

SECRET AGENDA

PROLOGUE

Moonless nights are made for mischief, especially the sexual romps of Golden Guys like Tony Portman. They are also made for mayhem, and retribution. But that never occurred to Tony as he signaled his bodyguard to stay behind in the cocktail lounge. All evening he had been burning to screw Ilsa Grant, and at about eleven o'clock, when she slipped away from the party through the French doors, he followed her out onto the beach. Pursuing her at a discreet distance, he looked up at the stars and smiled, his groin stirring in anticipation. Slowly, he closed the gap between them. He pitied guys who needed Viagra, and couldn't imagine a time when he himself ever would.

Alone in the night, holding her Chanel sandals by their slender straps, Ilsa looked like merely another broad for the taking and not an invulnerable sex goddess, which was the image currently being cultivated by her PR guy, the same bald little genius who advised Middle Eastern and African strongmen, the President, corporation CEOs, and messiahs from the Orient and the Bible Belt. The wind was blowing in from the ocean, and as Tony began to speak, it was an effort for him to shape his usual suave tones.

"Hi, Ilsa. I see that we both had the same idea."

Montauk was reputed to be safer than Manhattan, but men, even billionaires, are the same everywhere, and she looked startled as she whirled around. It took a moment for her to get her act together, and she began with the ravishing smile from the ads for her latest film, *Shades of Passion*.

"Hello again, Tony." She looked down at her toes. "You've caught me without my shoes."

He would rather have caught her without much more of her attire. "I hope I didn't frighten you," he said, and grinned as he did in the TV commercial for his luxury hotel and spa in the Virgin Islands.

"Of course not. I recognized your voice right away." She added, "It's so distinctive, you know."

He knew that very well, because early in his career he had studied with a voice teacher, aspiring to a repertoire of styles that would, above all, enable him to charm beautiful women and intimidate stubborn businessmen. As for those men and women who were amenable only to more forceful methods, he felt no compunctions about using those same methods in both work and play. At forty-six, with a backbreaking work schedule, he had no time to waste on other people's games, and he had learned from studying the careers of several recent Presidents that with the right PR and spin doctors, you can wallow in shit and come out smelling like an American Beauty rose.

Still in his vocal mode with Ilsa, he turned and gazed across the mounds of sand at his latest achievement, Portman Condos in the Clouds, which rose far higher and wider than the neighboring hotels and condos and would soon make the Hamptons passé as a playground for the rich and famous. More than the usual number of naysayers had predicted that it couldn't be done here in Montauk, with its vested interests and its maze of zoning and conservation laws. But once again he had summoned his lawyers, politicians and, most helpful of all, a few of his old

fraternity buddies, who, after twenty-five years, were still adhering to their slogan borrowed from the Three Musketeers, "One for all and all for one." The name of the game was hardball, and in tune with the business and political climate of the new millennium, the Golden Guys, as they had been known in college and ever since, had added some embellishments that would never have occurred to D'Artagnan and his simpleminded buddies.

"Doesn't it look just great from here?" he said, employing the boyish enthusiasm that his pollsters had identified as his most positive trait.

"I'm sure your tower looks great from anywhere."

As if paying homage to Freud, his penis stirred at her use of the suggestive word *tower* rather than the more neutral *building*. With his thick black hair and custom-tailored tux he had an image that oozed potency. He was as attractive a guy as she was a woman, and quite probably their libidos were on the same wavelength. Anyhow, *People* magazine was always selecting him as among the ten sexiest men in the world. This was going to be easier than he had thought, and for a fleeting moment, he regretted that their coupling would lack that added zest of having to overcome an initial reluctance.

"I started planning this complex at the dawn of the new millennium, and it took five years to see it through to completion," he informed her. "Of course, it would have taken any other builder fifteen."

She nodded as if she were a subscriber to *Architectural Digest* and had read all about him in the latest issue. "I certainly admire your energy and drive."

"And I yours, Ilsa. Needless to say, I've followed your career."

"Thank you, but it's nothing to compare with yours."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he lied.

"Really, a career in show biz is as volatile and shifting as these mounds of sand."

