

Faith, Hope & Reindeer

2nd in The Santa Claus Trilogy



Joe Moore

Also by Joe Moore

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The North Pole Chronicles*

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Faith, Hope & Reindeer

By Joe Moore

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Dedication:

To my loving and beautiful Mrs. Claus, my Mary, who has kept me focused and gotten us both through all our adversities. She has been the only lighthouse I have needed to bring me back home through all the storms we have encountered. She has always been the twinkle in this Santa's eye. Thank you, my love, for all you do for me.

Acknowledgements:

I need to say a special thank you to my many dear friends that have always believed in this project and have contributed pearls through the various readings. To all of you I give thanks. My dear friend and fellow Santa, Fred Selinsky, for his unwavering support of this book. My friends from California who appear as characters in this book including Bill, Julie, Marshall, Jonathan, Graham and Regina, along with several others. And to my dearest friend who has made me look so good to so many, the lovely and gentle Brenda Harris Tustian who painted the cover. She has painted me so many times with her lovely watercolors. She always brings out the best in Santa time and again.

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Preface

When they read the will they hadn't heard of this company before. He may have mentioned it to them while he was alive, though they couldn't remember it. But for such a large sum of money to be given they would have thought they'd have greater knowledge of the firm.

When they contacted the company, it sent a very short but pleasant man who said he was in charge of endowments to the firm. They pressed him for information, strictly out of curiosity, and the smallish man in his forties said that their firm had contributed significantly to Ruth and Elliott Handler's efforts a long time ago. "Many of their innovations were accomplished through our assistance," the man stated.

Fearing an upcoming copyright fight for some of Mattel's products they started to protest his statement. The man held up his hand and said, "We consider the matter long past closed, and payment for our part was made in full many years ago. This is why we consider this check as purely a donation from two very special philanthropic individuals." He placed the check in his coat pocket, thanked them and left.

Thursday
December 15th



*“Doubt is a pain too lonely
to know that faith is his twin brother.”*

Khalil Gibrán, Author and Lebanese Poet

Chapter One

“This is so useless!” Jared Grady moaned. He stood up to his full 6’1” frame and rubbed his sandy brown hair with both hands. While he was only 42, he felt he had aged a good ten years this past year. He had rugged features, but he had begun to look more weathered in recent months.

Julie gave her husband of twenty years a sympathetic look, knowing his frustration all too well. “Something is out there for you,” she said. “It’s only a matter of time. Right now I need to get the kids.”

Julie jumped into her SUV and backed out of the driveway of their modest, but pretty, Cape Cod home. She pulled up in front of the high school a few minutes later.

Her daughter, Susan, stood out front with some friends. Julie again admired her striking daughter. She was proud of how much Susan looked like she did at seventeen. Same shoulder-length auburn hair, same high cheekbones and the beautiful figure Julie had at her age. Julie had kept that good shape all her life and thought Susan would, too. Susan spied her mother's car and said a hasty goodbye to her friends. She hopped into the front seat. “Hi Mom.”

“Where’s Marshall?” asked Julie.

“He forgot his Chemistry book and since he has a test Friday, he thought it might be a good idea to bring his

book home to study.”

As soon as she had said this, Marshall came jogging around from the far building. “Sorry.” he said scrambling into the back seat. “Hey Mom, did you remember to sign that release for the band concert on Saturday?”

Julie said, “The paper is on the counter, now don’t forget tomorrow, or they may not let you go.”

Marshall smiled broadly. “Naw, they’d never think of leaving their best tenor sax behind!”

“You’d be surprised at the things they’d do in the name of school policy.” Julie was proud of both her children and was pleased that Marshall’s looks emulated her husbands, except like Susan, he had her soft green eyes and long fingers.

Both of the Grady kids were in great moods. This was that special time of year. They only had a few more days, then no school for two whole weeks while everyone celebrated the holidays. Even final exams would be held later than usual and wouldn’t begin until the latter half of January.

Marshall was more animated and he seemed to sense something particularly special about this upcoming break. Had you asked him, he couldn’t say what – only a feeling deep down. Susan always loved the Christmas holiday, and thought it was her special time of year.

