

COURSE
OF
ACTION

by
GUN BROOKE



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PROLOGUE

That role is mine! I *am* Diana Maddox!” Carolyn Black planted her hands on her agent’s desk and stared at him like a chained panther defending a bloody meal. The meal in question was the hottest movie role on offer for an over-thirty actress since *The Hours*.

“I know you are, and so do all the fans,” Grey Parker tried to reassure his best client. Carolyn had always been goal oriented and ambitious, but she seemed almost desperate over the new Supernova Productions feature. He could understand her agitation; at forty-five, she was staring down the barrels. Most actresses her age were already playing Mom in television movies of the week.

“You’re my agent, and I pay you a lot of money,” she hissed, abandoning his desk to pace the luxurious office. “I want this role. I have to have it.”

“We don’t have a script yet,” Grey said in a soothing tone. “They’re not casting until—”

“Oh, please. They’re casting. Read the goddamned tabloids. Annelie Peterson is taking actresses to lunch. Sylvia Goodman was on E! News dropping hints.” She stopped in her tracks and spun to face him, a signature move from her small-screen days as soap goddess Devon Harper. “I’ve earned this, Grey. I’m the one who should bring Diana Maddox to the big screen. Make it happen.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing, my dear.” He masked an uncharacteristic lack of confidence. “Consider it done.”

CHAPTER ONE

Annelie Peterson sipped her champagne and gazed down at the crowd thronging the ballroom below.

“I think we’re a hit.” She smiled at the boyish-looking man next to her.

Gregory Horton was the CEO of one of her companies and a trusted friend.

“Three hundred and fifty guests, a thousand dollars per plate.” He rolled off the numbers with patent satisfaction. “And that’s not counting the auction later. We should see half of that again with those first editions and the paintings. Of course it helps that you’re the hostess—the woman everyone wants to meet.”

Annelie shot her employee a mock glare. Gregory had worked for her for seven years, ever since she came to Florida, and they shared an easygoing camaraderie as well as a smooth work relationship. In his early thirties, like herself, he looked more like a surfer than a seasoned executive. His unruly blond hair attracted the attention of both men and woman, as did his green eyes and broad smile.

“We should mingle,” he continued. “It’ll pay to shake some people’s hands before we sit down to dinner.”

Annelie sighed. The mingling was the tough part. She would never get used to the kind of meaningless exchanges and air-kissing that went on at charity galas like this one. But she had spent six months planning the event for the Nebula Circle, a philanthropic trust she had established several years ago. A little mingling wouldn’t kill her.

Pulling at the skirt of her ice blue Ungaro evening dress, she walked through the crowd, smiling faintly as she shook hands. She had met very few of these people personally, as she normally kept a low profile, but most of them seemed to know who she was—A. M.

GUN BROOKE

Peterson, the owner of Key Line Publishing Inc., the woman whose empire was growing so fast *Fortune* magazine had labeled her the next Ted Turner. Annelie wondered if she would ever get used to people regarding her with awe—and if she did, what that would say about the person she had become.

Certainly the large mirrors lining the ballroom walls confirmed that she looked the part. The softly flowing dress fit her like a glove, and a chignon covered with a white gold web of diamonds held back her long blond hair. Annelie disliked rings and never wore any, but a breathtaking diamond necklace drew attention to her plunging neckline, and a matching bracelet encircled her right wrist. She was taller than most women and some of the men there but kept her head high, a posture she had perfected along with the rest of her carefully constructed public image.

Annelie continued to work her way through the glamorously dressed crowd. Being used to men staring at her curvaceous body, she ignored their stares yet greeted each man politely. The envious looks from some of the women disappeared when they discovered she was just as friendly toward them.

When she finally reached the other end of the hallway and scanned the crowd for Gregory, she noticed him talking to a couple and recognized the woman standing to his left. Carolyn Black wore an elegant black dress decorated with a cascade of rhinestones stretching from her left shoulder down around her waist and onto the form-fitting skirt. Her auburn hair was intricately piled on top of her head, with thin tresses caressing her neck. The actress had an obvious, quite overwhelming, charisma, which clearly held all around her captive and made Annelie catch her breath as she approached.

