

A Little Noel

By Cindy Rae



For the Yule Page on Treasure Chambers, 2019

“Hey, thanks again for giving me a lift, Radcliffe. I know airport traffic is a bear, especially around the holidays.”

Catherine smiled slightly as Joe Maxwell reported in at the ticket counter. JFK International Airport was a busy place, and the line stretched out a good bit behind them. The travelers looked either excited or weary, mostly the latter. Some wore Santa hats, and a woman wearing a brown pinstripe suit sported felt reindeer antlers.

“No problem,” Catherine replied, content to stand with him in the line. She would see him to his plane. For what might be their last face-to-face good-bye, it was the least she could do.

“Checking through or carrying on?” the harried woman at the counter asked.

“Carrying on,” he replied, giving her the bag, for a moment.

She gave his luggage the appropriate tag, handed him his ticket, and gave him the concourse number. “Airside Terminal 6, gate 23. Have a good flight, Mr. Maxwell.” Her attention then turned immediately to the next person in line.

“I can’t believe that’s all you’re taking with you to Florida,” Catherine commented, eyeing the much travelled valise. “Didn’t you have that back when we were still working together? Like... in the ‘80’s?”

“Good leather never gives out on you,” he replied, hoisting his only luggage. “And the rest is being shipped. There’s not much,” Joe said, with the aura of a man who’d lived in rented apartments, all his life.

“You can’t believe I’m taking one bag. I can’t believe I’m going, at all.”

Neither one of them could believe that. They stepped out of the way as Joe tucked his boarding pass and other paperwork into his coat pocket.

“I’m going to miss you, Joe. I mean... really miss you,” she said, knowing this was ‘good-bye’ in more ways than one. Joe wasn’t going just for a visit. Joe was going to retire. And the distance involved meant they might never be together in the same room, again.

He gave her a slight smile. “Yeah. Me, too. Me too, Cathy. Walk me down?”

“Of course.” Catherine brushed a bit of a tear away, as they both turned in the direction they needed to go. *No time for that, now. Plenty of time, later. Later, there’s always time... I sound like Mouse.*

They headed off in the general direction the arrows and letters pointed. The airport display confirmed it: Flight 210 to Orlando International Airport was going to board at gate 23, and so far, it was scheduled to leave right on time.

Joe adjusted the shoulder strap on what had become his “go bag,” for years, at the District Attorney’s office. It had borne more airport tags than the law allowed, and the sturdy bottom showed signs of wear, and scuffing. In that way, it was not entirely unlike its owner.

Or for that matter, not unlike me, Catherine realized. Grey threaded through her formerly sandy hair, though it positively filled Joe’s temples. She sneaked a look at him, as they walked.

On Joe, subtle crow’s feet and laugh lines etched a face that was still handsome. The eyes were perhaps just a touch more deep set than they’d ever been, and small scar he’d picked up the night Patrick Hanlon had died still rode an area on his forehead, right near the hairline. It was invisible, unless he ran his fingers through the slightly thinning mop of curly hair, pushing it back.

He did so now, as he looked left and right, before taking off down the concourse with Catherine in tow. After thirty-two years, the last twenty five of them spent as New York’s District Attorney, Joe Maxwell, crime fighter most likely to leave his cape at home, had retired from public service, and was about to board a plane for one of the retirement capitals of the world.

“Why Florida?” Catherine asked, as Christmas Muzak filled the airport.

“Chandler, I been through enough New York winters to let me know I’ve had my fill.” He patted his pocket, reassuring himself that his ticket was still in there. “Hell, it surprises me more that *you* didn’t retire there. Isn’t Florida where rich people take all their money? Buy a condo on the beach and start ordering fancy drinks topped off with an umbrella?”

Catherine smiled. There were reasons why she hadn’t moved to Florida... or anywhere else... after she’d left the DA’s office. But she’d never told Joe any of them, not really. Now, it looked like that would never happen.

“South of France,” she replied, as they stopped in front of an elevator. “Come again?”

“Rich people retire to the south of France. And they sip Chardonnay and go around trying out regional wines.” The doors slid open. They got in and rode the car up to their airside destination.

“Oh. Florida sounds better,” he said, as they got out.

Setting off again, he began counting down the numbers of the gates they were passing. Soon, they would have to part. She couldn’t come with him through baggage check.

He knew that meant that their time together was truly drawing to a close. And though they’d remained good friends over the years, Catherine Chandler had become almost a recluse, as far as the rest of the world was concerned. She maintained her New York address, but could rarely be found there. And though she did charity work, she was more often absent from the New York social scene than part of it.

