

# VIGNETTES

## Beginnings

- 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 worked as the head chef. “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 needed room to breathe and think. Despite his brave words, he knew he needed 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 knew seemed to have moved on without him, beyond his reach.

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. 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 assessed him closely. “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. “My 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 leftovers. 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**