Gregory performed the introductions, and Annelie shook hands with Carolyn and the man she was with, Jared Garrison. As they exchanged pleasantries, she wondered if the rumors about Carolyn and Jared were true. They didn't look like lovers, but Annelie wasn't sure what gave her that impression.

"We're delighted your audio version of the Diana Maddox books has become so successful, Ms. Black," she said, thinking how young the actress seemed. Carolyn's flawless skin, lightly dusted with freckles, looked satiny smooth. Her steady blue-gray eyes, able to portray any emotion required on stage or screen, swept Annelie up and down.

"Well, thank you. And please, call me Carolyn," she said in the low,

smoky voice that had convinced Annelie to hire her for the audiobooks. “Of course the role came very naturally to me. I think, in many ways, Diana and I are kindred spirits.”

Annelie smiled inwardly. The actress might as well have announced her interest in the film role on a foghorn. “Your voice was perfect,” she said. “I knew it would be after I saw you in *The Greenhouse* three years ago.”

Carolyn’s mouth stretched into a brilliant smile. “You handled the casting decision personally?”

“Of course. The Diana Maddox books are pivotal to my company.”

“And you’re planning to bring them to the screen now. How brave of you after the V. I. Warshawski fiasco.”

A warning shot? Either Carolyn really cared about the character or she wanted it to seem that way. “Well, I haven’t hired a moron to direct my film or hacks to write the screenplay,” Annelie said coolly. Was it her imagination, or was this actress actually interviewing *her*—assessing her competence to extend the Diana Maddox franchise onto the screen?

Carolyn’s expression was serenely self-possessed. “I’m sure, if you can attach the right cast, you’ll have the distributors eating from your hand.”

“Thanks.” Annelie was aware her voice held an edge of sarcasm. She wasn’t accustomed to having anyone imply she might lack the skills to pull off a project. Mildly irritated, she steered the conversation back to social pleasantries. “I’m so glad you could be here tonight. What are you doing in Florida, by the way? Are you filming here?”

“No, I’ve just closed a play in New York, and I need a break. So I’m reading a few scripts and spending some quality time with Jared.”

Apparently Jared Garrison had missed the change of topic. “Do you have anyone in mind for Maddox yet?” he asked Annelie, oblivious to his date’s unmistakable glare. “I hear there’s a lot of interest. Even Meryl Streep and Sally Field.”

Annelie had to hide a smile. She knew Jared professionally. The good-looking lawyer was a senior partner at a firm that did pro bono work for Nebula Circle clients. Her charity focused on children born with HIV and shelters for women, so they always needed volunteer legal help. She’d had no idea Jared was involved with Carolyn Black

GUN BROOKE

until she'd read some gossip recently. For a moment she pitied him. The actress had a reputation for chewing men up and spitting them out.

Annelie smirked faintly. "I don't see either Streep or Field as a potential Diana Maddox," she told him. "They're wonderful actresses but not the right age, to start with."

She could almost hear the wheels turning inside Carolyn's head, but the perfect face revealed nothing. Sweeping a quick assessing look around, she made an expansive gesture and projected her voice as only a Broadway star could, declaring, "Wonderful night, Annelie. I'm so glad I could come." She took Jared's arm. "Now I really mustn't keep you from your guests. Perhaps we'll chat later."

By some strange magic the crowd parted as she moved through it, people turning to gaze at her, a few even clapping. Annelie was astounded to see even the most sophisticated of her guests looking starstruck at a smile or nod from Carolyn Black. If the woman was trying to make a point, she'd succeeded. She was the consummate performer. A star.

But was she Diana Maddox? Annelie had her doubts.



"You look like the cat that ate the proverbial canary," Gregory remarked as he followed Annelie off the stage after the auction.

"I'm overwhelmed," Annelie said, checking her Palm Pilot. "Someone paid \$12,000 for those signed first editions of the Diana Maddox books."

