

PROLOGUE

AUGUST 13, 2015, HAVANA CUBA

Samson Young gazed across the Plaza Vieja. He had been sitting at the table alone for precisely three hours. Three elderly women, evenly spaced, walked slowly across the square through a foraging flock of pigeons. He had never met or seen any of the trio before, but he instinctively knew that all three were widows who had been close friends since childhood. Three women. Three hours. Three days. Always in threes. *I have finally become insane.*

Sam looked down at his tablet. His finger hovered over the link that would show him the video clip of his client and, he understood now, his aunt, Camille Paradisi, being shot to death in front of the Bennet County Courthouse three days before. He had seen her brains come out of her head. What he was trying to understand was whether it was indeed possible that she somehow still lived.

Sam watched the clip. He agreed with the general consensus. People survive being shot in the head, but not like that. As the clip ended, he looked up and saw three different women walking towards him, through the pigeons, across the plaza. Camille was one of them. Another was his deceased mother. He had known his mom as Marcela Young. Now he realized the journal was true. Her real name was Fifika Kritalsh. And while she and Camille looked hardly a day over thirty, they were both, in fact, over seventy. And the old woman walking between the two sisters would be their mother, who had died—at least, the first time—back in the fifties. Sam thought back to the journal.

“You mean Job sued God, like in court?”

“Sort of like that.”

“Did he win?”

“Of course not.”

“The biggest case ever, dude,” Barnabas had said.

Finally insane.

CHAPTER ONE

DAY 1, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2019

Alleged rape victim Tawana Hightower had been on the witness stand for only a few minutes, but the prosecutor was already irritated. Tawana wouldn't answer questions directly and used poor English. Tawana's appearance didn't endear her to the prosecutor, either. She looked exhausted, with heavy bags under her eyes staring blankly into the abyss.

"Miss Hightower, please tell us what happened next?" Prosecutor Lynn Norwood pressed.

There's an old practice in criminal trials. When a victim is telling a story to the jury, don't interfere. Every once in a while, just ask, 'What happened next?' Let the witness do the work. But Samson Young, the defense attorney, thought it was a pretty lazy strategy for Norwood to employ with a witness like this. What could go wrong?

Sam Young's attention wandered the courtroom while he listened to Norwood awkwardly attempting to get Tawana to accuse his client of rape—even if only to repeat what she had told detectives months earlier. Sam's mind jumped from the judge to the gallery, to the prosecutor, to his client, to the jury, and back to each again. And it settled finally on Hightower, the internet hooker who had invited Sam's client to the Shangri-La Motel for sex, only to pick up the phone and report a rape as soon as he left.

Sam took a deep breath and studied his client, David Park. David's slumped posture and downcast eyes telegraphed a message riddled with shame. He was a married man with kids and no previous criminal record. Now his habit of hiring prostitutes was being thrown down in public. He might avoid prison and perhaps his marriage would survive. But David's reputation had been destroyed.

Sam knew that David, somewhere inside himself, had been prepared to deal with getting caught for his indiscretions. But rape? Never. If he got caught, he would apologize. Minimize it. Plead for forgiveness. Maybe even buy his way out of it.

Tawana leaned back on the witness stand, rubbed one of her eyes and cleared her throat.

Part of Norwood's obvious frustration with her may have stemmed from what she had chosen to wear to court. In a hooker-rape trial, a plunging neckline said something. And it was hard to say which side it helped. Looking into her eyes from across the well, Sam saw past Tawana's fatigue. It dawned on him that her aw-shucks, beat-down, trashy-hooker routine was a charade, but he had no idea what she had to hide. Somewhere under that rough exterior, a mystery lurked.

"Ms. Hightower," Norwood said, "you texted with the defendant about meeting for sex at the motel. You've shown the jury your escort advertisement. You planned to have sex with the defendant for money. He came to room 2020 at the Shangri-La

Motel. Your room. When he left, you reported that he raped you. What happened after he got there?”

