



“The Beginning”

By Judith Nolan

“Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown again into instant flame by an encounter with another human being.”

~Albert Schweitzer

William...

“I’m sorry, William, but this letter is the final straw. I have to let you go. I can’t afford the threat of any more lawsuits because of your behaviour.”

“Aw, come on, Tony.” William scowled at his boss, the owner of the upmarket La Tripoli restaurant where he’d worked tirelessly as the head chef. Until this morning... “The woman ate my food and said

she liked it. Then she had the cheek to complain about how badly the plate was dressed to anyone who would listen; like it was some great, federal crime. It wasn't that bad. She didn't even have the decency to come into the kitchen and face me. Get my side of the story. Understand we were seriously short-handed that night and everyone did their best to get us through the service. We have a great team here and now you want to ruin everything."

"Because that's what she does." Tony groaned, briefly lowering his head into his hands. He looked up again. "She's a food critic for the New York Times, and by yelling at her in front of a restaurant full of paying customers you've pushed her into a corner." He stabbed a finger at the letter. "She has to follow through. But she says here she will let the matter rest, and not print a bad review, if I fire you. She's given me no choice."

William folded his arms across his massive chest. "So that's it then. Four years of back-breaking work—slaving day and night—to get this place up and running, and now that it's a success, you no longer need me. You'll get someone cheaper and younger."

"That's not why you have to go and you know it." Tony raised his hands helplessly. "But my reputation is on the line here. We could go broke overnight if I don't get on top of it. One bad review and we might as well shut the doors. My hands are tied. You know how fickle the public can be."

"So what about my reputation?" William stabbed an accusing finger. "This is what I do best. I cook and I feed people. What else is there for me?"

"I'm sure you'll find something," Tony responded, a little too quickly. "You've a great chef. Tons of places will want to hire you."

“Yeah, sure there are.” William tore open his white chef’s coat and flung it down onto the kitchen bench. “After they find out what went on here last week, they’ll be queuing up to hire me.”

“If you’d just keep that damn temper of yours in check, then you’re a fine employee.” Tony came close as if to grasp William’s shoulder and then let his hand drop when he saw the hard look in the other man’s eyes. “If you need anything, a reference, or some money to tide you over, you know you only have to ask.”

“Keep your charity. I don’t need it.” William stalked to his locker in the back of the kitchen and shrugged into his winter coat. Gathering his old Navy duffle bag he slung it over one shoulder.

The brisk autumn chill bit at his cheeks, as William slammed his way out the restaurant’s service entrance. He thought he saw someone dart away from scavenging in the restaurant’s dumpster further down the alley, but when he turned to look there was no one there. He shrugged. “Must be too many late nights and not enough sleep...” It was none of his business now, anyway.

Automatically, he began to head for his apartment but he felt too restless to lock himself away behind four walls and brood on the disappointments of his disintegrating life. Instead his feet turned towards Central Park and its wide open spaces. He just needed some room to breathe and think. Despite his brave words, he knew he had to find a new job and soon. His savings would barely pay his current bills and they were always piling up.

He raised his eyes to the scudding clouds overhead and released a heavy sigh. His whole life seemed over-full with disappointments and failures. Just when he’d finally gotten a hand on something permanent it always slipped away again. Nothing good was ever likely to happen to him now and that was a fact. He was getting too

old and set in his ways, and the world he once thought he knew seemed to have moved on without him, beyond his reach or recall.

This last job had been the longest he'd be employed since leaving the Navy twenty years ago. Somehow his temper and sense of fair play always got the better of him, no matter how hard he tried to contain it. Push him too far and he pushed back, in spades. It was just the way he was. And now everything he'd put into making the restaurant a going concern had evaporated before his eyes. His hands clenched involuntarily. *If he ever saw that damned critic again...*

Head down, intent on his thoughts, he didn't see the boy until he cannoned into him. Unconsciously, his hands reached to clasp the child's shoulders to keep him from falling on his butt.

"*Hey!* How about watching where you're going?" The boy twisted neatly aside from his slackened grasp. "You could've broken something. You're big enough."

"Sorry about that," William rumbled, frowning down into the boy's open and cheeky face. "Guess I wasn't watching where I was going. Too much on my mind."

"Yeah, well, maybe you'll keep an eye out in future." The boy's dark eyes assessed him closely. "I know you, don't I?" He cocked his head. "You work over at that fancy restaurant, La Tripoli. I saw you coming out of there not so long ago."