Gregory grinned. "Yup, and that was none other than Diana Maddox herself, or should I say, Carolyn Black. She must want the part in the worst way."

"Gregory! Behave."

"Don't look now, but she's on her way over here. Don't make any promises you can't keep."

Annelie turned around and saw Carolyn approaching, this time without her date.

"Annelie." The throaty voice seemed to caress her name, making Annelie shiver. "I wanted to thank you for this evening. It looks like all your hard work paid off."

"I'm thrilled," Annelie said. "And everything will go directly to the children we're supporting. The hotel even donated the ballroom."

“That’s wonderful.”

“Your bid was extremely generous. It was very kind of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Carolyn wasn’t going to ask about the Diana Maddox role. Annelie admired the actress’s steely nerve. It wasn’t often she encountered a woman with as much strength of mind as she herself possessed. She could sense that strength in Carolyn and was drawn to it. “How long will you be in Florida?” she asked.

“I’m due back in New York in two weeks.”

“Are you staying in the city?”

“I’m at Jared’s condo on Bal Harbour. I was hoping to swim every day since that’s my favorite way to exercise. But the wind has been too strong.” Carolyn smiled with faint self-deprecation. “I’m so used to swimming pools that I find the large waves intimidating.”

Annelie reached into her small purse for a business card, an idea taking rapid shape in her mind. “Tell you what. I live near Jared, on Golden Beach. You’re more than welcome to come use my pool. I’ll leave word at the gate that you’re on my guest list.” A small, wry smile lifted her mouth. “Needless to say, that’s a very short list.”

Carolyn’s eyes widened, and Annelie could hear Gregory cough in surprise behind her.

“That’s very generous.” Carolyn said. “I don’t want to impose—”

“You’re not. I promise. Any day is fine. My housekeeper will let you in. She’s off on Sundays and Mondays, but I’m usually home till lunch then.”

Carolyn’s polite hesitance vanished. “So, would tomorrow be all right?”

Annelie smiled at the unabashed question. Being rather direct herself, she found Carolyn’s manner refreshing. “Sure, why don’t you come around eleven? We could have lunch afterward.”

“Are you sure it isn’t too much trouble?” Carolyn briefly touched Annelie’s arm. “I mean, after tonight and everything?”

“Quite sure.”

Gregory coughed again, but Annelie ignored him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” Carolyn looked delighted. “Good night.”

GUN BROOKE

As the actress vanished into the sea of departing guests, a soft male voice behind Annelie inquired, “What are you doing?”

“Running my business.”

Gregory seemed unimpressed. “You’re going to offer her the part?”

“No. I’m going to make it very attractive for her to agree to terminate the audiobook contract.”

Gregory frowned. “Why? The sales have been huge.”

“Once I have an actress playing Maddox on screen, we’ll need to rejacket all the print books and redo sound on the audio series for the Diana character. I want the same actress doing everything. It’s the only thing that makes sense, and our marketing people agree.”

Gregory grimaced. “You can’t seriously imagine Carolyn Black is going to take that lying down. She won’t terminate. She’ll sue.”

“We’ll see.” Annelie said. “I can be very persuasive.”

Gregory put his arm around her waist and gave her a quick squeeze. “Just be careful. Promise me that.”

She smiled at him over her shoulder. “I promise.”



“Did you remember to call Beth back?” Jared pulled out into the night traffic.

Carolyn groaned. “No, I forgot. I was running late but that’s no excuse. Did she say what’s up?”

Beth, her eleven-years-younger sister, was a nurse, far from Carolyn’s glamorous world. Married for six years, she and her husband, Joe, lived in D.C. with their four-year-old daughter, Pamela.

“No, just that she needed to talk to you about something. It didn’t sound like an emergency.”

Carolyn leaned back, resting her head. A familiar throbbing in her temples made her reach for her purse and pull out a nasal spray. If she disregarded the early symptoms, the throbbing would inevitably escalate into a full-blown migraine attack, incapacitating her for several days. She took her medicine, noticing Jared’s concerned glance in her direction.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Just a precaution.” Carolyn gave a muted sigh. She

needed to relax; she was tired after doing six performances a week for eleven months. If she wasn't careful she would end up with permanent bags under her eyes.

