

## Chapter 7 - A Rising Star

On her way back to Laguna Beach, Maria felt totally thrown by the time she had just spent with Miranda. They hadn't kissed or embraced although Miranda's hand had occasionally rested on the back of Maria's, which she hadn't objected to, and indeed felt comforted by. They had, however, talked quite seriously about emotional relationships and the impact that these might have on one's life. Maria wanted to take their discussion further along, but it was getting dark and she felt that Flynn would be expecting her at Laguna Beach.

'We'll talk again,' Miranda said at her front door, 'and I wish you well.' Maria had wanted to give her a hug, but they settled instead for warm smiles and a couple of waves. Coming down into Laguna Beach she could see a light just inside their balcony, so she straightened her shoulders and breathed in deeply a couple of times. Upstairs, outside their apartment, she knocked on the front door before inserting her key into the lock.

'Good god ... and where have you been?' Flynn asked when he appeared. 'I was starting to worry about you when you didn't answer your phone.'

'I'm sorry,' Maria said, embracing her man. 'I've had a hell of a day, and I was so distracted coming back, it was all I could do just to stay on the road.'

She was instantly forgiven, but Flynn wanted to know all about what had happened for her; so she told him in detail what she had been through up to, but excluding, her time at Miranda's house.

'And you've had two offers,' he said, astonished but clearly pleased.

'Yes,' Maria answered, 'although I'm not sure if I'm really the right person for either of the roles ... I mean, I'm not exactly into being a widow who excels in business - or with playing the part of a wife who gets cheated on and then humiliates her husband's lover.'

'Oh, come on - you can do it, girl. You're a natural with passion, and the more demanding it is, the better you'll do it. Of that I'm certain.'

Maria hugged and kissed him for this, which seemed heartfelt. But she wanted to know what he had been up to while they were apart. 'I'll tell you all about it,' he promised. 'But let's go and eat now.'

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They found an agreeable little cafe a few minutes' walk away in the centre of Laguna Beach. Californian red wine made for a good starter, and when they had ordered some light supper, Flynn leaned forward across their rather intimate table. 'I spent most of the morning with Rosie and Dale,' he said. 'Or Chantelle and Pierre as they now are in the script I've got to

develop. They are a lovely pair, and there are indeed similarities between their roles in the movie outline and my play, which you took to heaven on stage in Dublin.'

Maria was pleased, but she wanted to know more about Rosie and how she interacted with Dale.

'They are a passionate couple,' Flynn said quietly. 'They are lovers in wartime France and their commitment to resisting the Germans is strong.'

'Like the characters in your play,' Maria said, but here Flynn shook his head.

'Not quite - I loved the idea of Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus opposing the Nazis ... but I think the love triangle between them was perhaps more intellectual than physical, at least where Sartre was concerned. However, if I had concentrated on an interpretation that only involved Camus and de Beauvoir, with yourself as Camus' mistress, that I think could have been hotter emotionally - and I guess that's what this guy Anton's outline I'm working on is all about.'

Maria was fascinated. But she wanted to know more about Rosie in the role of Chantelle. Flynn veered off here, but humorously, and the talk edged into how it might be for each of them in the movie business - especially Maria.

'I think I could do what's required,' she said, 'for both Jose and Beaumont. Although I have doubts about how either of their scenarios might be received by serious critics ... and where would that leave me? I mean - I played the role I had in your play, Jack, because I was passionate about what you had written. OK - I didn't get paid for what I did on the stage in Dublin. But the reviews were good ... and that meant a lot.'

Flynn took in what she said respectfully. He then laid one of his hands on the back of hers. 'This is all a very new experience for both of us,' he said slowly. 'But we're looking at mega commercial possibilities here, Maria. If we both decided to go for what's on offer, it could be rewarding - both financially and emotionally.'

Maria smiled at this, and then considered her lover for a moment in silence. 'So what I think you're saying,' she suggested eventually, 'is that we should both get in there with a vengeance and storm the world with passion.'

'Yes,' Flynn answered confidently. 'Get in, go for it ... and don't stop. If we give it all we've got initially, the satisfaction could be beyond our wildest dreams. Sure - we might not bring the critics on board immediately. But if we got appreciative audiences, we could progress indefinitely - and if we lose the passion we started out with ... well, who knows ... we could maybe buy a small farm in West Cork with what we might have accumulated in Hollywood dollars.'

This got Maria laughing. She loved Flynn's enthusiasm and his conviction was winning her over to the movie business. 'So for now, I need to totally involve myself in the character of this cheated on wife who draws in the employer of her husband's lover.'

