

Chapter One

Pilgrims

THE SHIP made land at last a hundred yards off the Rockaway Peninsula, a slender, skeletal finger of sand that forms a kind of barrier between the southern reaches of Brooklyn and Queens and the angry waters of the Atlantic. Dating back to the War of 1812, the people of New York erected battlements and positioned cannons along the beaches here, to defend against foreign invasion. Even before white settlers arrived, the local Canarsie Indians had identified in the eleven miles of dunes and grass something proprietary and exclusive. “Rockaway” derives from the Canarsie word *Reckowwacky*, which means “place of our own people.”

A single road runs down the center of the peninsula, past the Marine Parkway Bridge, which connects to the mainland, through the sleepy winterized bungalows of the Breezy Point Cooperative, right out to the western tip of Rockaway, where weekend anglers reel in stripers and blues. Looking south, past the beach at the Atlantic, you wouldn't know you were on the southern fringe of one of the biggest cities in the world. But turn your head the other way, out across the bay side of the peninsula, and there's Coney Island in the distance, the grotty old Cyclone tracing a garish profile above the boardwalk.

At a quarter to two on a moonless Sunday morning, June 6, 1993, a single police cruiser drove east along that central road, its headlights illuminating the dark asphalt. A large stretch of the peninsula is na-

tional park land, and inside the car, a twenty-eight-year-old National Park Police officer named David Somma was doing a graveyard shift with his partner, Steve Divivier. At thirty, Divivier had been with the force for four years, but this was his first time on an overnight patrol.

It wasn't typically an eventful task. The Breezy Point neighborhood west of the bridge was close-knit. The families were mostly Irish Americans who had been in the area for generations, working-class city cops and firefighters whose fathers and grandfathers had bought modest summer homes along the beach in the fifties and sixties and at some point paved over the sandy lots and winterized their weekend shacks. At 98.5 percent white, Breezy Point had the peculiar distinction of being the least ethnically diverse neighborhood in New York City. A night patrol of the beach might turn up the occasional keg party or bonfire, but serious crime along that stretch was unheard of. The Breezy Point police force was a volunteer auxiliary. The officers had so little use for their handcuffs that they had taken to oiling them to stave off rust.

Somma was behind the wheel, and he saw it first. An earlier rain shower had left the ocean swollen with fog. But out to his right, beyond the beach, the darkness was pierced by a single pinprick of faint green illumination: a mast light.

The officers pulled over, got out of the car, and scrambled to the top of the dunes separating the road from the beach. In the distance they beheld the ghostly silhouette of a ship, a tramp steamer, perhaps 150 feet long. The vessel was listing ever so slightly to its side. Somma ran back to the car and got on the radio, alerting the dispatcher that a large ship was dangerously close to shore. He and Divivier climbed the dune for another look.

Then, from out across the water, they heard the first screams.

Half stifled by the wind, the cries were borne to them across the beach. To Somma they sounded desperate, the kind of sound people make when they know they are about to die. He had a flashlight with him, and pointed it in the direction of the ship. The sea was rough, the

waves fierce and volatile. About 25 yards out, between the rolling swells, Somma saw four heads bobbing in the water. The officers turned and sprinted back to the car.

“We’ve got a large number of people in the water!” Somma shouted into the radio. Divivier had grabbed a life ring and was already running back to the beach. The officers charged into the water. It was cold—53 degrees—and the surf was violent, big swells breaking all around them and threatening to engulf the people in the distance. Guided by the wailing voices, Divivier and Somma strode out until they were waist-deep. As Divivier closed the distance to the four people, he hurled the life ring in their direction. But the wind and current carried it away. He reeled it in, walked deeper into the water, and cast the ring again. Again it failed to reach the people as they struggled in the swells.

