

PATRICK
RADDEN
KEEFE

THE SNAKE HEAD

AN
EPIC TALE
OF THE
CHINATOWN
UNDERWORLD
AND THE
AMERICAN
DREAM

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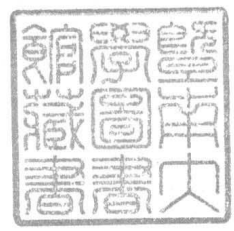
The Snakehead



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OF THE
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AND THE
AMERICAN DREAM



PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE



DOUBLEDAY

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First Edition

TO JUSTYNA

*In at least some parts of nineteenth-century
Norway, people called those who intended to
emigrate "Americans" even before they left.*

—ROGER DANIELS,

*Coming to America:
A History of Immigration and
Ethnicity in American Life*

Dramatis Personae

GIVEN THE historical and geographical sweep of this story, there are, of necessity, many characters. Because *The Snakehead* is an account of people transplanted from one country to another, many of the individuals described go by more than one name. In order to minimize confusion for readers who may be unaccustomed to Chinese names, I have defaulted in many instances to the English names adopted by some of the Chinese characters. Thus Chung Sing Chau, who upon arriving in America took the name Sean Chen, will be Sean Chen for the purposes of this story. Because some of the characters in the book are involved in organized crime, and because Chinese mobsters share with their cousins in the Italian Mafia a wonderful facility for nicknames, I have opted to refer to some characters primarily by their nicknames—like Mr. Charlie, or the Fat Man—simply on the grounds that the nicknames will be easier for the reader to keep straight.

Chinese names are customarily rendered with the family name preceding the individual name, so Sister Ping's full name is Cheng Chui Ping, Cheng being her surname. I have followed the Chinese form, with a few exceptions, such as Kin Sin Lee and Pin Lin, where through some consensus prosecutors, immigration attorneys, *Golden Venture* passengers, and the friends and associates of the individual in question have all elected to reverse the order, putting the first name first and the

surname last, and for me to do otherwise would be formalistic. In what follows, the boldface name is the one used in the body of the book, nicknames are placed in quotation marks, and inside the parentheses are aliases, birth names (if the person has adopted an English name or a nickname), and traditional Chinese renderings (in the few cases where I otherwise depart from them).

"Ah Kay" (Guo Liang Qi), *leader of the Fuk Ching gang*

"Ah Wong" (Guo Liang Wong), *younger brother of Ah Kay who assumed control of smuggling operations*

Gloria Canales, *major people smuggler, based in Costa Rica*

Ann Carr, *British immigration attorney who represented Sean Chen in York, Pennsylvania*

Ying Chan, *Daily News reporter who covered the snakehead trade*

"Mr. Charlie" ("Char Lee," "Ma Lee," Lee Peng Fei), *Bangkok-based boat smuggler*

Sean Chen (Chung Sing Chau), *Fujianese teenager aboard the Golden Venture*

Cheng Chai Leung, *father of Sister Ping, early Fujianese snakehead*

Cheng Chui Ping ("Sister Ping"), *New York-based snakehead and underground banker*

Cheng Mei Yeung, *brother of Sister Ping, smuggler based in Guatemala, California, and Bangkok*

Monica Cheng (Cheng Hui Mui), *daughter and oldest child of Sister Ping and Cheung Yick Tak*

Susan Cheng (Cheng Tsui Wah), *Sister Ping's sister, procured travel documents for smuggled migrants*

Cheung Yick Tak ("Billy"), *husband of Sister Ping*

Beverly Church, *nurse and paralegal in York, Pennsylvania, became involved with the Golden Venture detainees*

Patrick Devine, *Buffalo-based INS investigator*

James Dullan, *driver on the Niagara smuggling route*

"The Fat Man" ("Four Star," Dickson Yao), Hong Kong-based drug smuggler and informant for the DEA and the INS

Kenny Feng, Taiwanese snakehead and associate of Sister Ping, based in Guatemala

Foochow Paul (Kin Fei Wong), original head of the Fuk Ching gang

Ed Garde, investigator with the Niagara County Sheriff's Department

Richard Kephart, driver on the Niagara smuggling route

Ray Kerr, head of the FBI's C-6 squad, handled Dan Xin Lin

Kin Sin Lee (Lee Kin Sin), Mr. Charlie's deputy, chief snakehead enforcer aboard the Golden Venture

Dougie Lee, detective with the NYPD's Jade Squad

Peter Lee, FBI special agent, handled Sister Ping

Dan Xin Lin (Lin Dan Xin), Fuk Ching gang member, defected to start his own smuggling operation

Li Xing Hua ("Stupid"), Fuk Ching gang member, bodyguard to Ah Kay

Sam Lwin, Burmese first officer of the Golden Venture, subsequently took control of the ship

Joan Maruskin, Methodist minister in York, Pennsylvania, became involved with the Golden Venture detainees

Billy McMurry, FBI special agent, responsible for the Sister Ping investigation after 1997

Doris Meissner, commissioner of the INS, appointed by President Clinton after the Golden Venture incident

Don Monica, Nairobi-based INS officer

Konrad Motyka, FBI special agent who worked on both the Fuk Ching and the Sister Ping case