"Heard from your brother lately?"

"No, not in a while. He's into one of his creative spells, I think. If my sister-in-law didn't drag him to my shows, he'd never get around to watching any of my work."

"You go to every one of his exhibitions."

Carolyn chuckled at the implied criticism. "That's different. John is a genius. It's my duty to admire him, even if I think his sculptures look like deformed pieces of junk."

Jared shook his head. "You can try to sound sarcastic, but it's not working. I know you're proud of him."

Carolyn smiled. "Yes, I am."

She had been twelve years old when their mother died, hit by a car while crossing the street. John was six and baby Elisabeth just eleven months. Their father had lost his moorings when his beautiful, vibrant wife was killed, and Carolyn had soon found herself in her mother's role, taking care of her siblings.

Shawn Black had suffered a massive heart attack when Carolyn was twenty-one, and she'd dropped out of college to look after her teenaged brother and young sister. Life had been a struggle, but she had never regretted making that choice. Even now, she was proud that she'd been able to raise John and Beth without help from anyone.

Jared pulled into the parking lot beneath the large apartment building where his ocean-view condo was. After they took the elevator up to the fifth floor, Carolyn leaned against the wall and closed her eyes briefly as he unlocked the door.

"Some evening," she mused. "I don't think I've been in a room with so many people dressed fit to kill since the Golden Globes."

"Half of Palm Beach was there." Jared sounded admiring. "Annelie knows how to raise money, and she's passionate about those kids. I heard she even volunteers at the hospital when one of them is admitted."

"Remarkable," Carolyn said. "I'm amazed she invited me to use her pool while I'm here."

Jared stopped on his way to the kitchen and faced her. "I've got to

GUN BROOKE

admit I'm curious about two things—her motives for inviting you, and yours, for going.”

“To swim, of course,” Carolyn said lightly. She could see Jared wasn't buying. He knew her too well to accept the explanation at face value.

“Carolyn,” he chided. “Since when did you share your precious private life, unless there's a payoff?”

“I spend hours with you, don't I?”

He laughed. “We both know it's very convenient for you to have our names linked in the media. Like I said, there's always a payoff.”

Carolyn produced a mock-innocent shrug. “If it helps Annelie Peterson see I'm the only sane choice for Diana Maddox, I'll be thrilled to swim in her pool as often as it takes.”

“Are you sure you really want to do this?” Jared looked uneasy.

“What do you mean?”

“It's a well-known secret that Annelie Peterson is a lesbian.”

Carolyn blinked. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as I can be without actually asking her to her face.”

Carolyn pictured the tall blonde in her blue dress, moving with perfect grace from one person to another in the marble hallway of the hotel, shaking hands, smiling. Her jewelry had sparkled but hadn't managed to draw attention from her ice blue eyes or her melodious alto voice. Annelie was not just attractive, she was stunningly beautiful. And gay?

“Carolyn?”

She raised an eyebrow. “If you're waiting for me to be shocked, don't hold your breath. I work in show business, for heaven's sake!”

Jared gave her a pointed stare. “Actually, I was waiting for the announcement about how you plan on using the information to your advantage.”

A flash of anger burned through the effect of her medication. Feeling her left temple begin to throb again, Carolyn glared at him. “Thanks a lot. You make me sound like a callous bitch.”

“You're nothing of the kind. You're a wonderful bitch.”

“You horrible man,” she muttered. “You make me so angry sometimes.” She rubbed her temple.

“Only because I see you the way you are, and not the way you

want to be seen. You're very good at playing *Carolyn Black*. It's the role of a lifetime, if you ask me."

He was an unbearable tease. Still, she felt herself relax as he put his arm around her shoulders and ushered her into the kitchen. "Let me make it up to you with a café latte," he said. "You're the only person I know who sleeps better after a healthy dose of caffeine."

Carolyn perched on a stool next to the kitchen counter, watching as he ground aromatic coffee beans. "Tell me something. What did you mean when you said you were curious about *her* motives for inviting me?" she asked.

