

## PRELUDE



*Pulau, Southeast Asia*  
*Friday, May 17, 2013*

It was smoggy and stinky as hell, but Pinocchio hankered for a cigarette: this blue, comforting poison. He was standing on a deserted part of the Disraeli river's shoreline, with Peel Quay's vigorous lights barely visible a hundred feet off, through the haze.

His handlers had said they couldn't risk picking him up there, at the Quay, because of CCTV. And how on earth could he even argue with that?

Hugging himself as though in a blizzard, he paced the haunted shore, coughing. And suddenly, he stopped and listened. The boat was drawing near. He knew that by the droning sound it made. It came from the opposite side of Peel Quay, from the South China Sea. Soon, it glided into view and swayed to a stop on the haze-covered water.

It was a small patrol cruiser carrying the unique flag of the nation of Pulau, the mermaid goddess. Pinocchio vaguely recognized the two men on the boat. Both were Chinese and wearing the pervasive N-95 mask.

“Sir, come, fast!” cried the tubbier of the two, gesticulating wildly with his arms.

“Is he on board?” Pinocchio shouted.

“You’re in big danger!”

You don’t say, Pinocchio thought querulously.

“You Borat friend, right?” asked the other sailor.

Nearly twenty meters stood between the shore and the boat. Pinocchio took off his shoes and socks and silently waded into the river, gnashing his left foot only three steps in. It was painful, but he kept going. The coast was steeper than he was expecting. He had to swim half the distance to get to the starboard, the Chinese having tossed down their Jacobs ladder for him.

They helped him aboard, and he jerked himself free from their grips. “You don’t happen to carry cigarettes around here, do you?” he asked.

“Not healthy.”

Pinocchio shook his head and proceeded to the taffrail, dropping there to examine his injured sole. The wound was deep and it looked hideous. “Is he gone already?” he said.

No reply.

He raised his eyes and saw the tubby sailor holding a gun, his hands trembling. “Sorry,” the sailor said, “this is my first time.”

He shot him in the stomach. Pinocchio yelped and tried to pull himself up using the taffrail. The sailor jerked the slide and reshot him, six times in the chest and back, until Pinocchio dropped and stopped moving.

“See?” the other sailor said. “This is why *they* should do it. Their spies are like cats.”

They dumped his body on their way back to the South China Sea.

## PART ONE





1



## RENDEZVOUS

### TWO DAYS AGO

**O**n his second day in Pulau, Hector Kane—the youngest professor at the American Institute of Middle Eastern Studies in Cairo—retired to his apartment early. Shortly after lunch, he feigned jet lag and excused himself politely from his students and wife. He would pop some melatonin, he said, and call it a day. Have a great evening, everyone.

And before he got bogged down by any questions, he hastened through the gate of the National University of Pulau's residence, nodded to the concierge who was patrolling the garden, then leaped up the stairs to his apartment on the third floor of the boys' dormitory. He would hunker down there until, at least, eight-thirty p.m. His rendezvous with the Company was at eight-fifty.

They were seven travelers in all. Besides Hector and his wife, Yubi, five graduate students—a small summer class—had come along. Those students didn't pose a threat to Hector's scheme.

They'd bye-bye'd casually to him and said, "Take it easy, Dr Kane. See you tomorrow, okay?" before going their separate ways.

All five of them had plans for the evening.

Baxter and Fifi, to begin with, had been clear: They would get wasted on gin slings and tequila in local bars, hopefully through midnight.

As for Ahmed and Zainab, the devout Muslim newlyweds, they must be by now celebrating the finale of their honeymoon at Peel Quay—the yacht-gorged harbor on the Disraeli river—before the "very exciting Night Safari ride, doctor," which Zainab had yapped about during breakfast.

Even Kero—his problematic student, who'd been slow to make a decision—got out of Hector's way eventually: He would tour Orchard Road's upscale galleries with a very beautiful woman.

Hector was the successful author of all this, the reason for everybody's excitement about Pulau. From the outset, he'd sown in his students' heads a stellar fantasy that still thrived despite the post-landing shock. A tropical island like Pulau, he'd said to titillate them, came to free singles and bonding couples once in a lifetime. Pulau was Southeast Asia's Las Vegas, a cyberpunk Camelot, the surfaced Atlantis. It was the city, after all, of Our Lady the Mermaid.

