

“Mirrors, Ballam? I would never have called you vain.”

Pitched low, the mild comment was still enough to break his intense concentration. Relaxing his arms, Jack Ballam completed a slow pirouette and stopped. His boss was standing in the doorway, a red folder tucked under his right arm.

“I’m not.” He pointed at the wall in question. “Those belong to forty little girls.” Irritated by the sudden appearance of the only authority figure he acknowledged, he waited until the man moved into the hall.

“Little girls? That’s worse than vanity any day.”

“And I’m not into paedophilia, either,” he stated, knowing his free time had ended. “This hall belongs to a dancing teacher I know. I use it when she’s at her day job. It’s private.”

“And rent free, no doubt.”

“And rent free,” he agreed wryly. “So what? You didn’t come here to check on my exercise arrangements.”

He walked to the long barre in front of the wall of mirrors to pick up his towel, oblivious to the reflection of a tall, wide-shouldered man in his thirties, wearing a sweaty gi. The jibe of vanity meant nothing; he was comfortable with his appearance. Wiping his face and neck, he dropped the towel and folded his arms.

“This is one of my days off,” he complained, “and I was enjoying it.”

“I know.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“This.” When Ballam didn’t move, his employer walked slowly across the polished boards and held out the folder. “Take it. I’m not in the mood for games.”

He took it and thumbed through the photographs slowly, raising his eyebrows at the various poses and distinctive features of a male model. Very pretty, tasteful, nothing too extreme, he thought. Sultry dark eyes stared back at him, the provocative expression highlighted by the loosely held cigarette, gold chain and down-covered chest beneath it.

He closed the folder, commenting, “Very sexy, if you like the type.” Aware that his reactions counted heavily, he didn’t hold back his opinion. “He’d keep someone nice and warm on a cold night. Why does AFIS want him?”

“We don’t want him. We want his lover.”

The pointed exchange of pronouns and the slight exaggeration of an Irish brogue emphasised the importance of the case. Ballam tensed imperceptibly. There was an overlay of distaste in the Director’s voice which indicated what was to come was not as politically correct as the Irishman would like.

Recruited from Interpol in 1993, with a brilliant record of success in counter-intelligence, Stephen O’Brien was a short, thin Dublin expatriate. After the publicly disastrous episodes of the late seventies and eighties that made Australia’s major spy network a laughing stock among the world’s intelligence communities and exposed its operatives as inept, poorly trained idiots, the man had single-handedly founded and run the Australian Federal Intelligence Service.

This was an organisation virtually unknown to the press and rarely mentioned anywhere, but it set the standard for everyone involved in national security work in South East Asia. Under O’Brien’s leadership, its list of successes was long and impressive. The epitome of a faceless public servant, the Irishman went unnoticed in the corridors of Federal Parliament, but he had immediate access to the Prime Minister and his actions were never questioned.

Ballam had worked for him for three years and he knew the man was not one to waste

time or words so he asked simply, "Why?"

"His lover was Gary Hale."

The five words were enough. Ballam knew the name.

An American citizen, Hale was responsible for more than twenty political assassinations in the last eight years. And that was a conservative estimate; the actual number was probably double the known figure. Many of the murders had not made headlines in the world news because the victims were minor political figures, diplomatic staff and business men, and the reasons for the slayings were buried in the local politics of the countries where they occurred. Proving Hale's guilt was another matter; the assassin was very clever, avoiding capture and never leaving any proof of his actions.

O'Brien lifted a single photograph from the red 'Restricted' file. "This is the man you will stop."

Certainty, thought Ballam, aware of his superior's determination and ruthlessness. There's nothing like it, especially when it comes from O'Brien's mind.

Taking the photograph he scanned the image, realising O'Brien must have found a way to catch the killer because judgement had been passed on him in a single sentence, uttered in a quiet tone tempered in steel.

The man in the picture was handsome without any visible sign of cruelty or evil. A perfect murderer's face, open and attractive, a face others would instinctively trust until their last moment of fatal betrayal.

"How and when do I kill him?"

"You will not kill him," O'Brien ordered. "You will carry out an operation which will enable us to capture him and try him according to due process. AFIS is not in the same business he is. Is that understood?" he asked implacably.

"Yes, but if he shoots at me, am I allowed to shoot back?"

His attempt at humour was ignored. "Only in extreme circumstances. Now, as you know, Hale is American but has based himself in Sydney for the last four years. He owns a fashion house and related businesses which means he travels frequently, using his cover to advantage."

"In other words, a wealthy jet setter, on the fashion circuit, going from one season's shows to another."

"Precisely. You seem to know something of the fashion world, Ballam, although you don't seem the type." O'Brien delivered an indirect rebuke for the interruption and continued, "Last year, Hale quarrelled with his partner and went off to New York. He hasn't been back."

Yet, Ballam added mentally, patiently waiting for the bottom line. His boss was leading up to something tricky and he was making uncharacteristically heavy weather of the process.

"In three month's time we have a series of delicate government negotiations taking place in various locations here and in Melbourne, culminating in the CHOGOM conference in Canberra. Given the present situations in Bougainville, Malaysia and Fiji, there are a number of people at risk. For some of the delegates, the possibility of political assassination is very high."