"So it was you in the dumpster." William stared down at him. "I thought I saw somebody." Dressed in ragged and patched clothes, the kid looked like a homeless runaway. "Don't worry, I won't report you for stealing. I got fired from there this morning."

“I’m cool. They won’t ever catch me,” the boy replied confidently. “I’m too fast for all of them.” He grinned and stuck out a hand. “The name’s Devin. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m William.” The cook took the boy’s hand. He tried to remember what he’d last thrown into that dumpster and hoped it had been still fit for human consumption. “You know, if you needed a meal, you only had to knock on the door and ask. I would’ve rustled you up something. There’s always plenty of left-overs. I hate to see good food going to waste.”

“So you can cook?” Devin’s frowning assessment intensified. “You any good at it?”

“The Navy never complained and I’ve won a few awards,” William replied slowly, not sure where this line of inquiry was heading. *Was the kid making fun of him too?* His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Why?”

Devin shook his head. “That’s fine, but can you actually cook food people would want to eat? We don’t need fancy stuff that the rich folk like. We need good food, plain and filling and lots of it. We don’t have any fancy equipment either. We have to make do with what we’ve got or can make.”

“So, you’ve got an opening for a cook?” William frowned. “You sure about that? You look like you don’t even have the money for a hot dog.”

“I get by. But yeah, we sure could use a new cook real bad. Our old cook just can’t do it anymore. He does his best, but he’s getting too old. So we’ve all been pitching in to help out lately. Can’t say much about the results; but so far it’s been edible.” Devin’s fine mouth turned down at the corners. “Of course the job doesn’t pay much, if

at all. But you get free room and board and we supply everything else. Why, you interested?"

"I might be. It depends on a few things." William folded his arms guardedly. "Any of those damn New York food critics go anywhere near this eating place of yours?"

"Nope." Devin's dark eyes danced as he laughed before shaking his head. "Not a one. It's kind of a secret place. Not too many people know about it. I can't say more right now. But I can show you; if you're willing to trust me, that is. You wanna go somewhere you've never been before?"

William shrugged as he spread his hands. "What have I got to lose beyond some time and maybe my dignity. This could be interesting."

"Then please come with me." Devin made a curious, courtly bow at odds with the clothes he wore. "I'm going to show you a place where what you do will be appreciated. Where you can do what you do best." His dark eyes narrowed. "Maybe there you'll find what it is you've been searching for..."

END

“The Birthday Party”

By Judith Nolan



“Words are easy, like the wind; Faithful friends are hard to find.”

~ William Shakespeare

William had spent days going through all his recipes, calculating and planning. He'd pulled in just about every favour owed to him, and then some. He wasn't beyond begging for some of the items he needed.

He'd used a little of the reward money Catherine had brought down to Father, after Vincent had found that damn stray cat with the expensive diamond collar. But he preferred the tunnel's time-honoured bartering system. He could keep that straight in his head, who owed what, and when.

He was equally determined to make sure this birthday party would be a feast to end all feasts. After all it was for his very good friend and William was going to make it work. Vincent deserved the very best of everything. But that was a tall order on a permanently stretched, shoe-string budget.

William had taken the time to recycle a lot of items left over from Winterfest and Christmas, so he was well ahead of the game on the decorations front. The Great Hall was being tidied and all set out. Soon the tables would be groaning with delights and specialities he'd pulled from every corner of the Tunnels and Above.

But the most welcome help and supplies had come from the inimitable Lady May. She had come to his rescue with those hard-to-source items, things William had not really hoped to secure by any means at his disposal. He'd sent up a list and prayed. Now he owed the old lady big-time, and no doubt she'd be along someday soon to collect. Lady May never forgot a debt, or a promise.

William knew he could spare a few pastries, share a cup of camomile tea and supply a few choice stories about Tunnel life for one of their oldest helpers. The old girl didn't get down into the tunnels as often as she used to when she was young. It was a small price to pay and William would do it gladly. It was all in the most excellent of causes and he was going to make sure everything came off perfectly.

Or die in the attempt...

"It might yet come to that..." He grimaced, wiping the beads of honest sweat from his flushed brow, as he scowled at the same damn cat Vincent had rescued some weeks before. Once more she had crept into the kitchen without him noticing, sitting just inside the opening, watching him with those knowing eyes of hers!