Realizing that they couldn’t do the rescue from solid ground, Divivier and Somma plunged into the water and began swimming, enormous waves twisting their bodies and crashing over their heads. The drowning people writhed in the cold ocean. Eventually Divivier and Somma reached them and shouted over the percussive surf, telling them to take hold of the life ring. Then the officers turned around and dragged the shipwrecked strangers back to shore. There the four collapsed, panting, on the sand. They were Asian men, the officers saw, diminutive and cadaverously thin. When Somma spoke to them, they didn’t appear to understand. They just looked up, with terror in their eyes, and pointed in the direction of the ship.

From the ocean, the officers heard more screams.

Somma’s first radio call to the Park Service Police dispatcher had gone out at 1:46 A.M. There was a Coast Guard station just across the peninsula from the beach, at the Rockaway end of the Marine Parkway Bridge. Charlie Wells, a tall, ruddy, nineteen-year-old seaman apprentice, was on radio duty from midnight to four in the morning. Wells, the

son of an Emergency Medical Services captain, had grown up in White-stone, Queens. He lived in the barracks; he'd been with the Coast Guard less than a year.

"A fishing boat sank off Reis Park," a dispatcher's voice said, crackling through the radio. "There's forty people in the water!"

Wells ran out of the barracks, started his truck, and drove a few hundred yards south down the access road in the direction of the ocean side beach. He pulled over in a clearing and ran up onto the beach, where he was startled by the sight of the ship in the distance. He mouthed a quiet *Wow*.

On the beach in front of him, it looked like some madcap game of capture the flag was under way. A dozen or so dark, wiry figures, some of them in ragged business suits, others in just their underwear, were running in every direction, and a number of burly police officers were giving chase. Three off-duty Park Service officers had joined Somma and Divivier and were scrambling after the Asian men who had managed to swim to shore.

"Help!" one of the officers shouted, spotting Wells.

Wells took off after one of the men, gained on him easily, and rugby-tackled him. He was much smaller than Wells, skinny, and soaked through. Wells held the man down and looked up to see more people emerging from the surf. It was a primordial scene—an outtake from a zombie movie—as hordes of men and women, gaunt and hollow-cheeked, walked out of the sea. Some collapsed, exhausted, on the sand. Others dashed immediately into the dunes, trying to evade the cops. Still more thrashed and bobbed and screamed in the crashing waves. Wells could just make out the outline of the ship in the darkness. There was movement on the deck, some sort of commotion. People were jumping overboard.

"We need a Coast Guard boat!" one of the officers shouted at Wells. "And a helicopter!"

Wells ran back to the van and radioed his station. "I need more

help,” he said. “There’s a two-hundred-foot tanker that ran aground right off the beach, and these guys are jumping right into the water.”

The tide was coming in, and a strong westerly crosscurrent was pulling the people in the water down along the shoreline. The officers ventured into the water again and again. They plucked people from the shallows and dragged them onto the shore. The survivors were terrified, eyes wild, teeth chattering, bellies grossly distended from gulping saltwater. They looked half dead. They were all Asian, and almost all men, but there were a few women among them, and a few children. They flung their arms around the officers in a tight clench, digging their fingers so deep that in the coming days the men would find discolored gouge marks on the skin of their shoulders and backs.

The night was still so dark that it was hard to locate the Asians in the water. The men relied on their flashlights, the narrow beams roving the waves in search of flailing arms or the whites of eyes. But the flashlights began to deteriorate from exposure to the saltwater, and when the lights failed, the rescuers had to wade out into the darkness and just listen for the screams. “We entered the water guided only by the sound of a human voice,” one of the officers later wrote in an incident report. “When we were lucky, we could then use our flashlights to locate a person . . . When we weren’t lucky, the voices just stopped.” The rescue workers pulled dozens of people to shore. Every time they thought they had cleared the water, another pocket of screams would pick up, and they would head back in.

Those who were too tired to walk or move the officers carried, jackknifed over their shoulders, and deposited on higher ground. There they collapsed, vomiting saltwater, their bodies shaking, their faces slightly purple from exposure. The officers tried massaging their legs and arms to improve circulation. Some were hysterical, sobbing and pointing out at the ship. Others seemed delusional and rolled around covering themselves with fistfuls of sand, whether to insulate their frozen bodies or hide from the officers was unclear. Some were more collected—they

were strong swimmers, or they had caught a generous current. They walked up out of the water, stripped off their wet clothes, produced a set of dry clothes from a plastic bag tied around an ankle, and changed right there on the beach. Some of them then sat among the growing number of survivors on the sand, waiting to see what would become of them. Others simply walked off over the dunes and disappeared into the dark suburban stillness of Breezy Point.

