

CHAPTER VIII

“Second time’s a charm?”

SUMMER 1886

When I finally stopped fretting about Taylor and Victor, eight o’clock rolled around and I was more than eager for dinner. What with all the excitement, I hadn’t eaten since my breakfast of hard tack biscuits and coffee. I cleaned up and put on my new shirt and jeans so as not to embarrass Miss Megan but strapped on my old gun belt just in case.

The dining room was where I remembered it was but bore no resemblance to the old one. The walls had been decorated with fancy paneling and paintings and the chandelier overhead was dramatic to say the least. It was so damn bright that you’d think the sun came inside to have dinner with us.

The tables and chairs were brand spankin’ new and looked to be hand-carved by a master carpenter while the tablecloths were made of fine linen rather than plain old spun cotton. The few folks having dinner were dressed way beyond my means and made me feel like a saddle bum. Even my new clothes were no match for that place and I felt so uncomfortable I turned to leave.

“Where are you going, Charles? Didn’t you agree to have dinner with me?”

I looked up to see Megan coming towards me in a fancy gown of lavender and pale pink that made a futile attempt to conceal her

physical attributes. Her hair and makeup were overdone and her smile seemed like it was painted on but she was still an undeniable beauty. She was outfitted for a battle for which I was completely unarmed.

“I thought about sending up some other clothes for you but I suppose what you’re wearing will have to do. May we at least place your gun belt behind the bar while we eat? I doubt if you will have to shoot anyone during dinner.”

If her purpose had been to humble and humiliate me then she had done a fine job of it. I unbuckled my gun belt and passed it to the bartender who looked down his regal nose at me and sneered at my Colt pistol. Megan took my arm and directed me to the fanciest table in the room. All the while, she went on and on about the changes she had already made and those that were a’comin’.

We sat at the table and a waitress came over to take our order. To my surprise and delight, she was an old friend named Glory. She was the same little blond girl I remembered but I hardly recognized her in a French maids outfit. Although it was a cute get-up and suited her feisty personality, it seemed out of place in Flagstaff. She didn’t seem at all surprised by my presence so I gathered that I must have been expected.

Megan stopped talking about the remodeling just long enough to order what she called *hors d’oeuvres*. The first *entree* Glory brought out was something named *Escargot de Bourgogne* but they sure looked like plain old snails to me. No matter, they weren’t to my liking and I left all of them on the plate. I coulda sworn Glory snickered under her breath when she picked up my plate.

Next we got some weird looking wild mushrooms that were introduced as “white truffles”. They were swimming in some sort of salty brine but I forced a few of ‘em down. Glory sarcastically recommended that I might have more but I declined.

I was about to starve to death when a thick creamy potato soup was served. It turned out to be something called *Vichyssoise* and was served cold. Glory suggested that I might enjoy it but she was wrong. As with the snails and mushrooms, Megan praised the cold

potato soup as being *Magnifique-superbe*. I gathered someone had been taking French lessons.

The main course, *Chateaubriand* Steak, was served for two. It was lucky that Megan wasn't much for beef cause by that time I was more than ready to eat a whole steer by myself.

While I was finally enjoying something that tasted like real food, Megan explained that fancy cut of beefsteak was named after some French author and diplomat who served Napoleon and Louis XVIII. Somehow, she seemed to think that made it taste better.

The worst part of the meal was the wine. Now I've always felt that most wines were just a waste of good grapes but that French Burgundy was gawd awful. And giving it a fancy name and pedigree didn't change my opinion one little bit. Glory kept coming by to refill Megan's glass and politely ask if I wanted more which I did not. Megan was obviously disappointed with my "cowboy palate". She acted as though she pitied my ignorance of French culture and cuisine but I couldn't have cared less.

Through the entire fiasco, Megan kept babbling about her hotel, her dining room, her French chef Philippe and her entirely new kitchen that allowed for the creation of such wonderful meals as the one we were being subjected to. I couldn't wait to excuse myself but was informed that no French meal was complete without dessert.