That was how she preferred to live her life, and Joe didn’t push for the particulars. He’d learned years ago, not to. But still, he considered them close. They went out to lunch once a month or so, and

exchanged Christmas and birthday cards. *Looks like that's the only way I'm gonna be able to keep in touch with you now*, Joe thought, turning sideways to allow a woman pushing a stroller to get by him. They both quickened their pace, on instinct. New Yorkers never tarried.

Still, something about this felt good, and familiar, Joe realized, as he lengthened his stride. She clicked beside him in low boot heels, having no trouble keeping up. This felt like the old days, when they were both working a case together, and had to jump on a plane to head cross-country.

That had been years ago...

"So, why Orlando?" she asked. "You don't have any family there."

He snorted. "Radcliffe, inside this little bag is a pair of Bermuda shorts, some sandals, and a short-sleeved polo shirt. And in three hours I plan on sitting at the hotel pool, drinking a Margarita, and watching the sun set. I hear it's 75 degrees. Can you imagine that? 75, in December. I might even take up golf."

Catherine couldn't picture it.

"You sound ready for this."

"More than ready," he assured her. "I got some money saved, and my pension kicks in this month. A couple years, and its social security and I'm sitting in a chaise lounge watching all the bikinis stroll by. I might even go to Disney World."

Catherine smiled. "I'm not sure If the Magic Kingdom is quite ready for you, Joe."

He shrugged. "Nah. They get lots of New Yorkers."

She tugged his sleeve and stopped walking, forcing him to do so, as well. "I just meant... I just meant I don't think anyplace is quite ready for someone as... someone as special as you."

The glimmer of a lone tear re-appeared, and Joe set down the bag, and opened his arms wide. Catherine went into them, and felt the sweet and familiar warmth and strength they still contained. They'd been friends for many years. Through everything, and that was saying more than a little. He'd always been the one she could count on to care, and to help, as much as he could.

"I love you," she said, meaning it in the deepest way friendship would allow.

His voice was a little hoarse. "Right back at you," he replied, knowing that even though all they could ever be was friends, they were definitely friends of a very particular sort.

"You did it right, Cathy. Got out early. Made yourself happy, and had kids, had a life. I'm too late for most of it, but just want a little bit of the same. You know?"

"I do. I do know, Joe." She gave him a squeeze, and they broke apart. All around them, the crowd flowed. The wool-coat wearing, hat wearing crowd.

In two hours, you won't even need your coat, she thought.

"You make them take care of you. Or I'll be down there."

"Come anyway. Just give me a chance to get set up," he invited.

"Can I bring Jenny?" Catherine asked, unable to resist.

"Only if her divorce is final. Her husband is an idiot. Don't tell her I said that." He bent down to retrieve his bag.

He and Jenny Aronson had had an on-again-off-again relationship in the 90's. One time when it was off, she'd married her current – and soon to be ex - husband.

"I'll take it under advisement," she said, promising nothing.

He faced her squarely. "Cathy... we were a hell of a pair, weren't we?"

Catherine smiled. "You and me, or you and Jenny?" She couldn't resist.

He returned her grin, the smile making him look years younger. "Take your pick."

She looked around them. "Part of me still can't believe I'm standing here, that we're doing this. In some ways..." She shook her head. "In some ways, I never thought we'd say good-bye. Ever."

He picked up his bag once more, and headed with her to his gate.

"Yeah. Me either. In some ways. But let's face it. You can't keep dropping in once a month to take me out to lunch forever. And it's been years since chocolate-covered cheese balls."

Catherine laughed. "I haven't thought about that in years."

"Yeah. Well, you make sure they take care of *you*. Whoever 'they' are. Don't make me come back up here, Radcliffe. Not in January, anyway."

"I promise I'll make them wait until at least April, to abuse me," she replied cheerfully.

"April. Good month, April."

Catherine thought of her anniversary month. "It's one of my favorites," she replied sincerely.

They arrived at his gate, and at the x-ray machine. The loose-knit crowd forming up into a single line, in front of them. Joe stepped back,

away from the line for a moment, allowing an elderly woman with a huge purse and a family of four to precede him.

“Take care, Cathy. I mean that. Of Jenny, too.”

“She’ll be free in less than a month. Can I give her your phone number?”

“Sure. My cell will still work in Florida. At least that’s what they tell me. And I’m not promising anything, with Jen.”

“I know. Twenty-five years is a lot of water under the bridge.”

“Twenty-eight. But nobody’s counting.”

He shuffled his feet, as a smitten-looking couple went by them to get into the line.

I still can't believe this is happening.

“Do you have gum? You know. For your ears,” she asked.

“No Radcliffe. I do not have gum. Because I’ve never been on a plane before,” he deadpanned.