So he was sure none of his students would bother him tonight.

His equally excited wife, though, was the problem. He needed to elude her, too.





Despite the CIA's questionably liberal view that Hector's Asian wife might be "helpful" in Asia, Hector had done his best to dissuade her from coming. Yet Yubi was friends with his students, and his fiction about Pulau seemed to hit a romantic chord with her in particular. "We never had a honeymoon," she said, "and I think we need one."

Even though they hadn't been intimate since their son's death last year, Yubi had stayed, battling to rebuild their marriage. Hector could only admire her tenacity.

She would drop by his office at the Institute without notice, plan dates that never took off or did then crashed in the same ditch: He was "giving up" on them, "not putting in the effort," or—more recently—*lying* to her.

"Are you back in that Spy Losers Club?"

"I wish." He laughed.

"I talked to Elena"—his teaching assistant—"and she said you canceled your class today. Where'd you go? Your phone was turned off."

"My battery died. I was with Jeff."

"The biggest loser of them all, eh? But I've got news for you. I called him and he hasn't seen you in weeks."

"You don't have his number."

"I called his office."

Pause. "You called the United States ambassador to Cairo, asking about your husband during his lunch break?"

"It wasn't a lunch break."

"I'll tell you what, I'm guilty. Sweet dreams, honey."

Late at night, she usually came to wake him up, kneeling beside his couch. She couldn't stop thinking. She wanted to share something with him.

Something like what, Yubi?

There was her Chinese father, and the fentanyl overdose that had killed him. He'd been having a difficult life in Canada, her father.

And Yubi's mom who, despite having loved her husband and done everything to make him happy, still thought she was responsible for his death.

There was the mob of mean girls who'd tortured Yubi in middle school.

And the generic, curly-haired boy who'd broken Yubi's heart at A. Y. Jackson Secondary in North York, Ontario.

She would open up to him, then demand the same from him. "Tell me something I don't know about you."

"But I told you everything when we first met. Besides, I'm a new man now."

"New how?"

He yawned.

"Hector, are you seriously bored here? Do you hate Cairo? We can move to Toron'o, if you want. You can work at U of T or York U or anywhere. They wouldn't dream of having you there."

"Right, right. Can we talk about this later? I need to be up at seven sharp. And you, too."

At which point, she relented and stood up.

In the syrupy night light, he saw the sheen of her violet nightie and, behind her, the sheets of her empty queen bed piled on the floor. "Want me to come inside?" he said.

"*Um*. Maybe tomorrow? I'm too messed up now. Or in Pulau. We're leaving in two days, anyway."

Yes, Yubi. Maybe in Pulau.





But he'd blown his chances today.

Sitting now in his lonely Pulaui apartment, Hector felt a mix of pride and guilt about the success of his ugly scheme.

At breakfast, he'd joined Ahmed and Zainab at their table, knowing full well how Yubi loathed Ahmed.

Then at the Ministry of Environment, he'd scandalized Yubi in public by flirting with a French blonde the Pulauis had contracted to advise them on their carbon emissions.

Later at the Music Box Museum—where they experienced the joys of the *pipa*, *erhu*, and *suona* and came upon rare photos of The Beatles, Pink Floyd, and Tina Turner in historic concerts—Hector dodged Yubi whenever she balked, crossed her arms, and looked ready to start a fight with him.

And by lunch... she'd given up on him.

It was heartbreaking, but he did what he had to do to protect her. It was during this lunch that Yubi had convinced Kero to escort her on a shopping spree in Orchard Road's famous stores—and Hector had received the instructions for his long-awaited rendezvous with the Company.



The lunch had been at a place called *Mister Prata*, a noisy greasy spoon on the foothill of Mount Victoria, the highest landmark on the island, where the Pulaui Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was perched.

By all means, it was not a splendid lunch. Most of Hector's students found the food strange and were quite upset because

Ambassador Lee, the celebrity who'd undersigned their travel invitations, had stood them up at the MFA.