As the prosecutor, Norwood needed to be the first lawyer to demand from her own witnesses the answer to such an obvious question: how did a prearranged, consensual tryst become a rape?

Norwood's frustration suggested she held her own witness in less than perfect regard. Sam glanced at the jury and sensed its disapproval of Norwood's tone. They simply did not like the prosecutor. Two women in the back row seemed, from their disapproving expressions, to especially disdain her. But why? Always so interesting, what people find compelling. One could make the assumption that Lynn Norwood, an attractive, successful young woman, would be the ideal daughter, date, or friend for most anyone in the DC suburbs. What's not to like? But no, this jury was compelled by the hooker and repelled by Norwood. Sam's law partner, Amelia, had once explained jurors' heartfelt and often unpredictable opinions this way: "Everybody has their story. The judge, the prosecutor, the cops, and the pimps and whores, and the do-gooders on the jury. They all have their story and don't figure on anyone finding out about it."

During jury selection, lawyers for both sides discover whether a juror has a criminal record. Felons cannot serve. Often, prosecutors and judges weed out jurors with even petty arrest records.

As a criminal defense lawyer, Sam often marveled at prosecutors' assumptions that jurors lacked seedy secrets and dark urges (realized or unfulfilled) just because they had no criminal record, dressed conservatively, or had a decent job. That is, prosecutors wrongly assumed jurors were as judgmental and prudish as they were.

Sam glanced past the jurors again, careful not to stare or appear too interested in them. *Everybody is just a few months, years, or decisions away from the Shangri-La Motel. Everybody.*

Tawana darted a look at the judge, then back at Norwood. “He was an Oriental,” Tawana said. She turned slowly, looked up at Judge O’Grady again, and flinched, like she expected a blow. “Sorry, I know I’m not supposed to say that word. I mean he was a foreigner.”

Norwood interrupted Tawana’s answer by extending her open palm. “What happened next?”

“I told him I changed my mind,” Tawana said. “That I didn’t want the date with him.” She paused. “I didn’t know he’d be a foreigner.”

“What happened next?” Norwood asked.

Tawana stared straight ahead.

Norwood took a deep breath at the podium, looked down at her notes, and plowed ahead. “Please continue.”

“He pulled out his cock. The next thing I knew, he was stickin’ it to me on the bed.”

“Ms. Hightower, will you please use more professional terminology,” Norwood admonished her as if she were a child.

“Sorry, ma’am. The next thing I knew he pulled out his cock and was having sexual relations with me on the bed.”

Norwood sighed again, and too loudly. “What happened next?”

Tawana looked around the courtroom. For the first time, her gaze halted at Sam. “He pretty much nutted all over the place.”

This time, a smile softened Norwood’s plastic veneer. “Do you mean to say he ejaculated?”

“Yeah, he nutted.”

“All right, I think it’s time for our lunch break,” Judge O’Grady said.

David looked expectantly at Sam as the judge left the bench.

“Relax,” Sam whispered. “They haven’t heard your side yet. She’s hardly even describing a rape. You should have lunch with your wife. I’ll see you back here.”

Sam watched David and Myra, his wife, leave the courtroom. Sam could tell Myra believed her husband hadn't raped Tawana Hightower. But he couldn't discern what she thought might have actually happened. What occasioned the rape allegation? As Sam had told David when they first met, it wasn't too hard to figure out. If you're gonna hire a hooker, you gotta pay her. The full, agreed-upon price and any suggested tip. What could go wrong?

Sam leaned against the wall in the hallway. Norwood, the detective from the case, and the few courtroom spectators—all staff and law students from the prosecutor's office—disappeared down the long corridor toward the elevators, their lunches, their emails, and their opportunity to discuss Tawana's testimony in her absence. To release some tension, they might make fun of Tawana, the victim for whom they were supposedly advocating. Meanwhile, Tawana sat alone on the bench outside the courtroom. She held her hands in her lap. No friends. No family. No purse. And apparently, no lunch.

