BACK TO FIRSTS

Episode #101

'Action!'

Written by

Christia Crocker

Idea Unit Inc.

14347 Albers Street #307
Sherman Oaks, CA 91401
(310) 989-4661
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COLD OPEN

EXT. MGM STUDIOS - LOT 2 - DAY

CHYRON: MGM Studios, Culver City, California - 1938

HAMMERING and BUZZ SAWING as a studio CONSTRUCTION CREW builds a "New Orleans Street". A trolley car DINGS and passes.

ANGLE ON

A large metal Parvo L camera case circa 1925 held by a well-manicured, dark-skinned man's hand as he walks.

INTERCUT WITH

INT. MGM STUDIOS - SOUND STAGE - DAY

MAISY GARSAUD (30, European Creole, stylish and energetic) directs a CAMERAMAN (40s, serious) CREW (15-50) and JOAN CRAWFORD (film star). The actress is not easy.

MAISY
(slight Louisiana accent)
Spotlight on! Rain go! Camera tight on her face as she comes to the realization...

JOAN
No, no, no. My character would not waffle--

MAISY
Cut!

Grumbles from the Crew and a YOUNG ACTRESS (18, raven-haired) on the set.

A STUDIO EXEC (30s, Caucasian male, impeccable suit, oozing power) crosses his arms and frowns. RUTH SCHWAB (19, Maisy's assistant, bright-eyed and quick) notes his displeasure.

ANGLE ON

The Parvo L camera case continues in the grasp of...

ANTOINE EVANS (35, Creole of Color, impeccable suit)

who continues walking with the case past bathroom signs reading: "Whites Only" and "Colored Only".

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Antoine passes a SET PAINTER putting the final touches on a fake storefront sign. It reads: “Laisay la bon temps roulay” Antoine winces at the misspelling.

MAISY

pulls Joan aside.

MAISY (CONT’D)
That moment will come, Ms. Crawford, but now we need to see that Marion is hurt, and it triggers--

JOAN
The only thing being triggered, is my frustration with you and your failure to understand the strength that this scene requires!

Joan grabs a prop GLASS from a table and SHATTERS it against the set wall.

JOAN (CONT’D)
I knew a female director would turn this picture into a milk-toast, puttering, flop!

ANTOINE

crosses past the set construction towards Sound Stage #8.

END INTERCUT

The Studio Exec abruptly corners Maisy in an aside. Ruth stands up and moves closer to the pair, just within earshot.

STUDIO EXEC
Get things under control! I don’t how the hell a woman ended up directing a major motion picture but--

MAISY
Sam Warner scouted me. I’m under contract.

STUDIO EXEC
I don’t care if God himself brought you here.

(MORE)

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STUDIO EXEC (CONT'D)
If anything goes wrong on this film, and I mean anything at all, this will be the last time you see your name in the credits. Let alone on a director's chair.

The Studio Exec turns on his heel and strides off the set. Ruth follows several paces behind. As he exits the Sound Stage in a huff, Antoine enters.

STUDIO EXEC (CONT'D)
Who are you?

ANTOINE
Antoine Evans.

STUDIO EXEC
And you're here because...?

Ruth interjects.

RUTH
I've got this.
(to Antoine)
How can I help you?

ANTOINE
I have a special camera for Miss Garsaud.

STUDIO EXEC
(departs like a diva)
It had better be budgeted. I won't be approving any overages.

RUTH
You can set it down here.

Antoine sets the metal case on a nearby workbench and places a NOTE labeled: "Maisy" on top. He looks into the distance of the sound stage and sees...

MAISY

rubbing her face with worry and pulling at her eyebrow.

ANTOINE begins to walk towards Maisy, but Ruth stops him, and escorts him out.

RUTH (CONT'D)
I'll make sure she gets it. Thank you.

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MAISY attempts to shake off the Studio Exec's threat. Then... an idea!

Maisy calmly leads Joan back to her spot and cues the crew.

MAISY
Back to firsts, everyone! Spotlight on! Rain go! Backstage mirrors on set! Bring them on!

The confused crew is still as Maisy walks over to a large mirror pane and rolls it next to the camera so Joan can see the scene.

JOAN'S POV - OF HER REFLECTION IN SET MIRRORS

She is costumed and lit so beautifully, she glows.

MAISY (CONT'D)
You bring beauty and power to this role, Ms. Crawford. There is no doubt. But your best performance will also show Maron's vulnerability. I'm asking you to give something no one else can - a piece of yourself.

JOAN
(cooly impressed)
Well, well... that's direction I might actually be able to work with.