'Absolutely ... and you'll need to savour every detail of her experience as she falls and then ascends emotionally ... you'll impress the world, Maria. Then you'll move on to wreak havoc on the hearts and minds of the targets you choose to seduce. I can't wait to see how you'll bowl everyone over ... and your remuneration will soar into seven figure dollars!'

She had never been so flattered or encouraged by her man, but she was still curious about how he was getting along with Rosie and Dale, or Chantelle and Pierre as they would become as Flynn's script evolved.

'It is challenging,' he said modestly, 'and I still have to see if I can actually produce a script that's viable.'

'I would like to meet your stars,' Maria said as he poured her a final glass of Californian wine. 'And I particularly want to see Rosie, who I can't help feeling may give a more interesting performance as a wartime lover than I did in your play.'

Flynn raised his glass towards her and then enveloped her with a warm smile across the table. 'We'll have a proper get-together,' he assured her. 'Because I'm sure they'll both be intrigued by your prospects with both Gary Beaumont and Jose Langella.'

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Back at their apartment, Maria studied the script scenes Gary Beaumont had given her while Flynn worked on the outline he was developing for Rosie and Dale as Chantelle and Pierre. In the morning, he took a call from Brad Casey who said he wanted to see him. 'We'll get together later,' he told Maria. 'But whatever happens, let's keep in touch with our mobiles.'

They kissed lightly before he left and Maria then went out onto their sunny balcony with Gary Beaumont's script outlines. She imagined how she might feel if she discovered that Flynn was having an affair with another woman, and how she might respond when she discovered what was happening. Her emotions were already flaring up with the very thought of such a scenario, however unrealistic it might be.

She was well into the role of a wife who was being cheated on when Beaumont called. 'So what do you think?' he asked when she told him she had been going through the script scenes he had given her.

'I'm up for it,' she told him, 'and I think I'm getting there.'

'Great - so how about you come to the studio and run through what happens when Gracie gets the news that her guy Harry is having a scene with the model girl Holly ... are you ready for this today?'

'Oh yes,' Maria answered. 'I just need to go through it again this morning - so how about I see you at the studio this afternoon?'

'That will be just fine, honey ... and I'm looking forward to seeing how you'll interpret Gracie and how she'll deal with her cheating guy Harry.'

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Their was a long mirror in the bedroom at their Laguna Beach apartment. So when Maria had looked again at Gary Beaumont's script scenes, she started on a mono rehearsal of her role as the cheated on wife, Gracie. The mirror helped, for she could imagine herself berating her cheating husband Harry at their beachfront home. She was exhausted by the time she had gone through the scene. But blood was pumping relentlessly through her veins and she felt she was playing a role that she could take forward convincingly. Maybe she should have told Beaumont that she could now drive straight up to the Stigler Studios for a right on performance. It was however best for her to stay with what they had already arranged. So when she had dressed appropriately and taken a coffee, she went downstairs to where her car was parked. Almost instinctively, she took the turning that led to the wood-fronted house with the white picket fence where Miranda was staying, and she stopped outside. It was not perhaps a very sensible decision, and she wasn't sure why she was doing it. But after a few moments, she got out of her car and walked across the beachfront street to Miranda's house.

She hesitated at the front door, but then her hand moved decisively to the house bell, which she gently pressed. It was still mid-morning, and there was every chance that Miranda might already have left the house, either for the Stigler Studios or Brad Casey's office block. Soon after she pressed the bell, however, she heard footsteps coming towards the front door.

'Oh my god ... well this is a surprise,' Miranda said with a welcoming smile. 'I had rather hoped that we would meet again soon, but I wasn't expecting you this morning.'

'I'm sorry,' Maria said. 'I didn't mean to disturb you ... and I certainly won't stay if you're busy.'

'No - come in, please, and I want to know whatever it is you're getting ready for today - so would you like coffee or juice?'

Juice would be great, Maria answered, and she then followed Miranda into the house and down to a small kitchen behind the living room. 'I'm meeting Gary Beaumont after

lunch,' she said, 'and I'm going to run through the role of his character Gracie ... I've already rehearsed it a little, and I'm beginning to feel it's something I could do.'

When she had poured Maria a glass of fresh orange juice, Miranda led her back to her sitting room, which had panoramic views over the Pacific. 'So would you like to go through the scenes you're doing for Gary?' she asked. 'I can take the part of whoever it is you want to talk to.'

This was more than Maria was hoping for, but she wanted to go with it. 'Perhaps initially you could be Flo,' she said. 'She's the woman who fills Gracie in on the fact that her husband Harry is having a scene with this model girl, Holly, and it would be great if you could just improvise on how she gets this revelation across.'