Sam heard the courtroom lock from the inside, leaving him and Tawana alone in the silence. Her rubbed his hands over his shaved head then glanced sideways towards her. After a moment, her eyes rested on his. He noticed for the first time how attractive she actually was. She looked two decades younger than her reported age of forty-seven. She wore long, elegant braids. And her hands, which she was previously wringing, now lay still in her lap. Her eyes, blank and tired in the courtroom, were calm and curious.

Then he saw it. *Ha*.

"Aren't you kind of slumming it?" he said.

Tawana narrowed her eyes. "Everybody has their story. How old are you now, Bubba? You forty yet? I always think of you as a teenager. It's been a while."

"We've never met, Tawana."

Tawana narrowed her eyes at him. "Says you."

Sam walked towards her. “You people always have to be mischievous about things, huh? Just calling me would be too normal?”

“Sad to say, Bubba, that the opportune time has finally arrived. And sometimes there’s a method to the madness. But first things first. Your Asian does owe me two hundred bucks.”

Sam pulled out his wallet. “I’ve got sixty. And why are you calling me Bubba?”

“Put it towards costs.”

“Costs for what?”

“The fee for cancelling the silly ski trip.”

“What ski trip? I don’t have a ski trip booked.”

“Oh, it’s as good as booked. And you’re running out of time to cancel it. You’re way outside your lane, Samson. You gotta put things into perspective.”

Sam and Tawana reached the elevators and stood together in the empty hallway for a long moment.

Sam reached into his briefcase, tore a page from a pad, and handed it to her along with a pen. “I need your phone number. The one you really answer.” Tawana rested the paper on her palm. He watched her write the number, her long, elegant fingers and red-polished fingernails taking their time with the task.

Sam’s phone buzzed. “What’s up, Amelia?”

“I’ve got a problem with a client at the jail. Riker Lugnudsky. One of my appointed cases. Pot distribution. Guy won’t talk.”

“So what? Not everyone needs to be a snitch.”

“I mean he won’t speak at all. Just sits there in complete silence.”

“Is he batty?”

“Doesn’t seem like it. No mental health history that I can find. I think he just won’t talk. I’ve visited him twice, and he sits there saying nothing. He’s got court Friday. Any ideas?”

“Let’s meet over there this afternoon. Two work?”

“What about your rape trial?”

Sam met Tawana’s eyes and pushed the elevator button. “It’s gonna end early.”

Once in the elevator with Tawana, Sam hit floor three and floor one.

“You’ve gotta talk to Norwood. About dropping the case. I’m quite sure you can persuade her. But I can’t help asking: did David force you or not?”

Tawana looked up at the elevator ceiling as if to ponder the question, or more probably as if to decide whether to answer it. “You can’t see it?”

“Really, I can’t,” Sam said. “I’ve been alone for four years. Not alone. But I mean, *alone*. The problem is, I see it both ways. Which in a way is—”

“No better than not seeing it at all. Hmm. Well, whether he’s guilty or not, it hardly matters now.”

The elevator door opened, but Tawana turned around on her way out and held it. After a moment of silence, she let it go, but Sam’s hand stopped it as it began to slide shut.

“You know, Bubba, people should stay with their kind.”

“You show up as the victim in one of my cases, and now you want to give me cryptic advice?”

“You know what it means.”

Sam removed his hand as Tawana turned to walk towards the prosecutor’s office. He placed the sheet of paper with Tawana’s phone number on it, along with the pen she had used, into a Ziploc bag as the elevator descended.

CHAPTER TWO

“IT’S HARD TO SAY what’s bigger, her ego or her tits.” Investigator Nguyen Jones leaned over his computer, reading aloud to Sam.

“And you had become so professional lately,” Sam said. “Are you watching porn again? Or does this actually have something to do with one of our cases?”

