

ONE

“How many bodies?”

“Six, Ms. Cooper. So far we got six dead. But there’s a mean rip and a swift current out there. Anybody’s guess what’s going to wash up by the end of the day.”

I was walking toward the ocean behind a cop sent to escort me from my car, following him on the path that had been formed in the dunes by the first responders who had tracked across it two hours earlier, at daybreak.

“One woman?” I asked.

“What?” the cop cupped his hand to his ear as he turned to look at me. The gust of wind that blew a clump of damp sand against the side of my face also carried off my words.

“The news is reporting that one of the victims is a young woman.”

“We got two now. Girls, really. Teenagers at best. Four men and two girls.”

I stopped at the crest of the dune and scanned the horizon. Dozens of police officers were scattered along a quarter-mile of beach, their blue uniforms a deeper color than the rough Atlantic. Detectives in windbreakers and all-weather jackets looked slightly less

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incongruous in this unlikely setting, some scouring the shoreline while others gathered around the survivors who had been brought to land.

“That’s it,” the cop said, pointing at the rusted freighter that was grounded on a sandbar about three hundred yards out to sea, listing to port, as police launches and Coast Guard boats darted around it. “*Golden Voyage*. That’s the name of the ship they sailed on.”

“*Golden Voyage* my ass,” Mike Chapman said, coming up beside me, adjusting his sunglasses as he spoke. “It must have been the crossing from hell. Happy new year, Coop.”

“Same to you, Mike. Although this doesn’t get it off to a particularly pleasant start.”

“I got her from here, pal,” Mike said, dismissing the cop. “You warm enough?”

“I’m fine. Battaglia called me at home this morning,” I said, referring to my boss, the district attorney of New York County. “Did you just arrive?”

We were both dressed in jeans. I had a cashmere sweater under my ski jacket, with gloves and a scarf to protect myself against the brisk January day. Mike wore a white turtleneck beneath his trademark navy blazer. The winter cold never bothered him, any more than the sight of a corpse.

“Nope. Human trafficking—you don’t get worse scumbags than the guys who deal in flesh. All the squads got called in right away. Every borough,” he said. “I was doing a midnight so I shot out here from a crack den in Harlem. Just went back to the car now to get my shades. The glare on the water’s a killer.”

Mike was one of the best detectives in the city, assigned to Manhattan North Homicide, which handled every case from Fifty-ninth Street to the northern tip of the island. We’d been professional partners—and close friends—for more than a decade.

“Where do you want to start?” he asked me. People were swarming across the beach like armies of insects. “The tent over there to the left on that paved area—that’s the temporary morgue.

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The group in the middle, we've got more than a hundred victims off the wreck so far, trying to get them in dry clothes. The commissioner is due in by chopper any minute now."

"Who's in charge?" I asked.

"Feebies, kid. The feds are running the operation. Your buddy from the task force, Donovan Baynes. His group is trying to set up a command center on the right. Hardest thing," Mike said, starting down the slope, "is holding the press at bay. Roping them off on the street is easy, but keeping the helicopters and power boats away is more of a problem, now that news has spread. C'mon."

"Take me to Baynes, okay?"

"Battaglia doesn't let go, I'll give him that. Rockaway Beach—the Irish Riviera—this is Queens, for Chrissake. That parking lot where the morgue is, it's over the line in Nassau County. What makes him think he has jurisdiction here?" Mike's loafers made a crunching sound as they pounded the sand while we toured the scene. His straight black hair, gleaming in the sunlight, was blowing wildly as he walked into the wind.

"Global and mobile. That's how he likes to think of himself. He's been DA for so long he doesn't believe there's anything that limits him," I said. "That's why he fought so hard to get me on the task force."

Human trafficking, a modern-day form of slavery, wasn't even on the books until federal laws addressing it were enacted in 2000. Before that, prosecutors had patched together local legislation to attempt to punish the handful of individuals who could be linked to efforts to transport victims across borders, coercing them to work at everything from agricultural labor to child prostitution.