Across New York and New Jersey, telephones were beginning to ring. Cops and firefighters, rescue workers and EMTs, reached for pagers buzzing on darkened bedside tables and rolled out of bed. When a disaster occurs, most of us are hardwired to run in the opposite direction, to stop and gawk only when we've put some distance between ourselves and any immediate risk. But there's a particular breed of professional who always runs toward the disaster, even as the rest of us run away. As word spread among the first responders in New York and New Jersey that a ship full of what appeared to be illegal aliens who couldn't swim had run aground in the Atlantic, a massive rescue got under way. It would prove to be one of the biggest, and most unusual, rescue operations in New York history—"like a plane crash on the high seas," one of the rescue workers said.

A heavyset Coast Guard pilot named Bill Mundy got the call as he was finishing a maintenance run in his helicopter and had just touched down at the Coast Guard's hangar at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, across the bridge from Rockaway. The propeller was still spinning, and Mundy summoned his copilot and two rescue divers, climbed back aboard, and lifted off, ascending 50 feet into the air. The fog was clearing, and past the bridge, beyond the dark strip of roofs and trees on Rockaway, they could see the ship, just a few miles away as the crow flies, protruding from the slate-dark sea. The helicopter tore through the sky, and below they could see the bleeding strobe of emergency ve-

hicles—ambulances, squad cars, a convoy of fire trucks hurtling over the bridge toward the beach.

The helicopter reached the scene in minutes, and Mundy saw people on the beach below and people in the ocean. The chopper's spotlight searched the scene, a pool of white light skimming across the black water and spilling onto the dark shapes aboard the vessel. The ship was called the *Golden Venture*, its name stenciled in block letters on the salt-streaked bow. Its green paint was scarred by rust along the waterline. Two rope ladders had been flung over the side, and people were climbing halfway down the ladders and jumping into the water.

Mundy couldn't believe it. He'd rescued a lot of people from the water, and what they always feared most was the unknown aspect of the sea—that voracious, limitless, consuming darkness of the ocean. But here these people were in the middle of the night, in a strange place, 25 feet above the water, and they were just pouring over the side of the ship like lemmings. *This is very high on the "I'm gonna die" list*, Mundy thought. They were lining the decks, emerging through hatches from the bowels of the ship. They were moving as people in shock do, their bodies erratic, herky-jerky, as they dashed back and forth in a lunatic frenzy, and cannonballed over the side.

Mundy hovered down, the chopper getting closer to the ship, training the bright searchlight, unsure what to focus on. The people on board looked up, alarmed, and dashed to and fro. "DO NOT JUMP," Mundy's copilot said over the loudspeaker. "STAY ON BOARD." But the whir of the propeller drowned him out. And even if they could hear, Mundy realized, these people weren't American; there was no telling what language they spoke. The helicopter descended closer still and Mundy and his colleagues tried signaling with their hands, using palm-extended gestures of restraint, hoping the people on deck would see them. But the rotor wash was strong enough to knock a man down, and as they came in close, the people just panicked, scattering to the other end of the deck.

From up here Mundy could see what had happened. A sandbar, a kind of shoal, had developed under the water a couple hundred yards from shore. The bow had plowed into that sandbar and ridden up onto it, so that the first 15 feet of the vessel cleared it altogether. The water around the ship must have looked shallow—they'd hit the sand, after all—but the water on the shore side fell off again, becoming deeper. And the waves were fierce. As Mundy circled the *Golden Venture*, he noticed that the propeller was still furiously churning water aft of the ship. The people in the water were getting pulled back toward the blades. Why hadn't the crew shut the engine down? "There's got to be a pilot on board," Mundy said. He set the radio to Channel 16, the international distress frequency, and addressed the ship. "Secure power!" Mundy commanded. "Shut the engine down!"