BACK TO SCENE

Maisy gestures to the Young Actress and the Crew to reset, slate and roll the film.

MAISY
Action!

EXT. NEW ORLEANS 1927 - FRENCH QUARTER - NIGHT

DRIVING RAIN pelts lattice-trimmed, multi-storied homes.

CHYRON: French Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana - Eleven years earlier.

We hear a distant RADIO PLAYING MUSIC from "The Jazz Singer".

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RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Just a preview from the motion picture, “The Jazz Singer,” which is sure to be a Warner Bros. triumph. Ladies and gentlemen, could talkies be the future of film?

INT. GARSAUD HOME - PARLOR - NIGHT

After-dinner bustle almost drowns out the same RADIO MUSIC.

An EMERGENCY ANNOUNCEMENT interrupts, but the FAMILY are too busy to listen, including...

A younger Maisy (19, creative and free) moving around the room looking at how light and rain are reflecting on...

VICTORIA (16, Maisy's sweet but image-conscious sister) standing in the middle of the room together with...

ALBERT (50, Maisy's doting father) as they act out scene from Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
We interrupt this program for an emergency announcement. Flooding has increased...

INT. GARSAUD HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

HELENE (40, Maisy's well-meaning but controlling socialite mother), addresses CALISTA (30s, Creole, the cook) and LOUISE (50s, African-American housekeeper) as they clean the table.

HELENE
Calista, can you make sure the provisions are inside and off the porch? Louise, we’ll take our coffee in the parlor.

CALISTA
Yes, Ma’am.

LOUISE
Yes, Ma’am, the parlor.

The women finish clearing the table as Helene flutters out.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
... Governor Simpson is standing by to order blasting of the levees.

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INT. GARSAUD HOME - PARLOR - NIGHT

Helene enters to find Maisy directing Albert and Victoria in their scene. Maisy TURNS OFF the annoying RADIO to focus on her work.

MAISY
Victoria - start from “The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch...” Miranda is asking Prospero to stop the storm if he can.
(THUNDER outside)
Do you hear that? It’s perfect!

HELENE
Victoria, stand up straight. Albert, my darling, you are the perfect mystical Duke. Isn’t he, girls?

Albert kisses Helene and hugs Victoria.

ALBERT
I can’t imagine a finer evening than re-enacting a Shakespeare classic with my three favorite ladies, each with talent and beauty!

Victoria beams, standing straighter, taking her place.

VICTORIA
“The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking-- ”

Maisy repositions Victoria, moves the lamps and examines the light in the parlor mirrors, perfecting the shadows and light.

HELENE
Really, Maisy. This has gone beyond a tempest in a teacup. You’re disassembling the parlor!

VICTORIA
Daddy! Please tell Maisy to stop. It’s *my* school assignment.

Maisy repositions Albert.

ALBERT
(in character)
“Be collected. No more amazement.
(MORE)

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ALBERT (CONT'D)
Tell your piteous heart there's no harm done."

More THUNDER. The lights BLINK and DIM. We see the family...

REFLECTED in the parlor mirrors, giving Maisy's blocking and lighting give an eerie glow (a precursor to the scene with Joan Crawford). Albert is impressed.

ALBERT (CONT'D)
Maisy, this truly impressive! It looks as if we are actually shipwrecked. You've got some kind of magic there, my girl.

Maisy beams and hugs her father.

HELENE
If only such parlor charades were useful to a young lady.

ALBERT
There is always need for good instincts and an artful eye.

Victoria looks sour.

EXT. GARSAUD HOME - NIGHT

The rain beats down on the roof heavily. It feeds a growing stream on the street. TWO CITY ALDERMEN (30-40s) run onto the front porch...

INT. GARSAUD HOME - ENTRY HALL - NIGHT

Maisy and Victoria hold Albert's coat and hat as Helene attempts to stop him from departing with the waiting Aldermen.

HELENE
Albert, please stay. I don't like the look of this storm.

He kisses each of them lightly.

ALBERT
We're a family that stands by this city, and all men are being called to protect it. I need you to be brave. I'll be home as soon as I can.

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Maisy hugs her father tightly.

MAISY
You're the brave one.

ALBERT
(reaches for his coat)
"'Tis time I should inform thee farther. Lend thy hand and pluck my magic garment from me."

Maisy and Victoria help him into his coat and hat and he exits with the Aldermen. Off a worried Helene and her daughters. Maisy pulls at her eyebrow in concern.

INT. GARSAUD HOME - PARLOR/FRONT DOOR - DAY

Helene, Maisy and Victoria are asleep in armchairs as radio ANNOUNCEMENTS continue.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
... emergency crews will use dynamite to blow the levees...