Neither of them could possibly guess what was about to take place as they were getting into the car.

Chapter Two

Jared thought to himself, *This is going to be a very different Christmas indeed, but for an entirely different reason.*

As he moved away from the computer again considering their plight the doorbell rang. He opened the door to a FedEx envelope addressed to “The Gradys.” Jared supposed it might be an early Christmas present, but couldn’t imagine from whom.

He retrieved the package and opened it. He scanned its contents and read and reread the cover letter. The return address simply stated “Alaska Authentication Department.”

Julie and the kids returned to see Jared standing in the entryway reading and scratching his head.

Marshall eyed the FedEx envelope and asked “For me?”

His dad looked past Marshall at Julie and said, “Can I talk to you for a moment?” Julie feared bad news. They walked into the office and Jared closed the door.

“What’s up?” asked Julie looking worried.

“Did you enter any contests or fill out any forms for prizes?”

Julie shook her head. “No, you know I don’t believe in those, they exist to get people on their mailing lists and other marketing ploys.”

Jared thought for a second. “What about the kids?”

“I suppose it’s possible, but I’ve told them the same thing and I discourage them from doing anything of the sort. Jared, what is this about?”

He handed her the contents of the FedEx envelope.

Julie read it and said, “This can’t be right. Obviously this is in error or belongs to another Grady.”

“Look at the cover letter and who it’s addressed to.”

Julie perused the cover letter. Dear Jared, Julie, Susan & Marshall: She was puzzled, “Well it still must be wrong. But let’s ask the kids just in case?”

They left the office and called Susan and Marshall down from their rooms. Both said they heeded their mother’s advice and didn’t enter anything.

Then Marshall groaned and said, “Oh wait, I did sign up to win an iPad one time on the computer.” He seemed hopeful, “Why, did I get one?” His parents looked again at the mysterious contents.

Susan asked, “What’s this all about? Why the questions?”

This time Jared spoke up, “It seems we’ve won a trip to Alaska. A one week, all-expense paid trip including airline and train tickets and we leave next week when your vacation starts and we’ll be gone over Christmas.”

“COOL!” “GREAT!” Both kids cried out.

“Now wait a minute,” said Julie, “We don’t know if this is legitimate or how we got this. It may be a scam or something.”

Marshall took the letter from his father’s hand and read it.

Dear Jared, Julie, Susan & Marshall:

Congratulations! You are invited on a special trip for the four of you to Alaska. Your tickets are enclosed. You will be traveling by Alaska Airlines to Fairbanks on December 19th then will board an exclusive train following the directions below. This train will take you through some of the most rugged and spectacular terrain with the widest abundance of Alaska's wildlife you are ever likely to see.

You will stay at a magnificent five-star resort for six days and nights, where your every wish will be attended to and return December 26th via the route you came. All meals, lodging, tips and transportation are included. The only thing you'll need to bring is plenty of warm clothing.

Please make certain you allow extra time to make your flight from Orange County's John Wayne Airport, as changing flight times or days cannot be allowed because it will affect the train schedule as well.

We know you will enjoy this trip of a lifetime and we wish you all a very Merry Christmas.

Sincerely,

Alaska Authentication Department

"It must be for us," Marshall said excitedly, "It has all our names on it. Cool. Are those the tickets?"

Julie stopped him in his tracks. "Now wait a minute

young man. We can't go off to Alaska in the middle of winter on a whim, especially at Christmas."

Susan was now reading the letter and said, "Wait a second, it IS over the Christmas break, and it says everything's included." She looked at her father, "Dad, you did promise we would take a trip to Alaska before things went crazy with your job."

"Yeah but sweetheart, I was talking about a cruise or a summer trip to Denali, and not as Mom said 'in the middle of winter!'" He looked at the ticket information for the airline and train again. It certainly seemed authentic, then he said more to himself, "We aren't even sure this is real."

The next half hour consisted of a family debate. Susan reminded them (several times) how she would be going off to college next summer and how this might be the last 'family' vacation that they could all take together. Marshall's argument was centered on a more simple 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' attitude.

The final decision for that day was that Jared and Susan would look into this more carefully and at least verify the legitimacy of the "trip", and what strings might be attached. Then they would discuss this further when all the details were available.

