PETER MENNIGEN

COTTON

COUNTDOWN



BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

business being there: a greasy pizza carton, a giant cup of diet coke, and a coffee cup with the words 'I'm too sexy for this world'', filled with a liquid that looked more like muddy water than anything else. "What're ya up to, Jerry?" Zeerookah looked like he'd been up all night, and now more than ever he seemed to embody all the stereotypical features of a nerd, with his pale face and hair so tousled that he looked like he'd just emerged from a wind tunnel.

"Don't call me Jerry," Cotton said. "I'm already irritated enough. What is so damn important that I have to be hauled out of bed at this ungodly hour?"

"I haven't got as clue," Zeerookah said, shrugging his shoulders. "Didn't Decker tell you what's up on the phone?"

"She only told me to get my ass over here for a meeting as soon as possible, and that it's very urgent."

"Get your ass over here? Those were her words?"

"More or less. Can you at least tell me what sort of meeting this is?"

"I saw some guys from Homeland Security and the chief of the NYPD paying High a visit a little while ago. I'm supposed to set up a video conference for someone in Washington."

"Who — some sort of chief of staff?"
"I think higher up."

"A security advisor from the White House?"

Zeerookah remained silent and pointed upwards with a finger.

"The president?"

"Bingo!"

"Wow! And what's my job as a member of this illustrious crowd? Why does Decker order me to come in instead of, say, Dillagio, who's been here longer than me?"

"Dillagio has other responsibilities. Besides, he's got all the charm of a bulldozer; not exactly ideal for a meeting of this magnitude. Watch out — the pretty one is approaching."

Zeerookah went back to tending to his computer. He clamped a phone between his head and shoulder and pretended to be very busy.

"And ... had a short night, Special Agent?" Decker gave Cotton a smile with a hint of empathy, which seemed about as genuine as the counterfeit money in the evidence room. "I'm sorry about that."

"I appreciate your compassion, dear Philippa."

"Great. Go and wait for me in the conference room; I'll be there in a second."

"I'm going to speak with the president? Then I think a dark suit would be more appropriate."

Decker looked perplexed. "How did you know that the president will be involved?"

Zeerookah pulled his head closer to his shoulders like a turtle and made himself seem smaller than he was, hiding behind Cotton.

"I have my sources." Cotton gave her an innocent smile that was anything but.

Decker looked at him with cool, narrowed eyes. "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't spread such sensitive information around. Now go."

Cotton entered the bug-proof conference room. In the middle of it stood the biggest table he had ever seen. It was brand new, stainless steel with a satin-sheen finish and a black glass tabletop that was completely bare. There were none of the refreshments and glasses that were usually to be found on top of such a table. Which might be a bad sign for this unusual meeting.

Hanging on the right wall was a 70-inch monitor. The connections for the video conference were already set up and the screen was split into various segments. The conference participants hadn't taken their seats in front of the cameras yet. The sections of the monitor only showed the seals of the different government agencies involved: CIA, FBI, NSA, and the president's seal in the biggest square.

Cotton picked out a place to sit on the long side of the table. He sat there for a while, and then dozed off a bit. A few minutes later, the chair beside him was moved. He opened his eyes and saw Decker, who was looking at him as if she could strangle him.