Before long three Coast Guard boats rounded the peninsula and tried to approach the *Golden Venture*. But the surf was so rough that they couldn't get close to the ship, lest a sudden swell should bash them against it. Eventually the smallest boat, a 22-foot Boston Whaler, managed to maneuver in close and come alongside the *Golden Venture*. Charlie Wells's roommate in the barracks, a junior seaman named Gilbert Burke, was on board, and along with two colleagues, Burke prepared to start persuading the passengers to jump into the Whaler instead of the water. But just as they approached the *Golden Venture*, an enormous wave came avalanching down on the bow of the Whaler, and the boat flipped clear out of the water, throwing all three crew members into the waves, then capsizing on top of them.

"The twenty-two just flipped over," a voice on Wells's radio announced.

Wells scanned the water around the *Golden Venture*. He could see the smaller vessel. "I'm looking right at it," he said. "It's not flipped over."

Then he realized: it was upside-down. Wells grabbed the radio.

“Coast Guard Station Rockaway Mobile One, our Boston Whaler just flipped over in the surf. Do you have a visual on our guys?”

Another Coast Guard helicopter had joined Mundy’s now, along with several police choppers. They were stacked one on top of the other, all circling the stranded ship counterclockwise, like buzzards. Mundy realized that they might be interfering with the flight path of heavy jets approaching Kennedy Airport, and he squawked his military code to the Federal Aviation Administration, asking the air traffic controllers to reroute any incoming flights around the rescue. His swimmers were wearing headsets, scanning the water below, and could not see Wells’s roommate, Gilbert Burke, or either of the others from the overturned Whaler.

“We’re looking for them,” they radioed Wells. “We’re looking.”

The rescue swimmers descended into the roiling water to try to recover the crew, and finally they radioed again. “We’ve got one of your guys.”

But it wasn’t Burke; it was one of Burke’s colleagues. When the Whaler flipped, the outboard engine had come crashing down and split the crewman’s head open. The rescue swimmer loaded the bleeding man into a steel basket and signaled the crew to hoist him up.

As Wells stood on the beach, a figure walked out of the surf and approached him, drenched and shivering. It was the third man from the Whaler. “We all got separated,” he said. There was still no sign of Burke.

After Mundy’s team dropped off the injured Coast Guard man on the beach, they picked up two of the *Golden Venture* passengers who had reached the shore and gone into cardiac arrest. It was the first time Mundy had seen any of the passengers up close. They were dressed only in their underwear, and to Mundy they looked like “something from a concentration camp.” They were all angles, bones and ribs, not a finger-and-thumb’s worth of body fat between them. There was no insulation for their internal organs, and Mundy realized that when they hit the cold water, their blood vessels must have constricted, causing a heart attack. As he tried to revive the two men, he could feel the gristle

of their bodies, the cartilage, their brittle ribs threatening to fracture under his powerful hands. The helicopter reached Floyd Bennett Field, where Emergency Medical Services had set up a triage station. But it was too late. Both men were DOA.

Even as he sat there with the corpses of these strangers, Mundy marveled at the resolve it must have required to expire on land and not at sea. The men had walked up out of the water, collapsed on the beach, and died.

When Gilbert Burke was thrown clear of the Boston Whaler, he got caught in a rip current and carried west, away from the *Golden Venture* and the rescue vehicles, out as far as the tip of the Rockaway Peninsula. Just before clearing the peninsula altogether, he managed to swim to a breakwater, and from there back to shore. If he hadn't, he would have been pulled farther out into the ocean.

Burke walked back east along the beach. By the time he arrived, the whole peninsula was a riot of rescue vehicles. A dozen boats surrounded the ship, four rescue helicopters swarmed overhead, and news helicopters had begun to arrive. Fifty-two ambulances lined the roads up and down the peninsula, ferrying the survivors from Breezy Point to Floyd Bennett Field and on to city hospitals.