To this Marshall said, "Wow! I'm going to go see what kind of warm clothes I've got," and took off for his room.

Chapter Three

“I’m sorry sir, I cannot give that information over the phone,” said the immovable Alaska Airlines representative.

“Look, I’m trying to verify whether you have tickets in our name or not.”

“I can verify that the flight number, day, time and destination are all accurate, but I cannot give you passenger details. If you wish, you may come to the Alaska counter with picture ID and we can verify any other information.”

Getting the information about the train was even more nebulous. The only thing he could find out was that, yes, there is a Northern Express train, and yes, it left from somewhere in Fairbanks. But its route, destination and schedule were some strange secret, or at least not known by any normal line of inquiry.

Julie tried calling the Alaska Department of Tourism, but got no further than Jared. No they were not giving away trips, and yes, it was possible someone else was. No they did not have an “Authentication Department”. Yes the cruise ships and trains generally stopped by September. But there could be a few special promotions and companies that did events over the holidays to get through the long quiet months of winter. It was suggested she search the Internet for more information on those.

Most of the next morning they tried to secure whatever information they could about the package contents. The “resort” itself wasn’t listed by name or address in the letter. Also, with no actual destination of the train, there was little to go on.

Susan and Marshall had left in high spirits that morning and Jared and Julie were not pleased with the aspect of dashing their hopes when they came home. But it seemed like everything led to a dead end. They weren’t very comfortable heading off to places unknown and unverified. Around 11:30 that morning the doorbell rang again.

Julie opened the door to a large box dropped off by UPS this time. When the Gradys opened the box they found four beautiful ski suits with matching gloves, each a different color and size. They were labeled for each of them. Jared’s was a rich dark blue with light blue piping, Julie’s white with red trim, Marshall’s a dark forest green, and Susan’s white and sported an eggplant trim. The enclosed card contained a hand written note, which said:

Hope this helps for the trip. We look forward to seeing you here.

The labels on the jackets read “The Warmth of Faith Company” of Alaska. Jared tried on the jacket over the sweatshirt he was wearing and it fit beautifully. He knew by looking at the ski pants and gloves that they would fit equally as well.

Julie looked at him and shrugged. This was getting a little eerie. If someone was out to get them, they were going through a lot of expense and trouble to do so. The

Warmth of Faith. Well they certainly would have warmth now, so she thought maybe they could supply the faith.

When the kids came home Jared and Susan filled them in on the whole story about trying to research the tickets and destinations and expressed their concerns. Then they finally showed them the suits and gloves. Susan agreed with her mother that this was one of those times when they had to put faith before cynicism. She reminded her Dad that often he reiterated what the Pastor at church said about how a little faith would go a long way.

Meanwhile, Marshall was already in his ski pants and putting on the jacket. In his mind, he was already halfway to the airport. Jared finally said that if the tickets on Alaska Airlines were good, they were going. If not, it would be the shortest vacation on record. All the same he might try going to the airport to at least get a secure answer for that part of the trip.

The kids weren't sorry about leaving over Christmas, and they would be home for the second half of vacation anyway. Everyone was suddenly in vacation mode, and for the first time in a long time, Jared wasn't transfixed on being unemployed.

Chapter Four

The next several days were spent tying up loose ends, going to Marshall's holiday concert, taking tests at school, securing vacation time at Julie's job, and getting together with friends to exchange what gifts they could before leaving Monday.

There was no time to shop for clothes and only time to restock essentials from the health and beauty departments. The Gradys were thankful for the new ski suits, and wondered how cold it might get. Jared looked on the Internet for weather and temperatures, but without an exact location, it was impossible to gauge. The weather varied widely throughout the state, from -35° F with blizzard conditions to 42° F and sunny, with everything in between going on in that massive wilderness. The nearest he could guess was their arrival in Fairbanks where it was a brisk -10° F with snow on and off. What he did know was that they needed to pack anything they owned that was warm.

From quick trips on the Internet, Jared learned that Fairbanks was one of the best spots on earth to see the Northern Lights, and he hoped that the kids would get to see this most awesome display of nature. He was frustrated at not being able to plan properly for the trip and felt that he didn't have much control, which of course was correct.