LOUD KNOCKS. The women stir. Helene pulls back a curtain revealing DAYBREAK behind the clouds and rain outside. She answers the door.

HELENE
How may I help--

Her expression falls at the sight of the family Lawyer, MR. CONNICK (40s, grim), flanked by the PASTOR (50's, kind eyes). They shake their heads as Helene collapses with grief. The girls rush over.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
...the horrific death toll continues to rise.

MR. CONNICK
Mrs. Garsaud, Maisy, Victoria, I'm so sorry...

MAISY
No! No! Daddy!

Maisy throws herself upon Mr. Connick, unable contain her grief.

END COLD OPEN

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ACT ONE

EXT. CATHOLIC CHURCH COURTYARD - DAY

The Garsaud family, in mourning attire, tries to keep up appearances as they accept polite condolences from SOCIETY LADIES. Maisy and Victoria talk to Friends nearby.

SOCIETY LADY #1
Oh Helene! I don't have words. If you need anything, please let us know.

HELENE
Thank you.

SOCIETY LADY #2
I would simply be lost without my Walter! How *can* you manage?

SUZANNE LATOUR (37, attractive, socially connected, but not entirely trustworthy) pulls Helene aside.

SUZANNE
Let's take a turn in the courtyard.

Suzanne and Helene stroll past a table with a sign "DONATIONS FOR DISPLACED FAMILIES". Suzanne places an envelope on the table, notices Helene's conflicted look, and guides her to a refreshment table. They talk in sotto.

HELENE
It feels cruel to say, but there are times I feel that Albert cared more about the city of New Orleans than his own family. What was he thinking?

SUZANNE
I'm sure he never imagined they were headed into such danger. How are the girls?

The pair look across the courtyard at...

VICTORIA AND MAISY

Victoria stoically listens to a MALE NEIGHBOR (16, well-dressed, gentlemanly) and Family. Maisy unburdens herself to a NURSE in uniform, tears streaming down her cheeks.

HELENE

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shakes her head, dropping from angry to hopeless.

HELENE
I just don't think I can do it without Albert. He was the one that could get through to Maisy, the one that made Victoria stand tall. The one that made me laugh...

Helene almost bursts into tears. Suzanne hands her a fresh lace handkerchief.

SUZANNE
My dear. There is nothing that can replace Albert. But your family will grow again. Before you know it, Your girls will be managing their own households and you'll have loads of "delightful" grandchildren.

Helene appreciates Suzanne's pointed humor and smiles.

HELENE
Victoria, without a doubt. But Maisy should have been married years ago.

SUZANNE
It's not too late.

Helene looks skeptical but newly determined.

EXT. CATHOLIC CHURCH - SIDEWALK - DAY

Maisy, Victoria and Helene stroll home.

HELENE
Girls, we need a day to put our troubles aside. Tomorrow we'll have our luncheon out, and go to the dressmakers.

Victoria lights up. Maisy looks like nothing could be worse.

INT. DRESSMAKERS - DAY

Maisy is getting fitted by the Dressmaker in a smart new tailored dress.

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HELENE
(directing the dressmaker)
I would just take the sleeves up a half an inch and the hips in to about... here.

MAISY
It doesn't feel right to get new dresses when half the city is homeless.

VICTORIA
What is wrong with looking fresh and pretty? Wearing old clothes doesn't help any more than buying new ones.

HELENE
Quite right. It's good for local businesses.

MAISY
I'd like to do something more. Elena is working as a nurse, I could try that.

HELENE
A job?! Absolutely not. Elena married beneath her and her husband thinks it perfectly acceptable. Not quite the example.

INT. GARSAUD HOME - ENTRY HALL - DAY

Maisy and Helene continue to argue as Louise helps Victoria, Helene and Maisy with their newly purchased packages.

HELENE
If you could unpack these all in each bedroom please, Louise.

MAISY
Thank you, Louise.

HELENE
Lowering yourself to work a job will not help your prospects as an eligible young lady.

MAISY
The last thing on earth I want to do right now is pretend I'm interested in courting.

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HELENE
But darling, it is precisely what you need - what we all need to move on.

MAISY
I don't want to move on! Daddy is dead and you act like it's just another day to dress up. Don't you care?

HELENE
Don't you dare question how I feel. Your father was the love of my life. Something that I can only hope you'll grow to know one day. So you're going to put on that new dress, and find your smile.

Maisy storms off. Helene begins to cry, but pulls herself together as Calista passes through to the...