Most of the survivors were corralled on the beach. They sat in clusters, looking dazed, hugging their knees and shivering. Their clothes were cheap and generic: acid-washed jeans and chunky Reebok knock-offs, vagabond suits, ill-fitting and frayed. Rescue workers unloaded truckloads of gray and blue blankets, and the survivors wrapped themselves in these, gazing out at the ocean from which they'd escaped. David Somma, the Park Police officer who had first spotted the ship, was walking among them on the beach, taking in the scene, when one of the men made eye contact with him. Somma approached the man and saw that he was clutching something in his hands. He held two hundred-dollar bills and a map of the New York City subway.

The sun was beginning to rise, casting a strange violet hue over the beach, and a makeshift command center had been established on shore, facing the ship. The brass from the fire department, police department, and mayor's office stood barking into radios at a folding table in the sand. Ray Kelly, the short, vulpine commissioner of police, arrived, wearing a crisp white shirt and tie under his blue NYPD windbreaker, despite the ungodly hour. Kelly was stunned by the vision—the ship, the people, the activity on the beach. Mayor David Dinkins showed up as well, and loped alongside Kelly, surveying the scene. The local and national media had descended, and correspondents were doing pieces to camera, the hulking ship framed over their shoulders in the background. “These are people who are apparently desperately trying to come to America,” Dinkins told the cameras. “I would hope that those people who are already here would recognize how important the freedom is that they have here.”

“Your heart goes out to them,” Kelly added. “You don’t know what the circumstances are that brought them here.”

The people on the boat were Chinese. That much the officials had figured out. But the ship looked like a fishing boat or a short-haul freighter; it couldn’t possibly have come all the way from China, much less transported so many people. Agents from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS, had arrived, and were trying to segregate the passengers from the crew. But communication was a challenge. Many of the passengers were from China’s Fujian Province, it emerged. They seemed to speak only limited Mandarin or Cantonese and conversed in a dialect of their own. Some of the men on the beach didn’t look Chinese at all; their complexions were darker, their faces broader. They were Burmese and Indonesian, and as soon as the authorities surmised that these men were the crew members, they segregated them from the others in a crude cluster and circled them with yellow police tape.

In batches, the authorities began relocating the passengers to a building at Floyd Bennett Field. It was there that Sergeant Dougie Lee was

sent when he reported to the scene. Dougie worked in the major case squad, the detective bureau of the NYPD. He was Cantonese American, tall and gangly, with a boyish face, prominent teeth, and a thick New York accent. He had been asleep in his apartment in Queens when the chief of detectives called and said, "You need to respond to Rockaway."

Dougie was thirty-eight and had lived in Hong Kong until he was twelve, when his family moved to New York. He spoke Cantonese and some Mandarin, and while he didn't speak Fujianese, he could understand some of it. As a member of the NYPD's Oriental Gang Unit—the Jade Squad, as it was known—he'd had a lot of exposure to Fujianese immigrants lately. "The Fooks," the cops called them. They had started showing up in the city, masses of them, new arrivals turning up at the sweatshops and employment agencies in Chinatown every week.

Dougie entered a large, brightly lit room filled with Chinese people. There were a few women, but it was mainly men, young to middle-aged, still wrapped in blankets, all of them wearing medical triage tags around their necks. The other officers standing watch were reluctant to get too close to the men. "Bad breath," they told Dougie. The men had been in the hold of a ship for some untold stretch of time, their clothes unwashed, their teeth unbrushed; their breath smelled of malnourishment and rot. Under fluorescent lights, they sat at long tables in a kind of rec room. Some sat alone, looking bedraggled and spent. Others were cheerful, grateful to be there, bereft of possessions in a foreign land, without so much as a dime for a phone call. They drank coffee from paper cups and ate cookies and potato chips, devouring whatever was put in front of them. They were desperate for cigarettes, bumming smokes off the cops, chanting "Marlboro! Marlboro! Marlboro!" Fearful of tuberculosis and that breath, rescue workers had given them all baby-blue antibacterial face masks.