But then again, it was rather exhilarating to not have

to worry about the details and to go “sight unseen” into this vacation. He did try to locate rail lines and such around Fairbanks, to no avail. He hit a whiteout trying to gain any new information. He also never got to the airport, and figured if everyone else could muster up some trust, he would too. Besides, the worst that could happen was that the tickets weren't real, but for some reason he didn't believe it.

Faith is a marvelous thing.

Monday
December 19th



*"I can't think of anything
that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder
than to be in a country
where you are ignorant of almost everything."*

Bill Bryson, Author of *A Walk In the Woods*

Chapter One

Monday came quickly and without much time to even think about it. The Gradys were off at 5:00 for their 7 am flight to Fairbanks. According to the flight information they did have, they had to change planes in Seattle.

The airport was already crowded, even at this early hour, from passengers trying to get away on their vacations. Many people made their plans for the week after school let out, and it seemed that most of them were in attendance.

The Gradys were relieved they had allowed more time than they needed, as the long lines ate up the clock in big gulps.

It turned out by the time they checked luggage and verified their tickets, it was already 6:15. Getting through security took another thirty minutes and by the time they got to the gate they were already in the process of boarding. They got aboard and settled in for the roughly three-hour flight to Seattle. The plane pushed back from the gate at 7:03 and Jared and Julie were surprised that they actually found themselves heading out on vacation. It was very different from what they had expected this December.

The flight to Seattle was without incident and they landed within five minutes of their scheduled arrival. As it so often does, it was raining in Seattle, but that didn't

dampen any of the Gradys' spirits. The first leg of a long trip was over. Now it was time to change planes and head for Fairbanks. They had approximately two hours before their next flight lifted off. They grabbed a breakfast wrap in the terminal and strolled to their next gate. More than at Orange County, people were bustling all through the airport trying to get to their connections. It was later in the day and more people were heading through the airport at a breakneck pace.

The plane they got on was a small, close-quartered 737 with three across seating on each side. Despite the busy airport, their flight wasn't very full and they were able to spread out and have open seats beside them. In fact there were only about fifty to sixty people. Jared and Julie secretly wondered if any of these people received a similar cryptic invitation and tickets like they had received. It was mostly all families and a few older couples on the flight heading north. A couple of the families had young children around four to eight. Jared wondered if it was wise to bring such small children to such an inhospitable climate. But he realized that people live there all year round and surely there must be children that live in the town.

After takeoff they were informed that this flight would last about two hours and forty minutes, and would arrive in Fairbanks on time a little after 3:00 pm. Once again Julie ran through the questions in her head about when they arrived in Fairbanks. They hadn't even tried to book a hotel as a backup, in case there wasn't a train, or if that's where their trip suddenly ended. She wasn't even sure about how they were supposed to

connect with their train.

Jared had said he assumed they would have information at the Fairbanks terminal since the letter hadn't really addressed that part of the 'tour'. She hated that word 'assume' and always thought of what people broke it out to mean. Nonetheless, she cleared her mind as the plane rose through the clouds and reminded herself how good it was not to see Jared all tied up in knots over his job prospects. He still showed his worry lines, but at least for now it was over something else entirely. Even if they went no further than Fairbanks, this had to be better than staying at home and beating the computer in frustration. Especially, since few companies would be interviewing over the holidays anyway. She murmured a little prayer of thanks for taking them away from their situation, even if temporarily.

A common, yet unspoken thought went through much of the airplane. *Exactly where are we going, and what are we supposed to see when we get there? It was on the minds of many of the passengers.*

Chapter Two

The arrival into Fairbanks Airport made the Gradys feel that they were literally off the edge of the map. It was already dark. There was only one other commercial airliner and a few private planes that were heavily tethered to the tarmac. The terminal itself was the smallest any of the Gradys had ever seen. The fact that there was snow everywhere making it difficult to see anything past the immediate runway gave them a serious pause in their jubilation at being on vacation.

For the first time Marshall thought maybe this wasn't such a hot idea. *'Hot', oh brother, that was a word that probably wasn't used much up here,* he thought to himself.

