

## Chapter 11: Churros and Smart Casual

*“Anyone who believes what a cat tells him deserves all he gets.” Neil Gaiman, British author*

I was famished. It was getting dark, and tonight included a visit to Clancy’s. Alice asked if I was up for a night out after such a brutish bout of food poisoning.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I laughed. I told her how I had almost fought alongside a pirate, but it was pretty clear that Alice’s question was rhetorical since she was already dressed and ready to go Clancy’s with or without me. She stood at the end of the bed with one hand on her hip and the unspoken word “well?” lightly framed on her lips. She had pulled her hair back and it was evident a good portion of her toiletry had been spent on her makeup. Alice loved cosmetics. Her close friend, Sarah, had retired to San Miguel after a forty-year career as a makeup artist with both MGM and Columbia Pictures. Sarah had introduced Alice to the ‘makeup secrets’ of the stars. Under the deft tutelage of a master artist Alice had discovered her own hidden talent for what she described to me as “the mystery of mascara.” Blessed with an unblemished complexion and a face that could pass for a teenager my Rockette girl was to me an unlikely candidate for makeup magic. Yet here she stood before me as I had seen so many times the past two years waiting for me to give her the low wolf whistle that her slightly blushed look demanded. Alice was stunning.

I remembered the first time Alice entered the MAC boutique shop in Mexico after having spent two dozen practice sessions with her makeup artist friend Sarah. The two young girls behind the counter were soon asking Alice for tips on applying blush and eyeliner. Alice had ended that little session and proudly asked me what I thought about her having achieved such competency that she was giving lessons to the cosmetics sales staff. I responded that I just thanked the lord that MAC was an international brand that had opened a studio in San Miguel. Now Alice could buy cosmetics without taking out a bank loan. Before MAC opened in Mexico, Alice would only use Oriflame products. How a Swedish company that was actually headquartered in Switzerland convinced customers to pay sixty bucks for something called Giordani Gold Bronzing Pearls or twenty-five dollars for a tiny little brush was the real mystery to me. Fortunately, the makeup scientists at MAC had figured out how to do the same thing at half the price. Once Alice discovered MAC the owner of the local Oriflame franchise probably took a cut in pay.

### Telenovela Beauty

In San Miguel, Oriflame was handled by Margarita Gralia, who owned the Oriflame franchise as well as the restaurant Chocolate and Churros. This unique combination meant that in the same block on San Augustine Street, Alice could buy the most expensive blush and lipstick sold in Latin America while eating Mexico’s most delicious twisted sugar dough sticks called churros.

Alice loved Margarita’s churros as much as she did Café du Monde’s beignets. Just like Café du Monde, Chocolate and Churros had long lines of tourists extending out the door and down the sidewalk. Weekends were the busiest as visitors waited their turn to check off the box indicating that they had eaten at Margarita Gralia’s. Behind the tourists’ interest in the churros

was the hope of seeing, and maybe snapping a picture of, the most famous Spanish Telenovela heartthrob in the world. Margarita Galia's performance in *Love in Custody* had made her a superstar from Patagonia to Los Angeles. Univision's ratings in the U.S. and Mexico exceeded that of the Grammy Awards on the night of the steamy, final episode when the 45-year old Margarita finally consummated her love for her best friend's teenage son. This year-long plot of a gender-reversed *Lolita* soap opera had captured the attention of a worldwide audience. The surge in viewer ratings can only be attributed to the blonde and voluptuous Margarita Galia. Her Chocolate and Churros restaurant was festooned with sidewalk posters advertising her movies and hit television shows. Her iconic photo of a tousled-hair blonde in a loose-fitting red dress standing on one high-heeled foot as she bent over, showing her ample cleavage, to reach the shoe strap of her bent leg, had been featured on Manhattan buses and Hollywood billboards. It was also the main promotional photo for Oriflame. In fact Margarita did not seem to be much affected by the MAC competition. There were enough well-heeled and Vogue inspired Mexico City beauties visiting San Miguel each weekend to keep the Oriflame till ringing.

Having accepted my sincerest wolf whistle in recognition of her superb 'mascara magic', Alice urged me to 'speed it up' if we were going to get to Clancy's on time. Alice had struggled more with obtaining reservations at Clancy's than she had with any other venue on our journey. The problem was not related to our kitties. Clancy's relies on its own in-house system that consists of a Garden District telephone number. Alice obtained the number and had added it to her iPhone for speed dialing. During the four weeks preceding our departure, Alice had made numerous attempts to get through to the reservation number. Each call from Mexico cost a \$1.10 to hear an answering machine's response, "Clancy's is not taking reservations at this time." Thirty-three dollars into the project, Alice finally made human contact.