As he turned round to view the sand she was nudging with her pedicured toes, he saw also the marble pavilion that he had contributed to the community in a trade for a few zoning variances, and he began to entertain the idea of having her *al fresco* instead of in one or another of the model apartments in Portman Condos. From a one-room studio to a terraced penthouse, each unit was currently supplied with a bottle of Dom Pérignon in the color-coordinated GE fridge, so that his sales reps could keep clients in a happy haze until the sale was finalized.

Ilsa was saying, "An actress is only as good as her last few performances, and there's always someone younger and prettier who's dying to push you out into the cold. I firmly believe that all actresses under twenty-five should be drowned in a vat of Diet Coke."

Tony looked astounded by her remark. And then, not at all lasciviously, but like a connoisseur examining a Renoir masterpiece at Sotheby's, he let his eyes pass in approval over her short blond hair, and blue eyes and full lips, and graceful throat and shoulders, and her full bosom and rounded hips. She wore a sleeveless black evening dress of a luxurious simplicity, and amid the shimmering satin, lace peepholes invited the eye to linger and lust. He ended his pleasure cruise at the string of pearls round her neck, as if this classic ornament certified her true and eternal beauty.

Now that he had fed her the carrot, it was time for the stick, and he sounded more businesslike as he brushed a mosquito from his sleeve and said, "To be candid, Ilsa, it was not my own idea to engage a spokesperson for the residential division of Portman Enterprises."

"Oh...?"

"But once the idea was proposed by my task force, I quickly saw its merit, and since we were looking for a unique image of beauty, charm, glamour, and intelligence, the choice was

obvious."

"What can I say but thank you? I'll certainly try my best to come through for your firm."

"I'm sure you will, Ilsa. And with flying colors." With a hand to his chin, he nodded as if he'd just made one of the ten big decisions of his life. "As a matter of fact, your contribution has such potential that I think it would be a good idea if you reported to me directly instead of to Bill Strausse."

"Are you sure Bill won't mind?" She turned and looked back at the towers. "At the party, I got the impression from him that he was my contact."

"I'm sure that Bill won't mind a bit. Besides, his wife is a very jealous woman, so we'll be doing him a big favor and keeping his marriage intact." He smiled as if he had just saved Bill and Dora from the exorbitant fees of divorce lawyers.

Like a proper lady, she looked perplexed by this allusion to her capacity for wrecking a marriage. She murmured finally, "You know best, Tony."

"Yes, I like to think I do. Trust me, Ilsa."

"Of course I trust you."

Suddenly he took a mighty swipe at a mosquito. "Damn these bugs. I think we've stopped in the middle of their convention center."

"It may be my perfume."

He stepped closer to her, then sniffed and smiled. "I don't blame the critters for wanting to hang around you. But since they're unlikely to go, may I suggest that we move on from here?"

When he took her hand, she allowed it to be held, but she offered no favorable signal, no pressure that she would welcome a more intimate contact. He felt a surge of annoyance, because, if nothing else, he was her employer, and employers were entitled to certain perks. Damn it, it was not only the American way but also the way of the whole world. Whenever he heard of the recreational screwing that went on in Thailand, he had an urge to transfer his corporate headquarters to that center of ancient wisdom and cheap labor and tax breaks, and he would probably do so one of these days. He envied his buddies in manufacturing and the service industries who were able to outsource so much of their payroll. But you couldn't erect buildings via phone calls to India and China. Of course, he did the next best thing by hiring contractors who kept costs down by employing undocumented day laborers.

"You're right," Ilsa said. "I should be getting back."

"Not yet." His grip tightened on her hand. "Those pests who are doing the documentary about me and my buddies are getting on my nerves. Help me hide from them a little longer. Come, I'll show you my pavilion. It's my 'public space' contribution to the community, but I intend to get a lot more than a tax break out of it."

"I can see it from here."

"But not well enough. I built it with you in mind—*for* you. That's where we're going to tape most of your commercials. You have to see it up close. Pity there's no moon tonight. No doubt Diana knew you'd be out here and couldn't face the competition. The stars are out in force, though, just to light your way."

Unlike every other woman who had heard a variant of this tarnished line, she did not smile and shed a few inhibitions. He sensed her reluctance to accompany him, but he pretended he was unaware of the stiffness in her hand and arm as he tugged her along behind him.