"Good morning, Counselor," a detective greeted me as we approached the group of men encircling Donovan Baynes. "Chapman, how many interpreters did you call for?"

"A boatload. Why? How many you got so far?"

"Two. Only two have showed up."

"What language?" I asked, trying to process the sight of scores

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of dazed victims who were wrapped in blankets, staring out at the shipwreck, undoubtedly looking for family members and friends.

“Ukrainian,” Mike said. “Why? You ever do a Ukrainian, kid? A little pillow talk and your Ukrainian could be almost as good as your French.”

I had just returned from Paris two days earlier—on Monday—where I spent the New Year holiday with my lover, Luc Rouget. The more about my personal life I kept from Mike, the more he needed me. “No surprise. Since the Soviet collapse, Ukraine leads Eastern Europe in the number of trafficking victims.”

“What do you want me to do about it, Chapman?” the detective asked. “We got to move these guys off the beach before they freeze their balls off. Sorry, ma’am.”

“Nobody’s gonna freeze today. It’s almost fifty degrees,” Mike said, not breaking his stride. “Send some cars over to Little Odessa. Go to a few coffee shops and grab anybody who’s sitting still.”

“Where’s that?”

“Brighton Beach. Right next door, in Brooklyn. You’re like Coop—you need a road map to the Outer Boroughs.”

Brighton had been built as a local beach resort in the 1860s, named for the English coastal town in a contest held by its developers. In the 1970s, it was nicknamed Little Odessa because of the large concentration of immigrants from that Black Sea city, once one of the great ports of Imperial Russia.

Donovan Baynes waved as he saw us approaching. I’d known the forty-one-year-old since his days as a federal prosecutor in the Southern District of the U.S. Attorney’s Office. He was surrounded by four men, three of them agents I recognized from our task force meetings. “Hurry up, Alex. Glad you’re here. I think you know everybody.”

I shook hands and introduced myself to the unfamiliar man. He appeared to be in his early fifties, barefoot and dressed in a wet-suit that was sculpted to his well-muscled body. “Hi, I’m Alexandra Cooper. Manhattan District Attorney’s Office.”

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“Stu Carella. Used to be homicide, NYPD. Guess you don’t remember me, but we met at a few crime scenes when I was still on the job. The dancer at the Met, the broad who was kidnapped at Fort Tilden,” he said, then nodded at Mike. “I see she’s still stalking you, Chapman.”

“My order of protection expired, Stu. I asked the judge to keep her three hundred feet away and to tell her to stop stealing my underwear, but she’s out of control again. Be careful, man, Coop’s a sucker for guys in tights.”

“Let me bring you up to speed, Alex,” Baynes said, ignoring Mike’s chatter as he put his arm around my shoulder. He’d been around the two of us enough to know this was standard operating procedure for Mike. Behind us were the high-rise buildings of the Rockaways—mostly nursing homes at this end—and the smaller residences that bordered the beach. “About five of the vics have been debriefed. The ship left Sevastopol more than a month ago, with close to three hundred people on board, mainly men, but at least thirty women and children.”

I looked out at the decrepit cargo ship, amazed that it had made it here from Europe.

“Smugglers find the villagers living the most desperate lives, promise them jobs and a better life in America. Take every nickel they’ve managed to save, claiming to use it to feed them on the trip. Bribe officials. You know all that. They trucked these folks from small towns all over their country and loaded them into sweltering holds on board the ship, then began dodging immigration police throughout the Mediterranean.”

“They got all this way only to run aground here and die within sight of land,” I said. The stories I’d heard from trafficking victims were heartbreaking, but at least those who were rescued by law enforcement agencies often had a second chance.

“It wasn’t an accident,” Baynes continued, turning to his deputy. “The leader of the operation in New York—well, what do you call a snakehead in Ukrainian?”

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“A friggin’ snakehead, Donny,” Mike said. “You brainiacs got to go to law school to figure that out? It’s the same in any language.”