Dougie Lee sat with the men. At first they didn't want to talk, eyeing him with nervous suspicion. But after a while they started warming up and coming over to him. Some spoke a little Mandarin or Can-

tonese. Soon they were queuing to tell him their stories. Dougie listened, and translated as best he could for the nurses who circulated through the room. The survivors all seemed to be from Fujian Province. A few had traveled with friends or cousins, but most had come alone. They had come for jobs, they said. Dougie needed to get people's names and find out whether they were hurt, but they flooded him with information—about brothers, sisters, parents, wives, the people they had left behind. They were afraid of the men who ran the ship, they said. On board, they had eaten only one meal a day.

One man said he had made a small scratch in the wall of the hold for every day they were at sea.

“How long was it?” Dougie asked.

“Months,” the man replied.

Many of the survivors announced right there in the holding area at Floyd Bennett Field that they wanted political asylum in America. The officers interviewing them thought they sounded somewhat robotic, almost rehearsed, as if they had been coached on what to say when they arrived. The passengers expressed surprise at the kindness of Dougie and his colleagues. “American police are much nicer than police in China,” they said.

As he listened to the passengers, Dougie found himself hoping that they would be able to obtain legal status in the United States. He himself had been lucky. His grandfather had come to America illegally, jumping ship and working in an old-school Chinese laundry in New York, where all the washing was done by hand. He had obtained his citizenship eventually; Dougie didn't know quite how, and even that—not knowing—was a kind of luxury. He had saved money and sent for the family, and that was how Dougie had come to America.

As he sat with the men from the ship, Dougie marveled at the way the Chinese treasured the United States—the way they borrowed money, left their loved ones, and risked their lives to get here. He had worked in Chinatown long enough to know that the nation the Chinese called the “Beautiful Country” was not always what it was cracked up to

be. He had worked the kidnappings and the extortion rackets, busted sweatshops and massage parlors, been to basements where dozens of people shared a few hundred square feet, where people slept in rotation. Dougie looked at the men he was interviewing, saw the sacrifice they'd made, and came to a stark realization: *I couldn't do what they've done.*

By 8 A.M. the *Golden Venture* had slid off the sandbar with the rising tide and washed to shore. A team of officers boarded the boat and were greeted immediately by the odor of human feces. The deck was littered with shit, little piles of it everywhere. The *Golden Venture* was a small ship. It was hard to imagine that it had been occupied so recently by hundreds of people. The officers made their way down a single ladder into the hold, a dark space that was roughly the size of a three-car garage. In the dim light they encountered more stench—the sour reek of piss and perspiration—and squalor. “Slippers, purses, money, a remote control from a VCR, sweaters, pants—anything, everything that you could imagine,” a Coast Guard officer recalled. “It was an overpowering aroma . . . The living space was being used as a bathroom.”

Working with translators, authorities had plucked from the assembled survivors a sullen, heavyset, dark-skinned man in his forties. According to the Indonesian passport he was carrying, his name was Amir Humanthal Lumban Tobing, and according to the frightened passengers, he was the captain of the *Golden Venture*. Tobing was taken to an office at the Park Police headquarters and questioned by members of the INS and the Park Police. They gave him some hot food and read him his Miranda rights. He spoke some broken English; most captains do. One of the Park Police officers made a crude map of the world so the captain could trace the route the ship had taken.

Tobing said he had boarded the *Golden Venture* six months earlier, in January 1993, in Singapore. From Singapore he had sailed to Bangkok, where he took on ninety Chinese passengers and an onboard enforcer named Kin Sin Lee. From Bangkok the ship had sailed back to Singapore, where the generator was fixed for twelve days. As Tobing

talked, a television in the office played the news, flashing images of the ship and the passengers on the beach. Suddenly Tobing sat up and pointed to one of the faces in the crowd on the television. “That’s Kin Sin Lee,” he said. He explained to the officers that Kin Sin Lee was the “owner of the boat.”

