of the lawn that was rimmed with a few small plants.

It wasn't a big backyard, but there was a small open lawn space to play. To the right of the deck was a dogwood tree and a red maple tree. Between the trees hung a striped hammock, its once bright stripes faded from the elements and use.

The edge of the circular garden was dotted by small hydrangea plants that bloomed prettily in the spring, leading to a Tuff Shed with a skinny-looking pepper tree that leaned against the small shed that stored the outdoor furniture and the grill during the winter. Leading to the left of the backyard was a concrete path, where there was a small herb and vegetable garden along the side of the house that led to the back gate.

"You better get a move on, Little Miss!" Mom put a hand on Mary's shoulder, steering her to the door that led into the house. "Now go fix your hair so you can leave for school!"

Mary rushed inside. Using the half bath downstairs, Mary scrubbed her hands. She used her wet hands to

smooth her curls back into place, but it was no use. She'd have to undo her short ponytail and brush it again to reclaim some neatness. Her fine, coily hair would never stay put anyway. Not unless she added enough styling gel and brushed it flat and then put a silk scarf over her hair to keep it in place. *That's waaayyy too much effort to get good hair for a regular school day*, Mary thought. As she grabbed the brush from the vanity, she looked at the fuzzy-haired girl in the mirror who had a scrunched forehead with a tiny zit poking its head out on her wide forehead, her flat broad nose, and full lips that, when she smiled, showed a slight gap between her teeth under her Invisaligns.

As she brushed and retied her hair, Mary noticed a speck of dirt on her pale yellow shirt. She brushed it away, looking down to ensure her sweatpants didn't have any dirt on them either. After smearing sunscreen to her arms and face, she rushed out of the bathroom. "Josh, you ready?!"

"Let's go, Bug." Joshua came down the stairs with his backpack hanging from one shoulder. "Where's your bag?"

"Oh!" Mary ran to the kitchen, where she had placed her backpack by the table after breakfast. Skip met her in the kitchen, yipping as Mary knelt to give him cuddles. "See you soon, Skippo! Be good today, okay."

Mary's mom took up Mary's bag and helped her put it on, placing the bag straps securely over her shoulders.



“Take a jacket with you, baby; it’s a bit chilly today.”

“Okay, Mom! Bye, love you!” Mary blew her a kiss.

“Love you, sweetheart! Have a good day!” her mother called after her.

“Bye, Skip!” Mary rushed back to the front door, where Joshua had already disappeared. The clicking of Skip’s paws followed her to the door.

Mary stopped to grab her hoodie from the shoe bench in the entryway by the door. She halfway opened the door and darted out, making sure to close it behind her so Skip could not follow. Through the glass pane in the door, she could see the blurred figure of her mother watching her, and she waved cheerily before following after Josh, who was already walking down the road toward the bus stop.

CHAPTER TWO

What a relief to see your smiling face...

Josh was already a few houses down their street. He paused as he got to the bend in the street, looking back as he waited for Mary to catch up. Seeing that Josh was waiting, Mary started hustling. Her long legs covered the distance easily as her backpack bounced on her back with each quickened step. As she caught up to Josh, he reached out and put a hand on Mary's shoulder, steering her as they turned right onto the street that would lead them to the school bus stop zone.

Mary knew Josh only put his hand on her shoulder to make sure she was safe and not out of some brotherly camaraderie. At least he wasn't holding her hand like the first few times they made this walk. Or like her mom and dad would insist on doing. *Goodness, it wasn't like she was going to run out into the traffic*, Mary thought. She knew by now to stay on the curb.

“I think I discovered a new bug in the garden today.” Mary craned her head up to look at Josh.

Josh was tall, so much taller than Mary. Which she would have been offended by if Josh wasn’t almost sixteen now while she was only just ten and three-quarters. Besides, Mom always said, “God knew Josh was going to have a gift for sports, so He made him extra tall.” Josh was good at basketball, and Mary loved going to his games and seeing him fly through the air whenever he dunked the ball. She smiled, as she pictured Josh sailing through the air while wearing a superhero cape over his b-ball uniform.

“What kind of bug is it?” Josh’s question brought her back to the present walk, although she was still smiling.

“Not sure... It sorta looked like a snail, but it wasn’t technically a snail. But it also wasn’t any slug I’ve ever seen before because its body had all these coils! Wouldn’t it be cool if it was a new species?! Maybe I’ll get to keep and maybe even name it!” Mary looked up dreamily.