"A bloody foregone conclusion," Ballam interjected.

O'Brien nodded. "We have received information in the last forty-eight hours which points to Hale having a contract to kill at least one of our visitors. We will stop him before he has a chance to accomplish his task."

"But how will you get a clear shot at him? He's smart, too smart."

Enjoying the chance to play devil's advocate, Ballam allowed a small grin to surface. "He leaves no proof and at least five other agencies, including the CIA, have missed him on more than one occasion."

O'Brien pointed to the folder. "Hale has a weak spot. That man is it. He is the partner Hale left last year. Despite numerous one night stands and short involvements with other men, Hale always returned to him while they were together. Gossip and rumours in the fashion industry say he was obsessed and people who know him are betting he will resume the relationship when he comes back to Sydney."

"No way," Ballam countered. He stepped back, turning to rest his hip on the barre. "Like I said, Hale's too smart to have a weak spot as simple as that."

"Nevertheless, he has, and it's confirmed that he is returning. This year, Fashion Week in Sydney coincides with the opening of the political negotiations." O'Brien loathed being queried and he glared at Ballam for contradicting. "Hale sent his firm the date of his arrival, a few days before the start of Fashion Week."

"So he's covered."

"Yes, and I have reason to believe he instigated the split with his lover to provide a reason for his trip to New York. A Lebanese Embassy secretary was killed there two months ago. The CIA investigated the case but they couldn't find a link to Hale."

"Wonder why? With all that good old American know-how and firepower at their finger tips ..." Ballam allowed the cynicism to tail off, well aware of his boss's opinions of certain agencies in the same line of business.

Ballam shook his head. "Do you honestly think a killer of his calibre will come back here? He's no fool, and he's stayed ahead of everyone for so long. What chance do we have of getting him?"

"A good chance, now. As I said, everyone has a weakness." The slight smile on O'Brien's face owed nothing to pleasure. It was the smile of an implacable enemy bent on justice and retribution. "Hale has two. He likes to kill and leave everyone wondering how he always succeeds. The other is his fixation on this man." He pointed again to the photographs in the folder. "His name is Tane Caton."

Ballam flipped the top photo over. The print beneath was a different pose. The model wore tight moleskins that drew attention to the prominent bulge of his groin. The army issue khaki shirt was open to the waist, pulled aside by long fingers splayed on one hip. The artful pose and fierce expression were eye-catching and the rifle supported by the man's other arm and hip completed the macho effect.

Grinning cynically, Ballam murmured, "What's he supposed to be? Tough?"

"He isn't," the Irishman stated, "but the reports we have on him say he's talented and he's been successful since Hale left."

I can see why, Ballam thought. He'd be raped at least six times on Mardi Gras night, and if the leather boys got hold of him, he'd be the star attraction.

He rolled his shoulders to ease their tightening. O'Brien's arrival had not allowed him to warm down. "Like I said, very pretty."

"Keep the file," O'Brien ordered. "You'll need the information in it."

Knowing he was about to find out his role in the operation, Ballam retrieved the photos. "Will I?" he goaded smoothly. "How do you propose I make use of it? How are you going to use Hale's obsession against him, if it still exists, sir?"

The use of the title was deliberate; he rarely used the formality and it had the desired effect. Keeping his own expression neutral he watched his employer's face harden.

"Don't play games with me." The command was harsh. "I haven't time for any

antics.”

“Yes ...” the hesitation was just enough to hint at another goad, before he staged a strategic retreat, “Sorry.”

“You aren’t, but that’s not important. Your job is to seduce Caton, gain his confidence and use him to get to Hale.” The bottom line of Ballam’s assignment was delivered without a change of inflection. “You have three months, so there is no need to go about it like a bull in a china shop. When you’ve read the file, you’ll know why this man will need careful handling. So you will entice him into a sexual relationship and you will make certain he trusts you before Hale returns.”

“You seem very sure I’ll be able to do that.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? Look in the mirror. As far as I can see you have all the right attributes,” O’Brien said calmly.

“Thanks.” He slid off the wooden rail and turned obediently. The ceiling-high glass and neon lighting highlighted the strong lines of his face and body. Thick black hair with a natural wave, grey eyes framed by dark lashes, straight eyebrows and well-shaped features gave him what many had told him was a handsome face. Six feet two in height, his wide shoulders were balanced by his deep chest and long legs. Years of martial arts had defined his muscles and given him an economy of movement which concealed his unusual strength. The only signs of his expertise in single combat were the ridges of thickened skin along the sides of his hands.

Silently admitting he did have all the right attributes, he stared at his reflection. In the past he been told by one of his bed-partners that his strength was a turn-on and the control and surety instilled by the disciplines he practised were highly attractive. He had no illusions about his sexual preferences but his face and body, reinforced by studied charm, lured male and female, a definite advantage in his work.

“So I take him to bed with all with the blessings of the Anti-Discrimination Act,” he added cuttingly, referring to the legislation which protected him from dismissal in any government department. “I wonder what happened to the universal belief that all spies were heterosexual and only seduced female enemy agents?”

“I don’t know. I never entertained that idea.”