Miranda wasn't an actress, but she had no problems with taking on the role of a woman who tells Maria as Gracie that her husband Harry was in the midst of a serious sexual relationship with Holly, who was almost half his age. Maria took the news disbelievingly. But Miranda had reports of sightings with the old and younger lovers romantically interacting at three different local restaurants. So it was left for Maria to take in the news and then collapse in tears on Miranda's sofa. 'But what am I to do?' she asked.

'Well, I guess you'll just have to confront him, honey, and tell him what you've heard - but don't give him any leeway to deny what he's been up to. So I suggest you metaphorically hire an investigator to confirm where your devious guy has been seeing this hot young Holly girl - right?'

Maria was excited now, and when she had taken another sip from her orange juice, she asked Miranda if she would mind going through the role of her cheating husband when he gets back home one evening.

'Sure,' Miranda said. 'But on this occasion you're going to have to be one hard lady ... you don't give this guy any breaks - OK?'

They waited for a couple of minutes, after which Miranda left the sitting room, but when she returned, Maria was ready to address her devious husband. She started quietly in the role of Gracie. But she then came straight out with what she had heard, and when Miranda as Harry denied the accusations, she hit him with her investigator's report, which was backed up with serious photographic evidence. She then went for him with a vengeance, and when Miranda represented him as an ashamed but cornered marital cheat, Maria went in for the kill. 'We've had it, and we're finished,' she said decisively. 'I'm going to divorce you, Harry, and you're going to pay dearly for what you've done ... but in the meanwhile, I want you out of here now - and if you don't leave I'll call the police and claim you've assaulted me.'

It will be a perfectly valid scenario, and if they question my accusations, I'll mention that you have been unfaithful, and I'll show them the evidence.'

They hugged when they had once more played through the relevant scenes from Gary Beaumont's script. 'God - I feel I could do this,' Maria gasped and Miranda smiled. 'Of course you could, you're a natural, honey - and I feel that rather than wait until this afternoon to play it for Beaumont at the studio, you should get up there now while you're still fresh with the experience.'

'But I said I'd come this afternoon, and I don't want to alienate him.'

'Don't worry,' Miranda said. 'I'll call him - and in the meanwhile I'd like you to take a look at the garden and see what improvements you think could be made.'

Maria left the room nervously and wandered through to the back of the house and then onto a neatly tiled terrace. There was a decent sized lawn, but there were some overgrown trees that blocked out the morning sun. Otherwise, however, it was a pretty well perfect place in which to relax and enjoy the day.

When Miranda came out, she smiled and nodded. 'You're on in just over an hour, honey, and your friend Flo will be there to give you the news about your cheating husband, Harry, who'll actually be able to face you after lunch - so it's one big day for you, babe!'

'Oh lord ... but what about you?' Maria asked. 'Can I give you a lift back up to the studios?'

Miranda smiled at this before taking Maria's hand and leading her towards a comfortable bench seat in the garden. 'Perhaps it would be good for you to have some company on your way back up to Hollywood, and I do have a few things to do in Brad Casey's office - so yes ... let's go together.'

Maria didn't say anything, but she moved spontaneously across to where Miranda was sitting on the bench and embraced her. They stayed close together for a few moments until Miranda kissed Maria lightly on her cheek. 'Come on you gorgeous creature,' she said as they parted. 'I'll drive - and I want you to meditate quietly about how you'll deal with your friend Flo, and later with your cheating hubby, Harry. Because I believe you've got what it takes to shine, my love ... and I guess you could be about to make an impact on our Hollywood scene.'

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Maria was nervous as they left Newport Beach with Miranda driving her car. There were emotions surfacing between them which was a little unusual, for Maria had never been emotionally or physically involved with another woman - at least not in a serious sense that she was aware of. The evolving bond between them was comforting, however, and she did as

Miranda suggested. She sat quietly with her eyes closed while concentrating on how she might respond to the news of her husband's deception, and then how she might deal with it when faced with him.

Her confidence increased as she focused on both roles, and as they got close to Universal City, she opened her eyes and smiled appreciatively at Miranda. 'I'm not sure if I'd have been up for this without your support,' she said, 'and I'd like to maybe meet again when I'm through and tell you how it went.'

'Sure,' Miranda said as they went through security at the Stigler Studios. 'But for now I just want you to stay very calm and cool, because you're going for it, honey, and I don't want you to be diverted before you start - OK.'