Philippe, the portly chef, came out of the kitchen with a large plate containing some skinny flapjacks Megan called *crepes*. They were marinating in some sort of sugar, butter and liquor concoction that he set on fire. I was sitting so close to the plate that the flames almost singed off my eyebrows. At first, it looked like he was trying to burn the joint down but the fire died out pretty quick. After considerable urging, I tried the *crepes suzettes* and found them a sight better than the snails or mushrooms but hardly worth the effort.

As we finished the dessert, Megan excused herself so she could go to the kitchen and compliment Philippe in person. As soon as she left the table, Glory appeared with a tray full of cigars.

"A fine cigar to finish off your meal, sir?"

"No thanks, I don't smoke much."

“Evidently you don’t eat much either or wasn’t the dinner up to your usual standards?”

“Listen, I spent the last few weeks on the res and enjoyed ever’ meal more than this one. Although, I must admit, the “Chatto-steak” was pretty good.”

Glory laughed at my description. “You are such a cowboy.”

“I thought you used to like cowboys.”

“And I thought you hated Megan. I guess time heals all wounds.”

“Nothing has changed between Megan and me. I don’t have any use for her or her French food.”

Glory pushed the tray closer to me and lowered her voice.

“Just take one of these damn cigars, will ya. Misses Langley is watching us from the kitchen window and I can’t afford to lose this job.”

I picked out the biggest stogie, unwrapped it and bit off the tip. Having no where to spit it, I stuck the tip in my shirt pocket while Glory struck a match and lit the damn cigar for me. I took a drag and almost threw up my fancy French meal. That damn thing smelled like burning manure and tasted worse. Glory laughed out loud and seemed delighted with my reaction.

“I take it you aren’t much of a smoker. You might want to get some fresh night air to clear your lungs.”

Glory turned to leave but hesitated a moment and looked back.

“If you’re serious about hating Megan, I could meet you out back in a half hour and we could take a little walk. Clear the air, so to speak.”

If I remembered correctly, Glory offered me that same walk four years ago and I didn’t take her up on it. I figured it might be the right time to see what I missed.

Megan returned from the kitchen and feigned great concern for my discomfort after sampling the cigar. I just wanted to be shed of her and that dining room.

“Are you alright? I hope that cigar wasn’t too strong. They’re imported from France, you know. The very best money can buy.

I'll wager you didn't know our word "nicotine" comes from a Frenchman, Jean Nicot. He was the French ambassador to Portugal from 1559 to 1561."

That figured. It seemed like I had no use for anything French.

"Well, in the Arizona Territory we call these "Stogies", not cigars. That word comes from Conestoga, Pennsylvania where they make a bunch of fine quality American cigars. You might be aware of the fine overland wagons that are made there too."

My cutting comments kinda stalled the conversation. Given that opportunity, I overdid the coughin' and hackin' as an excuse to return to my suite. Megan politely pretended to understand and allowed me to leave. I retrieved my gun belt from the bartender who stood there with his palm extended for a tip so I fished out the cigar tip from my shirt pocket and gave it to him. I don't suppose he'll ever get over that.

As I tried to leave, Megan caught my arm and pretended to pout.

"If you're feeling better in the morning, perhaps we could have breakfast together. Silly me, I've been going on and on about my life and I never got to hear about what you've been doing these past four years. I'm also interested in your future plans. We may have mutual business ventures that would benefit us both."

I promised to consider breakfast and headed back to my room coughing all the way. I couldn't imagine why Megan was trying so hard to be nice to me. We had nothing in common except for mutual hatred. I knew one thing for certain; whatever Megan had in mind had nothing to do with the Wells Fargo shooting. I suspected her reason had something to do with our past relationship and I knew I wasn't gonna like it.

After rinsing the sour taste of the dinner and cigar out of my mouth, I cleaned up a little and went downstairs. I made sure no one saw me make my way to the rear entrance of the hotel. As I snuck past the kitchen, I saw Ogger devouring a huge plate of what I assumed to be leftovers. I think he ate the snails, shell and all.