“Mhmm,” Josh murmured.

He’s probably used to me talking this way, Mary thought. *My nickname is Bug, after all.* He shrugged. “Why do you want to keep a slug anyway? It’s gonna be so gross, dude!”

As they reached the school bus pickup spot, they could see the bus heading up the street toward them. They made it just in time.

“No, it isn’t!” Mary kept her eyes on the bus. Too bad she wouldn’t have time to convince Josh so he could side with her later on when she debated this with her mom.

As the bus pulled close to the curb, Mary waited, until the bus extended its crossing arm and the doors opened, before giving Josh a halfhearted wave.

“Bye, Bug!” Josh called. He would walk a little more distance to catch the bus that would take him to his high school. *Josh was such a grown-up*, Mary thought.

On the bus, Mary dove into her seat, plopping down as she pulled her backpack around into her lap. She turned to give the occupant next to her a big grin. “Guess what?!” she said to Joy Aketch, her bestest of friends.

“Hey, Mary, Mary!” Joy wiggled her fingers in greeting. Joy placed her back to the window, leaning on it as she faced Mary. Mary returned the finger wiggle, her grin widening. Joy was always putting a creative spin on her name.

“Skip and I found a new species of bugs this morning!” Mary tilted her head. “Well, unconfirmed species.”

“Ewwwww!” Joy scrunched up her rounded nose with an expression of disgust.

Mary gave her a playful shove “Come on! It was really cool!”

“I’m sure only you will think that!” Joy laughed. Joy didn’t share Mary’s love of all animals. Dogs, cats, or even a goldfish were fine for her, but she drew the line at the

creepy-crawly things, as Joy would say. They freaked Joy out too much!

Mary sighed at her friend's lack of enthusiasm for this obviously wondrous discovery. *It's not every day you run into a new creature, living in the suburbs.* Mary observed her friend closely, trying to figure out what she could say to change her mind. *Joy was so stubborn sometimes.*

Joy had already moved on and was sharing about the latest jewelry she had made. She presented her wrist proudly as she showed Mary her latest design.

"I just couldn't resist using these new beads, they are so pretty," Joy said, eyes bright. "They were kind of a late addition, but then inspiration struck. And voilà! I glued them right onto the knots of the string bracelet!"

Mary admired the bracelet. It was beautiful with red, yellow, orange, and light blue strings patterned in some complicated way Mary couldn't understand. Joy was wonderfully creative like that, always working with her hands to draw or to make bracelets.

"I don't know if the glue will hold for long. But I just love how the beads shimmer on the threads," Joy held up her wrist to the window where the sunlight filtered in. As she slowly turned her wrist, the light reflected off the silver and opal-looking beads that were strung throughout the patterned bracelet. Joy's face lit up, shining as she watched the sunlight play on her pretty bracelet.

Mary smiled watching her. She was glad Joy was her friend. This was her first year in public school, as she had always been homeschooled by her mom.

But now that she was older and her learning needs were different, and as her mother had claimed, “They had changed math,” Mary was off to this intimidating new school.

Although she was slightly younger than other middle schoolers, it wasn’t because Mary was smart or anything—quite the opposite—it was due to her homeschooling preparation. Mary had already completed all the elementary school curriculum in her homeschooling, which moved at a different pace. She guessed it was much easier to teach just one child instead of twenty.

Luckily, she knew Joy from her church. They were both in the same grade, so Joy was also a new student at this school. However, Joy had been going to public schools since kindergarten, so she had no problem adjusting. *Well... maybe a little*, Mary remembered

During their first week, Joy had dropped her cool and had confessed that this school was about twenty times bigger than her previous school. Mary thought she was exaggerating a bit.

They were a couple months into middle school, and Mary had somehow gotten the hang of it... or at least so she thought. The changing of rooms for some classes had

confused her at first. Not to mention the girls' locker room, and she still got hives on the days when they had P.E.

The sun glinted off one of the beads on the bracelet. Mary squinted, her attention snapping back as she tilted her head. "It's really cool, Joy!" Mary complimented the bracelet.

"Thank you!" Joy beamed, looking like the very definition of her name as the sun continued to stream in through the bus window, making her face and bracelet shine.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND MORE

About the Author

Roxanne Wright is a child of God and communications professional devoted to helping children build a personal relationship with Jesus, one story at a time. *Just a Girl With a Sword* is her heartfelt invitation for kids to discover the strength of their faith.

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