From Singapore the ship sailed through the Strait of Malacca and across the Indian Ocean to Kenya, Tobing continued. In Mombasa it took on two hundred more passengers. With a finger, Captain Tobing indicated the route from Kenya: south along the east coast of Africa, down around the Cape of Good Hope, then up through the Atlantic, past Brazil and Central America to the East Coast of the United States. There was something peculiar about this route. It would have been vastly easier to cross the Pacific, in a straight line from China to California. The *Golden Venture* had traveled the wrong way around the planet, a journey of some 17,000 miles. In total, the trip had taken 120 days, twice as long as the storied voyage of the *Mayflower*, which brought the Pilgrims to Plymouth in 1620.

Even as the officers interrogated Tobing, the passengers were being led away. A convoy of blue-and-white Mass Transit Authority buses had been commandeered to transport the Chinese to an INS detention facility in a federal building at 201 Varick Street in downtown Manhattan. No one could pinpoint precisely when it had happened, but a subtle categorical shift had occurred; the passengers had been reclassified. They were no longer shipwrecked refugees, no longer the huddled masses, the wretched refuse of the teeming shore, no longer the homeless, tempest-tossed, that Emma Lazarus extolled in the 1883 poem inscribed in bronze on the Statue of Liberty a few short miles away. They were invaders. In the days and weeks to come, numerous people who were on the beach that morning would describe the arrival of hordes of Chinese as resembling the Normandy invasion—a storming of the beaches, a waterborne assault on the United States. Once the immedi-

ate logistical challenge of saving scores of people from drowning had subsided, the daunting gravity of the situation set in: some three hundred undocumented foreigners had just landed in the media capital of the United States. It was the single largest arrival of illegal aliens in modern American history, and the whole thing was unfolding in real time on national television. Before the Chinese boarded the buses, someone determined that they should be handcuffed, and every major news channel captured footage of the men being frogmarched into the buses, decked out in surgical masks and triage tags and flexicuffed together in twos. As dozens of police officers stood guard, bus after bus filled up and slowly wheezed away.

All that remained on the beach were the strewn belongings that had washed ashore, cast-off possessions and crude souvenirs, the detritus of the crash and the rescue: discarded cardboard suitcases floating in the shallows; torn white plastic bags in which the jumpers had packed a dry change of clothes; empty gallon jugs of Taiwanese frying oil, which some had clung to for flotation; a few stray bottles of orange drink from Kenya. All this jetsam washed up through the morning, along with ragged bits of soggy blue paper: air-mail stationery, for letters home.

The only Chinese who remained on the beach were the dead. For a time it was unclear how many they were. The initial count was eight, but that was lowered after it was determined that some of the bodies had been counted twice. Along with the two cardiac arrest victims that Bill Mundy had dealt with, the bodies of three who had drowned washed up that morning, and another later in the day. In the coming weeks, clam dredgers and fishermen would stumble upon four more bodies, bringing the total who perished to ten.

Little was known about the dead. They were undocumented, in the most literal sense—they had no papers and offered no clues. A few had New York telephone numbers written in permanent marker on the waistbands of their underwear, which enabled authorities to track down family members in the city. Four of the bodies were identified and sent back to China for burial. But the others just lay there in refrigerated

vaults in Manhattan, waiting to be claimed. Early on, two Chinatown residents who thought a relative might be among the dead ventured into the medical examiner's office, only to be accosted by immigration officials, handcuffed, and interrogated about their own immigration status. Word spread in the neighborhood, and no one took the risk of going to identify the bodies. Ten months later, six of the bodies were still there, unclaimed and unburied. Local residents pitched in \$6,000 to pay for their cremation at a cemetery in New Jersey.

Of the survivors, thirty or so were taken to hospitals in Brooklyn and Queens and treated for hypothermia, exposure, exhaustion, and various injuries. The rest ended up in the INS holding center at 201 Varick. The facility had only 225 beds, not enough to accommodate the *Golden Venture* passengers. The immigration authorities were overwhelmed, ill-equipped to deal with this number of new arrivals.