They parted with discreet cheek kisses outside the studio that Gary Beaumont had said they were to meet in. An assistant from Casey's office was waiting for Maria at the studio reception desk. He was a quiet but friendly young guy who led her through to the studio stage, where Gary Beaumont greeted her with Flo Reynolds, who was shortly to give her the distressing news about her husband.

'We'll start immediately,' Beaumont said. 'And we'll run the second scene with Harry after you've had a break.'

There were some people sitting beyond the stage, and Maria thought she recognised Brad Casey and the gay movie director Jose. She should maybe have called Flynn before she got to the Stigler Studios, for he might even be in the same building, but the cameras were ready to roll and as the lights were adjusted Beaumont held up his hands and beckoned Maria and Flo to join each other for their roles on stage.

Flo approached as a true friend, but with disturbing news about Maria's husband, Harry. She responded with initially silent shock. How could her husband of three years possibly want to indulge himself with a curvaceous young model - and was there any evidence to support Flo's allegations? There was of course, and it was pretty decisive. Harry had been seen with the busty young model, Holly, at several restaurants. Maria screamed with frustration and then collapsed in tears on a stage sofa.

The tears were for real, and as the scene ended there were claps from seats in front of the stage. 'That was great,' Gary Beaumont said as he and Brad Casey approached. Her movie friend Flo had already embraced Maria, who was still shaking from the scene she had just been through.

There was coffee and juice on hand to ease the strain. But as the actresses relaxed Gary Beaumont took a call. He then approached to tell Maria that the actor who was to play Harry to her Gracie had just arrived and wondered if she might like to berate him on stage.

'Sure,' Maria said instinctively. 'I'm up for it if he is.'

The guy who joined them shortly afterwards was in his late forties and had a pleasant smile. He made a point of offering his hand to Maria, who shook it with a slightly distanced expression.

'OK,' Beaumont said. 'I think you both need to get into your roles now from the opposite sides of the stage. Maria knows what's been happening, but Harry is unaware of this, and enters initially with a loving smile.'

They were each given a few moments to consider their parts until Beaumont shouted: 'OK - cameras now ... and you're both on stage.'

Maria's first instinct was to think about how she might respond if she discovered that her lover Flynn had been having an affair with another woman. It was helpful to think along these lines, for when she emerged from the side stage to meet her husband Harry in the living room of their beachfront Californian house, her hands were already shaking. She was furious at the very thought of such infidelity.

Harry entered as her husband with an agreeable smile, but he was quickly halted by Maria's angry expression and he responded with an open mouth as she started on her venomous tirade. There wasn't much he could say to defend himself as she tore into him, and by the time she finished his legs were shaking and he was on the verge of collapsing.

'You're a shit,' she concluded acidly, 'and I want you out of here now ... do you hear what I'm saying?'

He certainly did, and the best he could do was to hold out his arms apologetically as Beaumont signalled a conclusion. There were more claps from the small audience on sets a little way back from the stage. Brad Casey and Jose Langella then approached as Maria tried to get out of her role as Gracie, and her cheating husband Harry grinned and said she was brilliant.

'We need to talk,' Casey said quietly, and as Maria and Beaumont nodded with Jose, they all followed him out of the studio to where two chauffeured cars were waiting for them.

When they reached the Apollo restaurant overlooking Toluca Lake, Maria asked to be excused while she went to the bathroom. She was close to tears, but when she had sat for a while on a lavatory pan, she got up and did some deep breaths. She then brushed her hair and walked assuredly back onto the sea view restaurant terrace.

Casey got up as she approached and held a chair out for her. 'You did brilliantly in both of the roles you played with Flo and Harry,' he said, 'and we can go back and run through the shots when we've had some lunch - but I think both Gary and Jose want to say something to you.'

Beaumont was first, and when he had coughed, he looked straight across the table at the young Irish actress. 'I want you for ten episodes in this series,' he said without hesitation. 'And we can offer you a contract of a hundred thousand dollars.'

Maria did her best to keep a modest smile on her face while nodding appreciatively. But this appeared to be just the start of her Hollywood movie career. For Jose now coughed lightly and when a waiter had poured each of them a glass of celebratory Prosecco, he smiled almost paternally at Maria.

'I have been truly taken by what I've seen of your performance today,' he said, 'and also by the way you played Kylie opposite Franco. I want you for the lead role in my next film, Maria. The contract fee would be similar to what Gary has just offered - and Brad has already produced the paperwork, which I hope you will sign for us.'

end of Chapter 7 - for the rest of the story go to Amazon <http://amzn.to/2or0PXN>