EXT. GARSAUD HOME - BACK PORCH - DAY

Calista accepts a crate from EARNEST EVANS (45, African American, provisions dealer, astute, kind).

CALISTA
Mr. Earnest, these peaches better be ripe. You know I can't make my pie for those gentlemen callers if they're too hard. You don't want that on your conscious do you?

In the background, Maisy sneaks into the back of Earnest's truck.

EARNEST
(laughing)
No Ma'am, I do not.

INT. / EXT. EARNEST'S PROVISIONS TRUCK - DAY

Maisy bumps around in the back of Earnest's truck as he makes his deliveries around town.

MAISY

sees the back of a Passenger's head in the front seat.

TIME CUT

It's dark, Earnest pulls up to...

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EXT. SUPPER CLUB - BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

KITCHEN STAFF meet Earnest and ANTOINE EVANS (24, Earnest's inspiring and attractive son) at the truck.

KITCHEN STAFF #1
Look at this college man! Antoine, you're grown! You feedin' him these steaks, Earnest? I'm glad you brought more. We must've had 200 orders tonight!

EARNEST
We got about 100 lbs left. Antoine and I will get them off the truck.

Maisy sneaks off the truck as the men circle around to unload it. She tries to catch a glimpse of Antoine, but he's off.

Maisy hears JAZZ MUSIC. Enchanted, she wanders from the truck towards the stage door where African American musicians laugh and smoke. Maisy follows them inside...

INT. SUPPER CLUB - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Maisy passes a sign that reads: "PERFORMERS ONLY". All of the PERFORMERS are African American. Maisy follows the music toward the stage. She stands...

IN THE WINGS

watching a jaw-dropping TRUMPET SOLO on stage. Maisy is entranced by the...

LIGHTS ON THE INSTRUMENTS

SWEAT ON THE MUSICIAN'S FACES

VELVET TRIM ON THE MUSICIAN'S JACKETS

BACKSTAGE

Other Performers gather and stare at Maisy as she watches.

MAISY

sees the steady, confident, walk of a young man with shined wingtips approach from the side. Revealing...

ANTOINE

Maisy looks at Antoine at the same moment that Antoine looks at Maisy. ZING! It's been a while. They're not kids anymore. Smiles rise on both of their faces until...

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Earnest spots Maisy just before the MANAGER does, and ushers her outside to the truck with a warning look to Antoine who follows.

EARNEST
I don't know how you got in here, but best believe it's time to go.

EXT. / INT. EARNEST'S PROVISIONS TRUCK - NIGHT - MOVING

Earnest drives through the backstreets of New Orleans with Maisy in the front and Antoine in back.

EARNEST
Miss Maisy Garsaud you could have gotten us fired - or worse! As it is we should not be driving you around at night. Puttin' us in danger of mingling with Whites. You know better!

MAISY
Momma is driving me to fits and I had to get out of that house and be... somewhere alive.

Maisy steals a glance at Antoine, radiant in the moonlight.

Earnest turns onto an sidestreet and stops the car.

EARNEST
Maisy, you're going to need to stay put until I'm done making my deliveries and Antoine gets safely to his job at the theater.

MAISY
The theater? Which theater?

ANTOINE
That one.

He points across the street to the...

SAENGER MOVIE PALACE

where CANDY GIRLS (16-20s, leggy, in daring uniforms) sell candy, cigarettes and popcorn outside.

MAISY
You work at the Movie Palace?

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EARNEST
(proudly)
He's the projectionist. Learned how at Xavier College. Moving pictures are going to be a big business. Antoine's going places far beyond Evan's Provisions!

ANTOINE
Pa, right now I'm just going across the street. Thanks for the ride. Be safe son. I'll see you at home tonight.
(to Maisy)
Which is where you should be, or your Momma's gonna wear you out!

INT. GARSAUD HOME - PARLOR - DAY

Maisy, all dressed up, sits in front of a lovely tea set.

PULL OUT to reveal she is sitting across from... an OLDER GENTLEMAN (45).

It's an awkward silence until Helene settles herself between them.

HELENE
Mr. Gerard, we're delighted to have you. Nancy spoke so highly of you.

OLDER GENTLEMAN
Oh, but Helene it's me, August.

HELENE
August Gerard of Holy Cross Primary School? Why, it's been 35 years!

Maisy shakes her head and eats a tea cake.

TIME CUT

Helene seats a WIDOWER (30s), next to Maisy.

WIDOWER
It's been horribly difficult without my Lizzie since the flood took her. And the children miss her something bad.

MAISY
The children?

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