She blushed a little, at the inanity of her comment. “You know, if you need to get in touch, you can always leave a message--”

“On that machine you check maybe once a week. Yeah. I know, Cathy.”

There was something she had to say. Something she’d never told him, before. And if it wasn’t an earth-shaking revelation, it was at least deeply sincere.

“One of the best things I ever did in my life was go to work for you. It made me better.”

“It damn near got you killed,” he countered, knowing it was true.

“I’d say we both had a couple tough days, there,” she said, reaching up to brush back his hair a little, to indicate his scar.

“Yeah. Well, thank God civil service is now behind both of us, huh?”

“Thank God.”

They were running out of things to say to each other.

“Well... I guess this is it,” he said. A couple with a diaper bag and a sleeping infant came up to take their turn at the machine. There was no one after them, so no reason for Joe to linger any longer, here.

“I guess so,” Catherine replied, watching the woman lay the bag flat, as it went down the conveyor belt. Security passed a wand over the father as he came out the other side of the machine.

“Um... have a good flight,” she tacked on, struggling for a way to draw the moment out.

Joe realized he had something to say, too. Something he was proud of.

“Philip Taylor. Evan Brannigan.” He ticked off the names on his fingers.

“Max Avery and that guy who sold kids out of foster care. What was his name?”

“Um... Barnes. Richard Barnes. That was one of my first cases. I haven’t thought of him in a long while.”

“We caught a lot of bad guys together, Cathy. We did a lot of good.” The security guard gave Joe the eye, and he put his bag up on the belt. *This is it.*

“We really did,” she answered. “I know it was hard. But in some ways... well. All I can tell you is, it was all part of one of the best times of my life, Joe. And that’s not old age talking.”

“Old age. Hah,” he scoffed. “You don’t look a day over forty.”

Catherine chuckled, knowing he was lying, and loving him for it just the same. “Considering my son is over thirty, that’s quite the trick. Thank you for never asking, Joe. About who his father was.”

Joe shrugged, as the luggage went through. “I didn’t have to. I just figured it was probably that Vincent guy you mentioned, once. Timing was right.”

They’d known each other for over thirty years, and he still had the power to surprise her.

“You kept that a secret, all this time?”

Joe shrugged again, and blushed, a little. “If you’d have wanted me to know, you’d have told me. Tell Jake I said ‘hi.’ And Beth,” he added, naming Catherine and Vincent’s daughter, Elizabeth.

“Sir? If you’ll step through, please?” the guard prompted.

Joe raised his hands in the air. “Yeah, yeah. I’m comin’.” He turned back to her, as he stepped forward. “You better get a move on too, Chandler. Rush hour traffic will be hitting soon.”

Catherine stayed where she was. “I’ll hurry,” she said, making no move to do so.

Joe put his wallet and change into a plastic bin, and stepped through the metal detector. His wristwatch set it off, necessitating a return trip. Cathy watched, wishing there was something more she could say, something she could do, to get Joe to stay in New York, to perhaps change his mind.

Stop it. You’re being selfish. He’s one of your oldest friends, and you’re being selfish. Drinks by the pool. Warm weather year round. A chance to relax, and play tourist. Take up golf. Walk on the beach. Maybe meet a beautiful woman, and fall in love. He deserves this. He does.

Catherine watched one of her dearest friends remove his leather jacket and spread his arms wide, as he was wanded down.

“I don’t suppose it helps anything if I tell you I was the DA for the city of New York up until last month, does it?” he asked the unsmiling guard. No reply was made.

He turned around, arms still open, as the baton went under his armpit, down his body, and across his back. And in that moment, he saw Catherine’s unguarded expression, as she looked at him.

I don’t want you to go, it said.

I know, he replied silently.

But I know you have to. She marshalled her expression into one of forced cheer.

Okay. He smiled a bit, in response. It was the best they both could do.

“You can go sir. Please take a seat in the waiting area, and we’ll begin boarding in a few minutes.”

Joe picked up his watch, wallet, and change, feeling odd that for the first time he could remember, he had no keys in his pockets. No office keys, no apartment keys, no car keys, no keys to his locker at the gym. All those things belonged to someone else, now, and a free and unencumbered life awaited him. He planned to spend a few weeks on the beach at a hotel somewhere, while he hunted for a place to live; maybe take in a couple of races at Daytona. There was money in the bank. It was something he could do. He was footloose and fancy free.

Catherine stepped backward, ever the poised debutante, even in her early sixties. *You really could pass for forty, forty-five at most*, he thought, knowing he couldn’t say the same about himself. *Whatever it*

is you're doing, it sure agrees with you, Radcliffe. Whatever it was you could never tell me about.