Ages ago, the Chinese perfected the ugly practice of smuggling human beings, called snakes, for slave labor. Ringleaders of the inhumane syndicates had long been known as snakeheads.

“The boss of the operation is somewhere in this city. When the captain got close to shore just after midnight, he radioed his contact, who was supposed to send a small fleet of speedboats out to pick up the passengers,” Baynes went on. “Two, three hours went by and no sign of escorts. Apparently, the anxiety level of the immigrants who’d been pigeonholed for weeks went over the top. The first handful of men had been brought up on deck to be unloaded, and one of them got frantic when he saw a vessel with government markings coming toward them.”

“Coast Guard?” I asked.

“We haven’t gotten that far, Alex. No agency we know of has claimed yet that they tried to intercept the ship.”

Mike picked up the story. “That first group just went berserk and staged a mutiny, according to two of the guys who made it ashore. They locked the captain in his cabin with a few of the other managers. Some of the men were in such despair about being caught by immigration that they started jumping overboard to swim in.”

“That water must be frigid,” I said.

“Frigid? Don’t go showing off your area of expertise, Coop. That’s why we hauled Stu out of retirement.”

“Like I was just telling Donovan,” Carella said, “I’m in the Polar Bear Club here at Coney Island. We swim every Sunday, all winter long. Just had our big New Year’s party five days ago. Not so bad for the Atlantic. Forty-three degrees. Some hypothermia, maybe. Everybody will be watching out for that today. Cold water doesn’t have to be fatal, Alex.”

“But at least six people have died.”

Carella shook his head. “Probably drowned.”

HELL GATE

“Drowned? The ship is so close to shore. The water isn’t even that deep.”

“Panic kills, Coop. Everybody who works on water knows that.”

“Panic?”

“Can you believe it? Not all the peasants in Europe grew up with a pool in the backyard like you did, princess.”

Shouts went up from the crowd of victims and several of them broke through a line of cops, running almost thirty yards eastward to the water’s edge. Stu Carella dashed after the frantic young men and passed beyond them as he dove into the surf, where something that looked like a large rag-doll was lifted again and flopped around by a tall wave that kept licking at the sand. He and three cops in scuba gear grabbed and carried another body onto the beach. One of the men immediately crouched in an effort to resuscitate the limp corpse.

I started after them and Donovan Baynes pulled me back. “Let it be, Alex. They know what they’re doing.”

“How many do you think jumped ship?” I wanted to make myself useful, but all the specialized squads of the NYPD were well-trained for this kind of disaster.

“It’s impossible to get an accurate count at this point. One fellow they’ve talked to explained that when the mutineers began to struggle with the captain, he tried to steer the damn thing away from shore, back out into the open sea. Making that turn, he ran the ship aground on a shallow sandbar. Some of the victims figured they were so close to the beach they could reach land—even several who didn’t know how to swim. Maybe twenty jumped. Maybe forty. Nobody seems to know yet.”

“The men you’ve talked to, do they know where they thought they were going?” I asked.

“Nobody told them the truth, Alex. It’s the usual scam,” Donovan said. “You’ve been there—people who don’t see a future for

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themselves and want to believe in a dream, but wake up in the middle of a nightmare. Countrymen were supposed to meet them right here in Queens and bring them into their homes until they're placed in jobs—mostly agricultural ones—in farms upstate and in the Midwest. Those would be the men, the lucky ones.”

“The young women would become your territory,” Mike said.

I had seen this time after time in my role as chief sex crimes prosecutor in the DA's office—girls abducted from their homes in Thailand or Montenegro, running away from abusive parents and desolate lives in Sri Lanka or Serbia, smuggled across borders in car trunks or leaky boats, often following their brothers or school-mates, hoping that hard work and physical labor would eventually gain them the freedom of a new life in the States.