Tommy Lee was an international lawyer who'd served two stints as Pulau's permanent representative to the UN. He'd taught international law at Harvard and Sciences Po and had written over fifty books. In a recent TV interview, Lee had said that he penned five to six books a year but published only three. "This way"—the old fox had winked at the BBC brunette—"there'll always be some juice in me when I kick the bucket."

Hector had groaned watching this. He believed Tommy Lee was no more than a scam, a beautifully publicized one, at that. Still, he preached about him to his students as if he were preaching about some sort of god.

Otherwise, how on earth could one spy convince five intelligent adults to join him on a trip to the equator in mid-May? *Pilgrimage, pilgrimage, pilgrimage!* There was not a mightier magnet in the universe.

The MFA comprised eighteen directorates, and they all reported to Lee. Eleven directorates dealt with administrative or economic issues. Only seven were diplomatic, broken up by different world regions. Hector and his group were guests of the Middle East Directorate (MED). The strange thing about the MED was that for most of its history, it had been dormant, its personnel serving in other directorates. Never once in recorded history had an Arab diplomat received a Happy New Year card from a Pulaui counterpart. Until the Arab Spring had happened. Suddenly, the Middle East became sexy in everyone's eyes.

Hector was slugging through his hot curry rice and chicken when the MED director, Fred Zhang, touched his elbow and grimaced, Fred's unhealed acne a topography of gorges in his saucepan face.

“How do you like the restaurant?” Fred said. “It’s pretty cozy, and the food is amazing.”

Hector looked out the clerestory windows at a sky heavy with smog. Even with the thick aromas of food, he smelled the stench awaiting them outside. He said the place was good, yes.

Fred balled his fist and coughed into it. Then he flung his neatly clipped fingers toward a picture of Lord Ganesha on the wall tapestry. “Fine people, these Indians. The gods watch over their foods and monics and sex. They don’t go anywhere without them. They wear them in necklaces and tattoos, write poetry and make great movies about them. They are, in analogy, the Catholics of Asia.”

“But isn’t that the case with Buddhists also?” Hector asked. “Director, as you may know, my wife is Buddhist, and she has her saints, too.”

Fred murmured a perfunctory concurrence, restraining his eyes from moving toward Yubi, who sat at his one o’clock between Kero and Fifi. “It is funny, Mr Kane, that we have accidentally stumbled into the touchy subject of religion. I have a question for you, you being a Western man. What do you call a high priest in Rome? A man who isn’t a pope and dresses in a red robe? Is he a bishop? A pope deputy, perhaps?” And the director let out a quiet, breezy laugh.

Hector was irked by this “Mister,” an honorific he’d acquired since landing and hadn’t managed to shake. If he were free to make assumptions, he would have thought the MED wanted to dismiss his academic qualifications whenever they were out of earshot. Was this the Pulaui way of endearment? Of patronizing? Or of despising!

“Your last name is Kane. That’s Irish, no?”

“Indeed, Irish-Canadian. And American on top of that.”

“Oh, a multinational.” Fred stabbed his last samosa with his



fork. "A man with many passports and a strong sense of himself." He chomped. "A Westerner, throughout."

"Your insight is astonishing, director." Hector downed the insult with a glassful of lukewarm water.

"Do you practice religion, Mr Kane?"

"I'm afraid not. My father was Methodist, my mother a Catholic. But I don't really go to church, no."

The director arched his eyebrows and argued, "But you still know your Western religion. We have a fellow..." He turned his head toward the right end of the table, where his men were gathered. Then he redirected himself. "I met a man, a very holy man. What do you call—Oh, Mr Kane, you haven't answered my question!"

"A Cardinal," Hector provided quietly.

And Fred blessed this answer with a nod of his forefinger and forehead. "That's what he is, then. A Cardinal. I wonder why I forget so often. It's early dementia, for all I know. So, Mr Kane, I met this Cardinal yesterday. He's almost seventy, but sharp and spry like a wolf in his prime. Very holy, a very holy man. He lives close to where you're staying with your students. Middle Road and Prinsep Street. Number eight, unit fifty. We should go visit him sometime. Maybe tonight if you can manage to free yourself up."

That was before the conversation had veered, miraculously, into discussing the weather.