A minute later, when they had climbed the steps and were standing between two of the graceful Ionic columns, he said with pride, "If I say so myself, even the Greeks couldn't have built a temple more worthy of Aphrodite, their goddess of love and beauty." He sat her down on

one of the long stone benches, and then waved his other hand in an all-encompassing gesture. "And what more fitting setting for you, our American goddess of love and beauty?"

He had her now. He saw the glow of vanity in her eyes, the swell of pride in those tempting, voluptuous breasts. He sat down beside her, moved closer, put his arm around her. He brought his face nearer, and his voice, a soft whisper, blew gently in her ear. "After a few commercials, this will be known not as Portman's pavilion but as the temple of Ilsa Grant."

That clinched it. Slowly she turned her face to his, ready to accept the homage of this supplicant.

Her lips were soft and satiny, a delicious appetizer to the feast to come, and as he pulled her closer, her breasts sent his blood pounding to his ears in a crescendo that drowned out the thunder of the ocean's waves. Closer. He had to get closer. And be inside her.

But as caress turned to crush and his tongue and hands began to reach for her intimate places, she stiffened in his arms. This was not the humble offering of a worshiper. This was a classic Hollywood rape, whether upon a producer's couch or a bankroller's patio.

"Tony, stop it!" she said, having managed at last to wrench her lips from his. "That's enough! I'm a married woman and my husband is your guest."

But he already had her back pressed down against the bench. He grabbed her hair, so hard that she thought her scalp would come off. "Who the hell are you telling to stop?" he growled, and his lips crashed down on hers again as he pulled her legs up beneath him with his other hand. "You want this as much as I do," he said, his lips working their way down to her breasts.

"The hell I do! Let me go! I'll scream!"

"Scream away. Not even the fish can hear you above the roar of the waves." Desire was a white-hot pain shooting from his groin to his chest, a pain made more delicious and exquisite by Ilsa's struggles. He reached beneath her dress. What a relief that, unlike in some of his previous encounters, she wasn't wearing those goddamn pantyhose. He grabbed her thong and started to tear it off.

"No!" she cried, trying to wriggle away, trying to knee him. "No!"

But he was more than twice her weight and his body was like iron. Her cries were lost in the hot cavern of his mouth, and her struggles only served to make his harsh, rhythmic thrusts all the more pleasurable.

"You son of a bitch!" She beat at his chest, but he grabbed her fists and pinned them down.

"Save the dramatics for the movie screen. You're no blushing virgin. You didn't give me anything you haven't given to dozens of other guys."

"You're right. I didn't *give* you anything. You took it, you bastard."

"Watch your language, honey. Remember that you're working for a blue-chip corporation with entrée to the White House and both parties in Congress."

"Not for long." She began to stuff her breasts back into her gown.

"We have a contract."

"I'll get out of it. That's what lawyers are for."

"Try it and you'll never work again except at McDonald's. All I have to do is pick up a phone and exert a little pressure in the right places. It wouldn't be the first time."

The hatred in her eyes blazed brighter. "You think you're so big, so all-powerful. But maybe this time you've met your match. You seem to have forgotten who my husband is."

A year ago, in a three-ring circus of a wedding, Ilsa had plighted her troth (the third troth for her, the first for him) to Vittorio Capperelli, the former Olympic wrestler from Italy. The

muscle-bound Capperelli now made his living from public appearances, cameo roles in the movies, and as a spokesman for vitamins, health foods, and a line of macho sportswear.

Portman laughed. "I haven't forgotten that overgrown macaroni-brain. If you tell him about what happened here, and I doubt that you will, because in his macho Italian way he's sure to blame you and not me, I suggest you keep in mind that the same goes for him as for you. If he ever dares to raise one muscle-bound finger against me, I'll be on the phone with my fraternity brother whose conglomerate owns both HeartHealth Foods and Chuck Chandler Sportswear. If he wants to continue to afford his spaghetti and meatballs, he'd better keep his peace."

"You bastard."

"You're repeating yourself. Your conversation has become as boring as sex with you turned out to be." He took out his Speert pocket comb from Switzerland and handed it to her. "Now get back to the party and do your duty as spokeswoman for Portman Condos in the Clouds."