“Everything to do with a case. This is a text message sent last week on Signal, an encrypted phone application.”

Sam walked behind Nguyen’s desk and zeroed in on his computer screen. “And?”

“These texts went out from Clifford Vick’s phone. The phone’s not under his name, but from the previous texts, you can tell he’s using it. That’s Vick referring to Teresa Mellon—the assistant US attorney handling his fraud case—and to her tits.”

“How did you get into this?”

“I’m telling you, Bubba, I’m battier than Bruce Wayne when it comes to this stuff. I hacked Vick’s Signal account. I’m also onto a private federal law enforcement site. My handle is Spudmuncher101. Believe it or not, *Spudmuncher* was taken. They think I’m an Irish cop, and—”

“Got it.” Sam often cut Nguyen off during such digressions. “And when did you start calling me Bubba?”

“Just now.” Nguyen continued to punch keys as he focused on the screen.

Sam unfolded his arms and looked out Nguyen’s window across the courthouse square. Nguyen’s hands glided over his keyboard. Nguyen, in his mid-thirties, looked the part of young computer geek—all business, and all about the tech. The reality was often a bit different.

“I’m about to shave Vick’s muskrat.”

“Show me what you’ve got,” Sam said.

“Now that I’m into a lot of the social media he uses—under false names—I got this.”

Nguyen pulled up a photograph of Clifford Vick, a jailhouse informant—a *snitch*—who the prosecution would be calling against their client in the capital murder trial due to begin in six days. Vick, a diplomat turned international business mogul, having been arrested for a wire-fraud charge in federal court, had spent two days in a cell at the Bennet County Jail last year with Igor Alexi—Sam, Amelia, and Nguyen’s client—before being released on bail. All of that was perfectly normal. Short-term cellmates, different courts, different charges, different worlds. The glitch was that Vick, to curry favor with the prosecutors in his own case, was prepared to testify about a conversation he’d had with Igor immediately before his own release. According to police reports, Igor told Vick he not only killed his wife and took her diamond engagement ring, but also “would have screwed the *shluha* if he’d had a *preservatif*.” Vick said Igor had used

his native Russian terms for *whore* and *condom*, a fact Igor's prosecutors would admit was a fortuitous revelation, since Vick, a one-time international gas trader, knew some Russian, especially of that idiom.

"That's Vick for sure, and his girlfriend. And it looks recent. Mexico maybe?" Nguyen said.

"Belize, fall of 2018," Sam said.

"All right, explain."

Like Amelia Griffin, Sam's law partner, Nguyen often asked Sam to explain how he knew certain obscure pieces of information. It seemed to Sam they did not so much doubt him as enjoy watching him scramble for logical explanations.

"So, check it out; that style of Ray-Bans didn't come out until 2017. The timestamp on the photo says five-thirty p.m., no date. But between May and September, the sun's not going to be that close to setting at five-thirty anywhere tropical. Vick had prostate surgery in March, right? After he started snitching? Also, you can see," Sam pointed to the screen, "that painted bird on the restaurant logo on this thatched roof is the keel-billed toucan, the national bird of Belize. It's gotta be the fall of 2018. Possibly December. Those places always have some sort of Christmas décor that time of year."

"I know the part about the sunglasses is crap. You buy yours at Walgreens. Is the rest true?"

"Only the part about it being Belize in the fall of 2018."

"So, what do you think?" Nguyen asked.

"I get it. Cliff's pretrial supervision order forbids him from leaving the country. And he should not be using aliases for social media, banking, or any other reason while under a federal fraud indictment. I'm glad you got me to ask him about social media when he testified. What a liar. Good stuff. What else?"

"To get to Belize, he's gotta have a fake passport, or at least some way to travel without one; the feds have his. And he's

barred from leaving the DC metro area. How do people think they're going to get away with this shit?"

"Because they've been getting away with it for so long," Sam said.