Jared placed a cup in the espresso machine. "Does she want to get to know you before she decides whether to offer you the role? Or is there some other agenda?"

"Such as?"

"You'll have to ask her. But if I were a lesbian, I'd probably enjoy having you swim in my pool." He handed Carolyn her latte.

She sipped it with a show of nonchalance. Could Annelie Peterson be attracted to her? If so, she wouldn't be the first lesbian Carolyn had had to politely discourage. On the other hand, this could be exactly the opportunity she needed. If there was one thing show business had taught her, it was how to convert lust into an acting contract.



Annelie stepped out of her blue dress and hung it carefully before taking off her lace underwear and putting on a white terry-cloth robe. She walked outside and switched on the jets in the Jacuzzi, dropped the robe on a garden chair, and climbed into the hot water. Screened from view by palm trees and high walls, her hot tub was located directly off the patio near the swimming pool. Annelie loved the sense of being in her own little world, naked outdoors. With a contented sigh, she leaned back and gazed up at the starry sky, amazed at how close it always seemed. This was one of the things she loved about Florida—in New York, you could barely make out the constellations because of the bright city lights.

Shifting in the water, she allowed the jets to reach every part of her body, teasing and caressing her flesh, rippling along the entire length of her spine like a thousand tiny kisses. Steady blue-gray eyes and auburn

GUN BROOKE

hair invaded her thoughts, and she closed her eyes, not surprised that Carolyn Black had lodged in her mind. The actress was more than a famous beauty; she was devastatingly sexy. Something about the way she moved, and the way she looked at Annelie, unsettled her in a way she was not used to. Face-to-face, Carolyn had made her feel like she was the only person in the room, nailing her with those amazing eyes, pulling her in and claiming all of her attention. It had taken an effort for Annelie to remain calm, at least outwardly, and just thinking about the encounter still made her heart hammer in her chest.

She wondered if Carolyn knew she was a lesbian. Annelie realized people automatically assumed she was gay just because she published an extensive range of widely successful lesbian books and never used token males as escorts to any of the functions she attended. It was not something she attempted to keep a secret, but she was not officially out either. Reserved by nature, she neither confirmed nor denied her sexual preference to anyone. It simply wasn't anybody else's business.

Annelie hadn't reached her present position in society overnight. Winning one of the largest ever multistate Powerball lotteries nine years ago had altered her life forever. After surviving the media circus with its interviews, followed by the obligatory letters and phone calls from begging strangers and acquaintances, she'd decided to drop below the radar.

Assuming her Swedish mother's maiden name, she'd moved to New York, living in Manhattan for two years while she attended Barnard College's Comparative Literature Program. During that period, she'd learned how to move among the rich and famous as if she belonged, taking lessons in deportment and public speaking. A regime of beauty treatments, massages, and regular visits to the gym changed her looks and movements.

The girl who had once been Annie Clint, bank-office clerk during the day to help pay for her literature studies in the evenings, became Annelie Peterson, businesswoman. She started a call center named Quasar Inc. at the beginning of the outsourcing boom. The business rapidly become so successful she was able to sell it at a handsome profit and look for a new business opportunity, something less crazy. Annelie never spoke about her past and had confided the truth to only three of her best friends, knowing they would never betray her. She'd

learned a few difficult lessons early on, especially that people treated her differently because of her money and few had genuine motives.

As she arched her back, she tilted her head into the Jacuzzi, allowing the jets to massage her scalp. Her naked breasts rose above the surface, her nipples pebbling in the humid night air. Shivering slightly, she sank once more into the seductive warmth of the water and released a satisfied moan. She had never regretted her decision to move on. Much as she'd loved Manhattan, she had longed for a slower pace. Having visited Florida several times and fallen in love with the cosmopolitan way of life in Miami, she decided to make it her home.

She bought a medium-sized publishing company, Key Line Publishing, and promptly branched out from nonfiction and children's books to publish gay and lesbian literature as well as mainstream novels. Her strategy paid off, soon making Key Line a thorn in the sides of the industry heavyweights.