As the plane taxied up to the terminal they saw the ground crew pushing the rolling stairs to the plane.

"Well I guess it's time to road test these ski jackets," Susan said flatly.

"How do you think the resort will cater to our every whim?" Julie whispered to Jared.

"We better keep our 'whims' to the small and basic," he whispered back.

The look of concern was on more than the Gradys faces. A quick look around would have told them who else was visiting Fairbanks for the very first time.

When the door of the plane was opened, a blast of cold air whipped through the entire plane. The temperature was an extremely frigid -12° F, and it

caught everyone's breath. Even the people who looked like they may have come from colder climes than Southern California looked stunned.

As they descended the icy stairs, nobody dawdled getting into the structure. The Fairbanks terminal was kind enough to hit its visitors with a blast of hot air as they came in. It was like some kind of perverse Swedish spa.

As they gathered around the sole turnstile to await their luggage a small army of impeccably dressed skycaps suddenly converged on the crowd. Each was holding a sign with a different name professionally printed in big bold letters.

The Gradys found a short but strong looking young man with soft features and a broad smile approach them holding their name.

"We're the Gradys," Jared said.

"Ah yes, Mr. Grady, my name is Conrad. I was told to look for an attractive couple and their two teens. Hello Susan, Marshall. Now if you will stand in back of me and point out your luggage, I will handle the rest."

He produced a cart out of thin air and carefully stacked the luggage onto it. Along with Conrad, it seemed that almost every family had a skycap at their disposal. The Gradys wondered if he was with the resort, and Marshall asked him.

"I will be your personal valet during your trip to and from the Inn. I will also be your waiter aboard the train."

Waiter! That meant food! Whatever they served it couldn't be any worse than what they had coming up

here in the plane and terminals. The long ago breakfast wraps were little more than a memory by now.

Conrad retrieved the last bag for the Gradys and filed in line with a procession of other ‘personal valets’ leading out of the terminal.

“Bundle up now,” he advised. “It’s a short walk but a chilly one.”

Susan thought, *Chilly? Chilly? What the heck did this man consider cold?*

As they were met with another Arctic blast they raced off to one of two waiting luxury buses. Conrad urged his passengers to get on and get warm as he placed the luggage aboard the lower part of the bus. A few minutes later he reappeared and said that the train station wasn’t far, but they certainly wouldn’t want to walk there. Even on a nicer day than this one.

About ten minutes later the buses lurched and moved away from the terminal. The buses were warm and comfortable. Each passenger had their own TV screen and there looked to be a bathroom and type of bar in the rear. It seemed a shame that the trip only took about ten minutes. The bus went through the downtown area and down a road into another structure. It resembled a large barn more than a train station, and at first some of the passengers thought the driver took a wrong turn. As the first bus approached the building a large barn door opened going up into the structure and the bus drove in followed by the second bus. It was deceptively large on the inside and seemed to almost grow double in size to one’s perception.

At the far end of the building stood an old time

passenger train complete with a large steam locomotive, three coach style cars and a caboose. It reminded Jared of the old Lionel set he and his Dad had set up when he was a young boy. The cars were dark green with bright red trim throughout. The windows looked large and spotless. The writing on the side stated simply: THE NORTHERN EXPRESS.

Jared thought it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

If you would like to purchase the paperback please go to www.thenorthpolepress.com. Joe will be glad to add a dedication.

If you would prefer the digital version, please go to the website that supports your digital reader.

It was thought to be a fantasy. A nonexistent place. A childrens fable. But for the Gradys and other families, reality takes a sudden turn. They find themselves not only in place that wasn't supposed to exist, but face to face with Santa, Mary Claus and all the elves of the North Pole.

But not without reason. These intrepid souls, while living exemplary lives, still face personal struggles and setbacks, but Santa knows exactly what will bring joy to them and the lives they touch.

This 2nd book in The Santa Claus Trilogy is about much more than Christmas and Santa Claus. It is about families battling through life and are in need of a booster shot of Faith. It is about each of us who struggle, yet never dare to give up Hope. And of course it is about the goings on at the North Pole, from the elves to the Reindeer.

Return to a time when you knew it was all true and you believed.



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