Taken by surprise when a human answered the phone, Alice had inadvertently begun her conversation with a reference to the illegitimate birth of the man on the other end. Whether or not this influenced his decision to report that there were no tables available until Thanksgiving was unclear. To me it seemed reasonable to assume a conversation starting with the words "*you bastards*" might end badly. Alice had slammed down her iPhone swearing that she would get us into Clancy's. And so she had, as I was about to find out.

Alice supervised my choice of clothes for this night out at a 'smart casual' restaurant. She shook her head when I reached for my Kirkland jeans. She knew I enjoyed wearing them without a belt in order to reveal the waistband labeled '34.' Actually, this pair was a '36', but some underpaid garment worker in Malaysia had attached the wrong label. Instead, she pointed to a pair of slacks, indicating that my evening would be spent in a pair of freshly pressed Docker khakis. Before I could even unfold my favorite Jack Daniels Black T-shirt, Alice tossed me a blue, pinpoint, long-sleeved oxford dress shirt that she had secretly slipped into my 'all beach, all the time' wardrobe. I dressed in my Sigma Chi frat-house uniform of chinos, blue oxford, long-sleeved shirt, and navy blazer with brass buttons. Now I understood why Alice had insisted on my packing a pair of Bass Weejun penny loafers that I had not worn in almost three years.

## Alice Makes her Mark

Tuffy was meowing; Munchie was huffing. Alice was radiant. We headed for the front door of the Monteleone carrying two cats in carriers. As expected, the dinner hour was turning out couples dressed in every imaginable style. Men chatting on their phones wore cargo shorts and polos, while their mates primped in front of hand mirrors while waiting in the taxi line. Our Uber ride was still five minutes away.

Standing at the top of three inlaid steps at the Monteleone's front door, we had a clear view over the queue ahead. Alice passed Munchie's carrier to me as she rummaged in her Nino Bossi Boogie-Woogie shoulder bag for her iPhone. Heads turned toward my Alice, who continued to grope in her bag, oblivious to the attention she drew. Smartly attired in her striped Isabel Pedro that was perfectly accented by her Phillip Plein heels and a striking shoulder bag, Alice was the epitome of 'smart casual.'

Alice turned toward the concierge desk. "Ha," she scoffed, sending my eyes back in the same direction. Standing beside it with her hands on her hips was a California blonde wearing a sparkling, spaghetti-strap top that clung like Saran Wrap to her yoga-toned frame. Her skin-tight stretch capris almost touched the gladiator laces winding up her ankles from her four-inch black, open-toe stiletto heels.

"Is that 'smart casual'?" I whispered.

"No, that's slutty, and screams, 'I will not be going to Clancy's,'" Alice said, tugging me down the stairs and out to our waiting Uber driver.

The road to Clancy's is long and winding. The uptown stretch of the road is on Annunciation Street which runs parallel to the Audubon Zoo for a few blocks. That explained why Clancy's is said to be located in the 'Audubon' neighborhood. The house that was featured in the movie, *Benjamin Button*, was in this neighborhood. Anne Rice lived nearby for many years, just down the street from where Archie Manning and his wife had raised two star, quarterback sons: Peyton and Eli. Sean Penn had bought Helen Mirrens' house on Audubon Street, and John Goodman stops for barbecue at the Voodoo bar while walking his daughter to Audubon Park for soccer practice. Bob Dylan keeps adding on to his Audubon Park manse, and Nicolas Cage is, comparatively speaking, a 'slum landlord' with his three mansions tucked away within walking distance of Clancy's.

In addition to the full and part-time celebrity residents of the town, the city is the backdrop for as many as ten movies a year starring many of Hollywood's A-list actors. They, along with many recognizable sports figures and politicians, visit this neighborhood regularly. It's not surprising to spot someone with a famous face on any night of the week at Clancy's. Quite possibly, the star quotient of this neighborhood bistro was a prime reason for its popularity with so many New Orleans visitors. Good food is the town's major export, and visitors flying in from St. Paul or Eugene are likely to look for a reservation along with a chance to dine beside Sandra Bullock.