"We're gonna bust up Vick's chiffarobe. Get this." Nguyen clicked open a new file. A page of text messages appeared on the screen, and Nguyen enlarged one of them.

"That's WhatsApp, right?" Sam asked. "An encrypted app. How did you get this?"

"These texts are from Eliza Johan's cell phone—that's Vick's girlfriend. The one in the photo. In this section here—obviously that's Cliff—you can tell from the context that he's talking about his federal case. He even mentions our guy." Nguyen highlighted a portion of the text. "See, here he says, 'Thanks to our friend Boris.' That's a reference—"

"I get it, the Russian," Sam said. "Igor is Ukrainian, but whatever."

"The number Cliff is texting from is assigned by Verizon to a Jonathon Steinberg in Bennet County. But look." Nguyen clicked open another file. "Here's a text thread from the Steinberg phone. There are similar threads every few weeks right up until last month."

"Coded language?"

"Of course." Nguyen quickly highlighted another passage. "Steinberg's talking about heroin. He's communicating with customers. You know—"

"Got it," Sam said.

"Cliff Vick, a critical witness against our capital murder client, has been violating his bond conditions, gallivanting around the world, and even conspiring to sell drugs—opioids, no less—to keep his cash flow going. Not to mention using racist slurs against our client," Nguyen said.

"He's got a lifestyle to maintain," Sam said. "Really, how do you get this stuff without a subpoena?"

Nguyen, as usual when asked about such matters, did not answer. “And now, we’ve got him creeping on the prosecutor’s rack—a woman, mind you, who is getting him a reduced sentence for testifying against Igor. Keep that in mind during jury selection. People are going to hate this guy. Especially women.”

Sam’s phone buzzed. He walked out of Nguyen’s office into his own, and onto the balcony.

“This is Young.”

“Samson Young?”

“Yes.”

“Samson Young, the attorney who represents Camille Paradisi?”

“I used to—who’s this?”

“I believe you still do represent Ms. Paradisi, along with a few others. Am I right?”

“Ms. Paradisi’s case was dismissed four years ago. After she was killed. Can I help you?”

The man on the phone began to speak. *Eastern European accent?* Sam listened for several minutes. While he did, his eyes roamed across the courtyard of the Bennet County Court complex. A younger defense lawyer he knew—Tre Rittenberg—exited the courthouse, walking fast. Nervous. Disappointed with a court ruling. The young lawyer slowed and looked across the courtyard at Sam as if sensing he was being watched. They waved at each other. Sam pushed his mind towards the guy. A soft push. *Don’t worry, Tre. You had no chance on that issue anyway. Good try.*

As the man on the phone continued talking, Sam realized he had been wrong about the accent. *Not Eastern Europe. But where?* He had one of those voices that was soft to the ears but firm to the mind. Like the voice of someone accustomed to rooms going quiet when he spoke. Sam studied a small photo he had taped onto his desk almost four years ago, when Young and

Griffin had rented the office across from the courthouse. The photograph of him and his mother at his high school graduation, the last photograph of them together.

“Mount Hermon in Israel?” Sam said. “Who are you?”

“I believe you received my package.”

“What package?”

“The Mount Hermon Ski Resort package.”

Sam watched Tre walk down the street below his window, a bit more bounce in his stride now. He quietly rifled through the inbox on the corner of his desk where Farah, Sam’s secretary, stacked non-pertinent items. He held up, then opened, the white envelope that contained a large travel brochure. Mount Hermon Recreational Area.

“I guess I did.”

“The opportune venue, no?” the man said.

“I see your point, but what’s the venue do for me? And who is this?”

“You’re the attorney. And your clients, including Camille Paradisi and your mother Fifika Kritalsh, are very much alive as you well know. Since you’ve agreed to represent them in this matter, I thought my venue idea would be helpful. I’m on your side. Samael will likely be your opponent. Be careful. He’s like catching hold of wind. Don’t trust that you know the meaning of anything he says.”

“He’s dishonest?”