President Bill Clinton had been in office for only six months. He had not yet appointed a director of the INS. As agency officials scrambled to house and process the passengers, they had to contend with the press as well. The arrival of the ship in New York was a sensational event. The *New York Times* alone assigned two dozen reporters to the story. The man who stepped into the leadership vacuum at the INS and presented himself to the cameras and microphones to address the situation was the agency's New York district director, Bill Slattery. Slattery had grown up in Newark, New Jersey, and done stints in the Marines and on the Texas Border Patrol before being assigned to the New York office of the INS, where he quickly rose through the ranks. He was extremely ambitious, and tough—tough on illegal immigrants and tough on his own subordinates. "A meat eater, not a grass eater," one colleague said.

"This is the twenty-fourth ship that the U.S. government has encountered since August of 1991," Slattery told reporters. "Almost all the aliens are Chinese nationals coming from Fukien province." (*Fujian* is sometimes pronounced "Fukien," and the Fujianese are also known as Fukienese.) In the past nine months alone, two thousand illegal Chi-

nese had been captured trying to enter the country, he said. Two weeks earlier a freighter had slipped beneath the Golden Gate Bridge and deposited 240 Fujianese on a San Francisco pier. The following day, 57 more had been discovered locked in a warehouse in New Jersey.

The fee to reach America was \$35,000, with a small down payment due before the trip began and the balance owed if the migrants survived the journey. Strictly speaking, this was “human smuggling” rather than “human trafficking.” Though the terms are often used interchangeably, they describe two different crimes. Human trafficking generally involves some form of deception or exploitation, where an individual is misled about where she is going or what she will be doing when she gets there and is often pushed into sex work or forced labor. Human smuggling is a risky and often extremely dangerous undertaking, but migrants generally enter into it with their eyes open; no one is telling them they will be models or waitresses when they arrive, and incidents of smugglers forcing migrants into prostitution, while not unheard of, are exceedingly rare. Still, human smuggling is a rough and exploitative business. Slattery explained that the poor Chinese undertook enormous debts to make the journey and then spent years working as indentured servants, turning over their earnings to the shady underworld entrepreneurs who financed their passage.

“In effect, slavery here in the U.S.,” one reporter prompted.

“That’s right,” Slattery replied.

Several miles away, inside a small shop at 47 East Broadway, in New York’s Chinatown, a woman watched the news unfold on television. She was short and pudgy, with a broad face, small, wide-set eyes, and a hangdog expression. She spoke almost no English; her hair was cut in a sensible shoulder-length bob; and she favored the cheap, utilitarian apparel of her countrymen from Fujian Province. She worked long hours in the store, selling clothing and simple goods, and in a restaurant downstairs, which served Fujianese specialties like oyster cakes and

fishball soup to the newly arrived Chinese peasants who had settled in the neighborhood. When a truckload of supplies came, neighbors saw her hauling the goods into the shop. She could have been mistaken for one of those destitute peasants herself.

But in fact she was a very wealthy woman, the owner of the shop and the restaurant and the five-story brick building that housed them. Her name was Cheng Chui Ping, but everyone in the neighborhood called her Ping Jie—Big Sister Ping, or simply Sister Ping, a casual honorific, a gesture of respect. At the age of forty-four, she wasn't just a shopkeeper and restaurateur but something like a village elder in the claustrophobically intimate corner of Chinatown where she resided. She was a banker of sorts, and something else as well. She was what the Chinese call a *shetou*, or snakehead, a kind of immigration broker who charges steep fees to smuggle people out of China and into other countries. She had pioneered the China-to-Chinatown route in the early 1980s, and from her humble shop on East Broadway she had developed a reputation as one of the most reliable—and successful—snakeheads on the planet. In Chinese communities from Europe to South America to the United States, Sister Ping had become a well-burnished brand name, one that connoted safe, illicit delivery from point A to point B; the Cadillac of global human smuggling.

But as she watched the news that morning, she brooded, and grumbled that she had come in for a run of bad luck lately. She had helped arrange the financing for the voyage of the *Golden Venture*, and she had personally received fees from two of the passengers on board. Sister Ping didn't know it yet, but one of those passengers was among the dead.