Discarded and unwanted by her owners, Cleopatra had taken up permanent residence in the tunnels, making herself right at home anywhere she chose to curl up and sleep. With the true perversity and sure instinct of all cats she'd soon found her way into the

kitchens, despite William's many scowls and stern words of discouragement. Between her and Mouse's pet racoon, Arthur, William felt he needed eyes in the back of his head to keep the pair of them out of his supplies, and from getting under his feet while he worked.

It didn't help that when the kitchens had been carved out of the solid rock wall behind the dining hall, no one had ever thought to install a door. He'd brought that subject up at council meeting after council meeting, but his concerns were always demoted to the bottom of the list as something they would get to *one day*.

Father would peer at him over the rim of his spectacles and once more intone the same old words, "Chambers and living quarters for our community always take precedence over a simple door, William. You know that." Then they would moved on to the next item of the agenda.

"Yeah, well, this is where I live and work," William grumbled, flipping through his recipe books. "Maybe I'll go and talk to Cullen...when he's free."

An unwelcome shiver of awareness moved up his hunched spine. He sensed, rather than heard the stealthy invasion of his personal space. He straightened and scowled down at the floor. Cleopatra was now sitting at his feet with the look of a cat who was about to expire from the advanced stages of hunger. Her clear blue eyes fixed on him with the exactness of a scud missile.

"Aw, come on..." William groaned in honest disgust, returning his attention to his recipe books. "I fed you only an hour ago. I thought I'd gotten rid of you then. How about you make yourself useful. Go and catch a mouse or something..." He made shooing motions

towards the door with one hand as he turned the page with the other.

Cleopatra yowled plaintively as she shuffled her furry body closer, reaching to place a pleading paw on William's boot. The cook glanced down reluctantly, distracted despite his best efforts to ignore the feline. He had to admire her persistence if nothing else. The cat's penitent look would have done justice to the greatest martyr who ever lived.

"Oh, for *Pete's* sake...All right, all right...You won't let me rest until, right?" William threw up his hands in disgust. "*Women!*"

He got off his stool and grumbled his way to the store cupboard. He took his time fussing about with some scraps, making the imperious feline wait a bit longer.

William had loudly voiced his opinion that they should have kept the necklace and given the cat back. To his practical mind that was a far better deal. This had drawn the vociferous ire of more than one tunnel child who was firmly under the cat's hypnotic thrall. Of course, around them, the animal behaved with the utmost decorum.

And with the adult tunnel denizens who mattered to her most, like Vincent and Mary. Around them she displayed unalloyed affection. But the more William tried to push the annoying feline away, the more she came around, watching and waiting for any opportunity to interact with him. Like she was on some kind of mission to wear him down and make him acknowledge her right to live in the tunnels.

"This is all there is for the likes of you." William grimaced as he bent down to place the battered tin plate of food on the floor. The cat looked at it, sniffed it and then glanced up at him, blue eyes narrow with calculation.

“Hey!” William addressed the look. “It’s this or nothing. *Capise?*” He straightened, fists planted firmly on his ample waist. “I have better things to do than run after you.”

Cleopatra arched her back and appeared to sigh. A swish of her tail signalled her discontent, but after one last look of calculation she resigned herself to the sparse fare at hand.

William watched her for a long moment, as she delicately devoured every morsel before sniffing around the plate to be sure she had missed nothing. Then she sat back again to watch him, seeming to calculate the odds there was more food.

“A door...” The cook heaved a long, resigned sigh. “I’m gonna ask Cullen, ya know. As soon as this party is over, you’re out of here. For good. You and that damn racoon.”

Cleopatra’s clear blue eyes looked him over, before she rose sinuously and approached him, winding her lithe body around his legs, moving across each firmly-planted boot, and then between, with the ease of long practice. A loud rumbling purr filled the room as she voiced her satisfaction. Her long tail made a question mark, as she rubbed her cheek back and forth over the rough denim his trousers.

“Damn cat...” William grumbled. Without thinking, he reached down to run his large hand along the cat’s arching spine, causing her purring to intensify. “Still say we would’ve had a better deal if we’d kept that diamond collar of yours...”

Cleopatra didn’t reply, she was still a cat. But her smug look of satisfaction spoke volumes as William’s fingers continued to smooth absently over the warm silk of her coat. They would be here for a

while, recipe books and birthday parties forgotten. It was as it should be...always...

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