She hesitated, but pride and big bucks won out, and she snatched the comb and ran it through her hair. After thrusting it back at him, she stood up, straightened her dress, and picked up her shoes. At the steps of the pavilion, she paused and turned to glare at him, still sitting relaxed and unconcerned on the bench.

"I'll get even with you one day."

"I doubt it. You have more to fear if word got out about our little rendezvous. I can either deny it and say you're lying in order to get publicity to save your career from going in the toilet. Or, a simple businessman who is unacquainted with women and their wiles, I can tell the world that you seduced me—and turned out to be a lousy lay. Either way, you lose big."

She paled and started down the steps.

"Also," he called after her, "I'd tell the world, starting with Page Six of the *Post*, that your tits are much smaller than they appear on the screen. Who's your stand-in for nudie scenes? Obviously, it will be great publicity for her."

Ilsa took the last two steps at a run.

Tony reached into his pocket for a Marlboro, the cigarette of real men, and regretting that he didn't have access at the moment to one of the horses at his Duchess County estate, he sat back for a leisurely smoke. When he tried to blow one of his perfect and exquisite smoke rings, the wind blew the smoke back in his face.

He listened to the crash of the waves and luxuriated in his power. Like the ocean, he was an irresistible force. Nothing could stand in the way of what he wanted. Too often, there was no challenge; sometimes he didn't even have to finish articulating what he wanted before it was handed to him on a silver platter. How delicious it was to be a real man and take it by force, as he had just done with that impertinent and unappreciative bitch, Ilsa Grant. He looked forward to exercising his dynamism on the political scene in a couple of years, when his old school buddy Lyle Wayne became President and would appoint him to the Cabinet. Or maybe not. It wouldn't make any difference. What mattered was that he and his pals would be where they wanted to be, running things, the way they had been planning it for years. It would probably be better for most of them not to be too visible. They would have more control that way.

His cigarette finished, he sighed and rose to his feet. It was time he returned to stroking his guests. There was almost as much money and power at Portman Condos in the Clouds tonight as at a Washington banquet sponsored by the American Pharmaceutical Association. It was the cream of Wall Street and society, which included, of course, most of his fraternity brothers. He laughed to himself. Too bad that he couldn't, as in the old days, take the Golden

Guys aside and tell them that he had just fucked Ilsa Grant. But now was not the time. It would make a good story, though. Maybe he would save it for their anniversary party in a few weeks. Yes, that would be a good time to share the experience. Just as he had a few minutes ago, they were bound to get a big bang out of it.

He was almost at the steps, and still chuckling at the pun, when he became aware that someone had silently entered the pavilion from the back or side and was now creeping up behind him. He froze, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Should he make a run for it, or turn and confront the intruder? The son of a bitch would probably run for his life when he saw who his intended victim was.

But in the split second it took him to consider his options, the options disappeared. A black-clad arm clamped over his neck from behind and started squeezing the air from his lungs. And from the corner of his eye, Tony glimpsed something sharp and shiny being held against the hollow of his throat. It pricked him, and he felt a warm trickle. The body pressed up behind his was tall, and the arm felt as strong as iron. He could feel hot, warm breath in his ear, and the fact that the breathing was smooth and controlled made his situation seem all the more ominous.

Never had he felt so alone. Never had he felt so helpless. Never had he felt so afraid. He tried to struggle, but the grip only tightened. The knife pricked deeper.

"Do you know who I am?" he screamed under his breath.

"Tell me." It was a whisper, and he felt the words in his ear.

"I'm Tony Portman."

"Too bad, Tony."

"Take my wallet, my Piguet," he managed to gasp out with the little breath he had left. "Who are you? One of Mario's guys? I explained to him about the carting contract. If he's not happy, I'll try to do better. I *will* do better! What the hell—it's only money. And I'll also cut him in on my next project. Just don't kill me. Please!"

"I'm not going to kill you." The whisper of that controlled breath near his ear turned even more menacing. "But when you wake up, you're going to wish to God that I had. Sweet dreams, lover boy."

The pressure tightened around his neck. Then, as he vowed to hunt down this maniac and exact the cruelest revenge that the world had ever known, everything went black.