She lifted a gloved hand and waved at him, a final farewell. 'Good-bye Joe.' He saw her mouth it, as two men in Air Force blues came up to the metal detector.

He shrugged into his jacket, as he watched her turn and walk away from him, stepping out of his life, and back into her own. He glanced down at his too-light bag, knowing if he picked it up and just waited, if he took a seat in the waiting area and then got on the plane, it would take him to a new life. Maybe even a better one. *Probably a better one.*

One where he wouldn't have to deal with the worst of the worst. One where he wouldn't get almost blown up by a car bomb, or have to deal with the press, or the mayor, or get cited for contempt for pissing off a cantankerous judge. One where he wouldn't have to hire new recruits, or say good-bye to old ones. One where he could get quietly drunk on a nice, warm beach, as he eyed the locals.

He kept his gaze fixed on Catherine. The crowd was starting to swallow her up, as she went back the way she'd come. The overhead Muzak was playing 'Holly Jolly Christmas.' A flash of her tan coat was the last he saw of her, as she stepped sideways to get in between a big family coming to board the plane. That was probably the last he'd see of her. Her or Jenny Aronson, or anybody else from New York...

"Ah, hell," he swore at his luggage, bending down to snatch it up off the floor. The crowd between him and Catherine was getting thicker. If he was going to catch up with her before she reached the parking lot, he was going to have to hurry.

“Cathy! Hey, Cathy, wait up!” he called, knowing she couldn’t hear him, as he dove under a rope.

“Sir, you’ll have to be re-screened if you leave this area ...”

Joe paid the guard no mind. He knew he wasn’t going to be coming back this way. At least not yet.

Still a few miles left in the old engine, Joe thought, weaving through the crowd. She wasn’t *that* far ahead. Surely he’d spot her?

Joe realized that “tan” must have been the “in” color for coats, that year, because the crowd was suddenly awash in varying shades of it. It didn’t help that Catherine was short, either.

He caught up with her somewhere between gate eight and gate seven, realizing she’d been walking fast to try and hide the fact that she’d been crying.

He fell in step beside her. “So. I was thinking. People always need lawyers to take look after the money they donate to good causes. Somebody to administer charitable trusts and foundations, you know what I mean? Stuff that gets set up to take care of the have nots?” He was making decisions as he walked. “Can’t be that tough of a job. Hit up donors, go to lunch a lot, make sure the one percenters are paying their share?”

Catherine, surprised into speechlessness, turned to look at him. And then didn’t miss a beat. “You mean kind of like what I’ve been doing the last few years with my dad’s money?” *Not to mention Margaret Chase’s.*

Joe nodded. “Yeah. But bigger. I’m thinking we should set up something just for foster kids, like the ones you saved way back when. Hit up some of the city movers and shakers, and shake them down, a

little. You still got Burch on speed dial?” He shifted his bag from his right shoulder to his left.

“I probably have a number where he can be reached... somewhere,” Catherine said, marveling at this new turn of events.

“Let’s face it. Between your reputation and mine, we’d be golden. Who wouldn’t trust us with a big check? And for a good cause?”

“Can’t think of a soul.”

“We’re gonna need office space.”

She didn’t miss the use of the word “we.” She even smiled at it.

“Yes, I imagine we will.”

“And nothing chintzy looking, or in some cheap dive, down in the Bowery. Someplace nice. You still got an in at your dad’s old firm?” He was making plans as he walked, and enjoying the exercise.

“Coolidge and Coolidge?” she asked. “I think they’ve got enough room to give us a piece of it. Maybe I can even talk Jay into letting me have my dad’s old corner office, but at a normal rate.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“Go big or go to Florida,” she replied, as they hit the elevator together, both of them knowing he was going to miss his plane.

He shot her a winning smile. The one that had endeared him to her since the first month she was on the job.

“You take care of the contracts, then.” The doors slid open, and they stepped inside.

She returned the smile. “I used to work in contract law, if you’ll recall.”

“Yeah. But you were never very good at it.”

Her smile broadened, as the doors began to close over both of them.

“And wouldn’t you know it?” she volleyed back at him. “The DA’s office offered me a job, anyway.”

This is going to take a little explaining, to Vincent. Oh, well. It’s just more of what I was already doing. And with help.

“Smartest thing I ever did,” he replied, as the elevator began to move.

Catherine accepted the compliment graciously. “Phone Jenny after New Year’s. I might just come in at number two.”

The car stopped at their floor, and the doors slid open. “Silver Bells” started playing on the speaker. It really was Christmas time, in the city.

“Maybe you will, Radcliffe,” he replied.

To Joe, the world and all its endless possibilities also seemed to open up, before him.

“Maybe you will.”



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