But the girls rarely made it to farmlands and fields. The sex trade had become a huge transnational industry, as lucrative as it could be deadly. The teenagers on the *Golden Voyage* were doubtless bound for basements and brothels, to be broken in by their owners for the months and years of prostitution that awaited them in the promised land.

“Is there any way to identify these victims?” I asked.

“No better than usual. Each one is supposed to have a piece of paper with his or her family name and town of origin in their pockets when they ship out,” Baynes said. “Most of them tossed or swallowed the paper as the police launches arrived. The brother of one of the dead girls is among the few who are talking. He dove in and she tried to follow.”

A lanky man sat at the corner of the tented morgue, with a gray blanket covering his head and upper body. I couldn't tell whether he was shaking from the cold or because he was crying so hard.

Stu Carella was making his way back to us, refusing the offer of an NYPD sweatshirt that one of the cops thrust at him.

“Another kid gone,” Carella said, throwing a tuft of algae at the ground in disgust. “Probably drowned in three feet of water, unable to handle the pull of the rip.”

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“From his hand?” Mike knelt down and picked up the slimy green vegetation with the tip of his pen.

“Yeah.”

Mike whistled and the closest cops looked up. He signaled one, who jogged to us. “Carry this over to the medical examiner. Goes with that latest body.”

The fact that the victim had been clutching algae, and I’d bet a handful of sand, as he was dragged across the ocean floor meant that he had been alive when he went into the water. Drowning, I had learned over the years, was a diagnosis of exclusion. A complete autopsy would be necessary for each of the golden voyagers who had washed up on the windy beach, despite how obvious the circumstances appeared to be to us.

“What do you plan to do, Donny?” I asked. “I mean, with the survivors.”

There was no good answer to this question. It was commonplace for these individuals whose lives at home were already overcome with despair to risk everything for this run to freedom, only to find themselves handcuffed in the backseat of a patrol car to begin the next leg of their ugly journey. A few might eventually be granted political asylum, some would be deported, but the majority would wind up in immigrant detention centers somewhere in the heartland of America.

Baynes stammered as he surveyed the bleak scene stretched out across the waterfront.

“I—I haven’t had an operation of this size since I—uh—since I was appointed to the task force. Frankly, I don’t know what becomes of these poor souls.”

The noise overhead was a police helicopter, probably carrying Commissioner Keith Scully, whom Donovan, Mike, and I all knew well.

“Not jail,” I said. “We can’t let them rot in jail while we sort it out.”

“Scully’s too smart for that,” Mike said.

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“You’ll have to start working with the women right away, Alex,” Baynes said. “We’ll have them checked out medically and then each one needs to be interviewed. You’ve got backup?”

“The senior people in the bureau will be on it with me.” I had a great team of lawyers assigned to my unit by Battaglia, experienced in the courtroom and compassionate in their interactions with traumatized victims.

I could hear wailing now, a cacophony of voices that seemed like it could carry for miles. Cops were trying to move a small cluster of bedraggled survivors toward the dunes, to the vans waiting in the street that would shuttle them to whatever police facility Scully designated. The men were refusing to separate from their comrades despite prodding—all still focused on the others being ferried ashore, all still searching the waves for signs of missing friends.

“C’mon, Coop. You’ll rerun this movie in your brain all day and all night,” Mike said, taking my arm to turn me away from the sight. “You got what Battaglia sent you for. Donovan’s not doing anything on this case without your input.”

My feet were firmly planted in the sand. “I want to talk to Scully, Mike. Let go.”

“Scully’s running late.”

My head whipped around as I recognized the voice of Mercer Wallace. I squinted in the sunlight and shaded my eyes with my hand to look up at him. His six-foot-six frame towered over my shivering five-foot-ten-inch body.

“Good to have you here, buddy,” Baynes said, shaking his hand. “We’ve got a monster of a problem on our hands.”

Mercer was one of the only African-American detectives in the city to make first-grade. He was my best ally at the Special Victims Squad—a former partner of Mike’s from his days in Homicide—and I had urged Donovan to include him on the JTTF—the Joint Trafficking Task Force, assembled to combat the increasingly desperate fight against human trafficking into the New York area.