“Not exactly. He just loves, let’s say, to thwart simplicity.”

A long silence this time. It was a strategy of Sam’s. Long silences. To get the other person to speak more. But this guy was using the strategy on him.

“You people are funny with your mysteries,” Sam said. “Always so cryptic.”

“It’s a process, counselor. And besides—” The man paused.

“Let me guess—you’re not people.”

“You now have your venue. Institution of the lawsuit is your job. What do you call it? Service of process? It’s been done before. But I do urge you to be careful.”

“Of what?”

“Just be aware. Beginning very soon, I think we’re in for a fast-paced conclusion to a troublesome conflict, and such things are always unpredictable. But the opportune time has arrived. I’ll see you soon enough. Thanks.”

Click. And the man with the accent was gone. Sam flipped through the brochure and then reached into his briefcase. He tugged a plastic glove on, swabbed the envelope seal with one swab and the spine of the Mount Hermon brochure with another, and gently placed the swabs in separate clear plastic bags and sealed them.

“Looks like we’re going skiing,” Sam said to Nguyen as he walked back into his investigator’s office.

“It’s October, Bubba.”

“To a ski resort, anyway. Mount Hermon Ski Resort.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“So, I gotta ask, you just took a quick call and then categorically stated that we’re going skiing on some mountain I’ve never heard of. Other times, someone asks you to do something that seems rational and you ignore it completely.”

Nguyen’s attention remained on his computer. “Vick is dead meat. We’re gonna roast his chestnuts over an open fire.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Sometimes you get a feeling about who to listen to and go with it.”

“Then we’re gonna knock the wheels off his chuck wagon,” Nguyen said.

“Good one.”

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Sam went back to his office, sat, and looked at that day's date, electronically depicted at the bottom right corner of his computer display. It had been more than four years since Camille Paradisi was killed. Since he found out his mother was still alive. Sam had felt each anniversary of the shooting creep up on him, only to pass and collapse back into the frenzy of his busy practice. The date was like a soft deadline that seems so far away until it arrives, yet even then sparks no activity. But suddenly, today, Tawana. And then the phone call.

Farah entered his office. "Sam, I'm gonna take off at lunch. It's my last day, and Bozo—"

"I know," Sam said. "Bozo always wants a urine screen on the last day of somebody's probation."

Sam regarded Farah, the young woman who, two years ago, had been crying in his office after her arrest. Bozo was Farah's nickname for her probation officer. Today she was completing eighteen months of probation for possession of Ecstasy. Her case would be dismissed and she was headed to the University of Virginia in two weeks.

"Does Bozo know you'll be going to a better college than he did?"

"The less he knows, the better. Also, we've got five or six emails from that eLocal thing. What do you want me to do with those?"

A marketing agency, eLocal, helped clients and customers find various services, including legal representation. The agency sent leads to attorneys and charged them if they clicked *claim lead*.

"If it looks lucrative, high profile, or for some other reason especially intriguing, hit *claim lead*. If not, hit *decline*. I trust you. I know, it's annoying. Lots of lame leads."

"Have you ever accepted one of the leads?"

"Never."

"Then why do you subscribe to it?"

"Sometimes I don't know why. What else do you have?"

“That lawyer called again. Bernie Genoa—the one you keep ignoring. Amelia said you called him a bottom feeder.”

“Would I say something like that?”

“Maybe.”

“Bernie’s just kind of a weird dude. He wears sneakers to court and carries a backpack, you know what I mean. Honestly, I hardly know what he does.”

“Are you going to call him back?”

Sam shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Maybe he got busted for weed or something?”

“Bernie? Not likely. Too dorky for weed.”

“Finally, I put a letter on your desk from that weird Appalachian guy. Esau Jacobs.”

“Thanks, Farah.” Mr. Jacobs, a potential client who would not set up an appointment through Farah, had self-identified merely as “an old man from Appalachia with a serious issue to discuss.” No return number. *Funny.*