Annelie returned to her condo in New York periodically, enjoying catching up with her friends. She kept a close check on the business endeavors she was still involved with and also worked with several charity organizations. Most of her fortune remained tied up in a wide stock and bond portfolio, and under the auspices of her savvy investment manager, her net worth had almost quadrupled since her lottery win.

Annelie did not flaunt her wealth the way many of Miami's newly rich did. Her financial status made her the target of opportunists, and showing up on *Forbes's* list of businesswomen of influence was no help. It was always a struggle to balance her need for privacy, which sometimes led to inadvertent solitude, with her need to do business effectively and provide active support to the charity organizations she had endowed.

Turning in the water, she pushed herself up over the side of the Jacuzzi, then into the swimming pool, needing to cool down. The hot water in the whirlpool was soothing, but it also made her lethargic if she wasn't careful. She swam over to the other side of the pool, completely submerged, relishing the water's silken chill against her flesh. When she reached the ladder, she climbed up and sat on the ledge, wringing out her hair as the balmy night once more surrounded her.

Droplets ran down her arms, glistening against her pale skin as they followed the rounded curve of her full breasts. They stopped at the puckered skin of her nipples, and the cooling effect of the water made

GUN BROOKE

her shiver. Annelie smoothed the rivulets away, running her hands over her body. The touch was oddly soothing, yet had a bittersweet tinge to it. She rarely felt lonely, but tonight she was all too aware of what was missing in her very full life. Suddenly Carolyn's eyes were there again, looking at her, her head slightly tilted as if Annelie were the most interesting, worthwhile person in the world. Not quite sure why the image of the actress was etched on her retina, she envisioned the smaller woman dressed in that elegant black evening gown, the rhinestones accentuating her figure. In person, she was everything Annelie had imagined, maybe even more.

Disregarding a sudden twinge deep inside, Annelie got to her feet and padded over to the Jacuzzi to turn off the jets. A set of patio doors opened from her bedroom, and she picked up her robe and went through these, heading for her bathroom. After a quick shower, she dried her hair and brushed her teeth before sliding into bed. For a moment, she lay completely still, enjoying the feeling of the crisp linen against her naked body; then she set her alarm for six thirty. She had a lot of work to do before Carolyn arrived to use the pool and she wanted to be clearheaded for this visit, so she could not afford to oversleep.

She hugged a pillow tight as she curled up beneath the covers, letting her mind wander to Carolyn Black once more. The actress had done a lot for Key Line, playing the role of criminal investigator Diana Maddox in their hugely successful audiobook series. It was hardly surprising that she saw herself as the logical choice for the lead in the movie.

Annelie's stomach clenched at the thought of having to disappoint her. Carolyn obviously wanted the role, and she had the necessary acting credentials. She'd won a Tony in her younger years and various film awards later in her career. But her impressive record cut little ice with Annelie's potential distributors. They'd already decided a younger star would have more box office appeal and had their sights set on Sylvia Goodman, an up-and-coming actress who'd attracted attention for her supporting roles in several major films. The fact that Diana Maddox was forty plus in the novels made no difference. In screen adaptations, everything was up for grabs.

Fastening her grip around her pillow, Annelie sighed. She was trying to keep an open mind about Goodman. The tall, fair-haired beauty had been pronounced the new Sally Field by some gushy columnists,

and she certainly had the right look for Maddox when she wore a dark wig as she had in several recent supporting roles. Still, in Annelie's mind she lacked certain key sensibilities Carolyn Black possessed in abundance. Carolyn brought maturity and dimension to her roles that few younger actresses could equal. But what did that really buy these days? Audiences had been trained to accept shallow performances as long as a movie was exciting and delivered some titillating sex scenes.

Annelie wanted to make more than one Maddox film, so everything depended on how the critics and the audience received the first movie. As far as she could see, sacrificing Carolyn for Sylvia came down to simple pragmatism. Annelie didn't have the luxury of indulging her own personal preferences; too much was at stake.