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"I'm waiting on the commissioner to land," Baynes said, staring as the chopper banked and circled out over the freighter. "We'll fill you in."

"You sleep in today or what?" Mike asked Mercer. "Half a tour?"

"Scully's not making it here, guys. I've been with him for hours," Mercer said, sipping from a cardboard cup of coffee.

"Where at?" Mike said. "Anybody think to tell him this slave ship just capsized in his very own territorial waters?"

"The commissioner knows all about it, Mr. Chapman. He's got his hands full with some other business."

"The mayor won't want to be stonewalled on this one," Baynes said.

"He and Scully are together as we speak," Mercer said, offering me a slug of his coffee. "Counting on you to hold this down, Donovan, till they get on it."

"Something more important than this, huh? Lemme guess," Mike said, tugging at the fringe on the end of my scarf. "You got a mayor who wants to be president and a commissioner who wants to be mayor. Ship of fools gets trumped by what? A whiff of political corruption with maybe a dollop of sex. Am I warm? Somebody passing money to a cross-dressing candidate in the stall of a men's room at Grand Central Station?"

Mercer was taking in the panorama of disaster that spread out before us. He crossed his arms and walked off to the side. "You're not too far wrong."

"Give me a hint."

"Ethan Leighton."

Mercer Wallace had everyone's attention with the mention of the name of the forty-two-year-old congressman from Manhattan's Upper West Side.

"What's he complaining about now?" Mike asked. "That guy's been a whiner since he was born."

"Ethan's a good guy. You know we were classmates at Columbia

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Law,” said Donny Baynes. “His dad’s always had big plans for him, he’s under a lot of pressure.”

“Yeah, well, either way, this time he’s on the other side of the complaint,” Mercer said. “Leighton’s the perp.”

Donovan Baynes seemed blindsided. I knew he and Ethan had even worked together after law school in the Southern District. “What are you talking about?”

“Ethan Leighton flipped his car on the FDR Drive at three-thirty this morning. Hit a van before he plowed into the railing. The two guys in the van broke some bones, but they’ll make it. The congressman was intoxicated. Maybe tanked’s a better word,” Mercer said. “Where do you want me to start? DWI? Reckless assault? Leaving the scene?”

“Is Ethan hurt too?” I asked. He was a rising congressional star who hoped to be New York’s next governor. In all likelihood Donovan Baynes was one of his closest advisors.

“A few bruises. Dead drunk, and somehow he fled the scene—or staggered away from it—before the cops got there. Tried to have one of his former aides take the weight.”

“I don’t believe it,” Baynes said, squaring off against Mercer. “Ethan’s such a straight shooter.”

“I guess he had a rough night with his girlfriend,” Mercer said. “The baby was sick, spiking a really high fever, and they fought about whether to rush her to the emergency room.”

“That’s nonsense,” Baynes said. I’d never seen him so agitated. “Where did you hear that crap? It can’t be true. There’s no sick baby. Ethan doesn’t have a girlfriend. Just because the mayor’s got a grudge against his old man—or, or he’s looking for some bait to get the paparazzi off the scene of this shipwreck—you’re buying into that? Who’s peddling these lies?”

“There’s apparently more than enough fodder to go around,” Mercer said, breaking away from Donovan Baynes as he headed in the direction of the morgue. “Ethan’s got a girlfriend, all right, and what the tabloids will undoubtedly call a love child.”

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“Who fed you this story?” Baynes said, charging after Mercer, challenging him to answer. “I want to know where you picked that up.”

Mercer turned and put his arm out to bring Donovan to a stop. “You got a sea of misery right here, Donny. Let’s deal with that. Don’t be getting in high dudgeon over Leighton.”

“He’s my closest friend, Mercer. I need to know where this is coming from.”

“It’s Ethan’s wife who told me, okay? I heard every sorry detail from Ethan Leighton’s wife.”