



## The Lady's Hug

The traffic in town crawled. Shoppers walked faster than the bumper-to-bumper cars could move.

"Just a few more blocks," I muttered. There was so much to do and the heavy traffic was wasting precious time.

Mapes was one-of-a-kind store that sold hardware, sewing notions, corny greeting cards and household goods. It'd been a fixture in town for decades. The kids loved the toy aisle, which was stocked with board games, puzzles and "must-have" items like silly putty, jump ropes and slinkys.

This visit to Mapes had special significance because Christmas was just weeks away. Frankie, Sarah and Caitlin took the opportunity to verbally add things to their Christmas list as they went along. A school yard sage had informed them that Santa had super-duper ears and that writing letters to the North Pole was old-fashioned.

After shopping we walked back to the car. A station wagon was double parked next to the car in front of me. Pulling out would be tricky. The space was tight, the traffic was thick and now, I had to maneuver around the double-parked car. The kids had gained energy from the toy aisle and the back seat chatter was escalating.

As I pulled out I heard a loud crunch. The car was suddenly silent. In the rear view mirror, three sets of eyes were wide with fear.

"It's okay," I said calmly. "I'm just going to take a look."

I got out and winced when I saw the cracked taillight and scratched paint on the other car.

"Just a few more inches and I would've been clear," I mumbled. Unbelievably, my Jeep was unscathed.

A woman climbed out of the station wagon. She was in her mid-sixties, with a brown hat that matched her knee-length coat. She surveyed the damage. Before she could say anything I blurted out an apology.

"I'm so sorry! I thought the car was clear! The kids..." The woman smiled. I stopped mid sentence. The smile was unexpected and so I waited, unsure what would happen next.

The woman's grin broadened as she touched her cracked taillight. "Merry Christmas honey."

My confused look made the woman laugh. "I said, Merry Christmas honey. Don't worry about this here car. I'm fine and so are you. Go on and take care of those children. My husband will take care of this."

I suddenly noticed a gray haired man standing on the passenger side, nodding and smiling. Overcome with relief, I hugged the woman. The woman hugged back and whispered, "Merry Christmas sugar."

I got back in the car and watched the station wagon pull away. After hearing what happened, the kids chattered about how great "the Lady" was. The rest of the day took on a glow of grace because she gave us the gift of kindness. I was sure, although I'd never know her name, I would never forget her radiant smile.

Days passed and Christmas drew nearer.

One afternoon, Frankie seemed troubled when he came home from school.

"What's up?" I asked as Frankie slumped on the couch.

"Nothin'." Which, in boy-speak meant something. Frankie's feet kicked in an up and down rhythm that kept his body busy while his 9 year-old mind worked on an unnamed problem.

"Care to share?" I sat next to Frankie, carefully avoiding the scissor-chop movements of his snow boots.

"Nope." Frankie's feet stopped. "Maybe later." And then he was off to play.

At bedtime, Frankie didn't want to sing any songs, which he loved to do in the weeks before Christmas. Something was definitely up. I rubbed Frankie's head and asked, "Wanna talk about what's bothering you now?"

Frankie shrugged, but seconds later a question bubbled up. It was one of THE questions parents face. In the category of questions like, "Why do people die?" and "Where do babies come from?"

"Mommy, do you believe in Santa Claus?"

I silently prayed for the right words. Seconds later I saw the Lady's brilliant smile and felt her kindness wash over me. An idea came.

"What do you think?"

Frankie shrugged. "Some kids at school said Santa wasn't real. They said parents put the gifts under the tree."

"Are you asking me if there is a Santa, or if parents put the gifts under the tree?"

Frankie hesitated. "I guess I'm asking both."

I wrapped my arms around Frankie and gave him a big hug. "I am so proud of you!"

"For what?" Frankie looked puzzled as he sat up against his headboard.

"You're old enough now!"

I moved closer and continued. "You see Frankie, while there isn't a man in a red suit, there is something called the Christmas Spirit. But when children are very little, it's hard for them to understand the Christmas Spirit so we say that someone named Santa is responsible for Christmas. Parents know when a child asks whether Santa is real that they're old enough to understand the Christmas Spirit."

Frankie looked surprised. "What's the Christmas Spirit?"

"The Christmas Spirit is love -- pure and simple. Every year, right around December, there's a special feeling in the air. People are kinder, they give to those who have little and spend time with friends and family. Have you noticed a change recently?"

Frankie thought for a moment. "Everything seems prettier. People seem happier."

"That's the Christmas Spirit at work. Do you remember the Lady at Mapes a few weeks ago?"

Frankie nodded and grinned. "Oh yeah! She was so nice!"

"She had the Christmas Spirit. She forgave me even though she didn't know me. She wished me a Merry Christmas and I can still feel that wish today. That's how I know she shared the Christmas Spirit with me. It's as real as if she'd given me a present with a pretty bow. The Christmas Spirit is a gift we all receive every year. And those who are most blessed, carry it with them all year."

"I felt her Christmas Spirit too!" Frankie beamed.

"Parents want their children to remember the gift of Christmas every year, so they put presents under the tree and say a man named Santa is responsible until each child asks the question you asked me tonight. Then they get to share the wonderful secret of the Christmas Spirit."

"A secret?" Frankie's voice was hushed with awe.

"Yes, now that you asked about Santa, I know that you're old enough to understand the Christmas Spirit. But until other children ask their parents, you shouldn't tell them there's no Santa because they may not be old enough to understand yet."

"Oh, like Sarah is too young." Frankie nodded and winked. "I won't tell her I promise."

"When people ask if I believe in Santa, I say yes. I absolutely believe that there is a Christmas Spirit that visits each house at Christmas. Does it matter whether that Spirit is wearing a red suit? Or what we call it?"

Frankie shook his head. "Nope!"

"So congratulations! You are officially old enough to start learning about the Christmas Spirit."

Frankie crinkled his nose. "Start learning?"

"Yep. It takes the rest of your life to figure out how to keep the Christmas Spirit in your heart all year long."

"Like the Lady at Mapes."

I hugged Frankie and felt the warmth and brilliance of the Lady's hug once more.  
"Yes Bud, just like her."