Joe Occhipinti, head of the INS's Anti-Smuggling Unit and lead investigator on Operation Hester

Benny Ong ("Uncle Seven," Ong Kai Sui), adviser for life to the Hip Sing tong in Chinatown

"Paul" (Min Hoang), Vietnamese smuggler based in Canada, piloted boats across the Niagara River

"Peter" (Cheng Wai Wei), *brother-in-law of Sister Ping, husband of Susan, ran the Niagara smuggling route*

Pin Lin (Lin Pin), *Golden Venture passenger represented by Craig Trebilcock*

Pao Pong, *Pattaya Tourist Police officer, interrupted loading of the Golden Venture in Thailand*

Grover Joseph Rees III, *general counsel of the INS*

Luke Rettler, *prosecutor in the Manhattan district attorney's office, specialized in Asian gangs*

Mark Riordan, *Bangkok-based INS officer*

Eric Schwartz, *National Security Council staffer, coordinated the Washington response to the Golden Venture incident*

Gerald Shargel, *prominent criminal defense attorney, represented Ah Kay Sterling Showers, retired factory worker in York, Pennsylvania, befriended Golden Venture detainees*

Bill Slattery, *district director of the INS in New York City*

Song You Lin, *Fuk Ching gang assassin*

Jerry Stuchiner, *INS officer in charge in Hong Kong and then in Honduras*

Alan Tam ("Ha Gwei"), *half African American Fuk Ching gang member, driver and fixer for the gang*

Amir Tobing, *Indonesian captain of the Golden Venture*

Craig Trebilcock, *York, Pennsylvania, litigator, led pro bono legal effort on behalf of Golden Venture detainees*

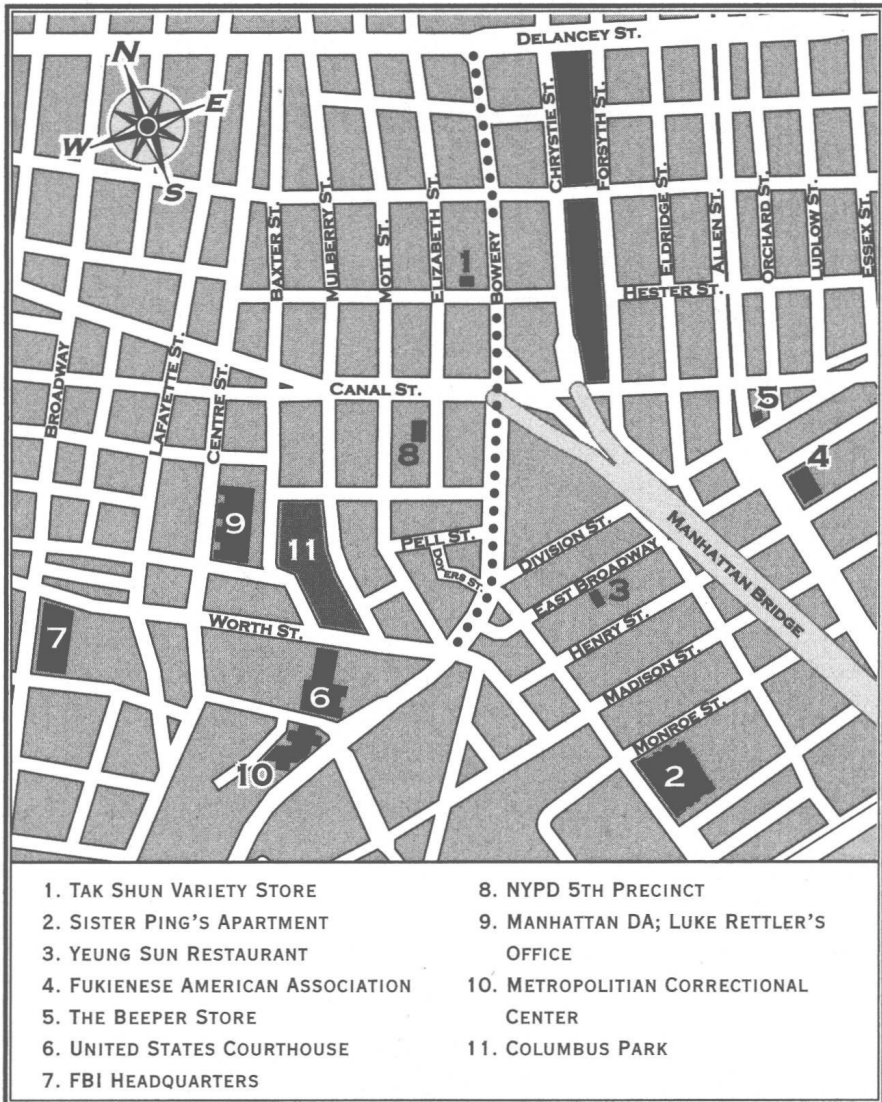
Wang Kong Fu, *close smuggling associate of Sister Ping's, introduced Sister Ping to Ah Kay*

Herbie Weizenblut, *associate of Jerry Stuchiner's, installed as Honduran consul in Hong Kong*

Weng Yu Hui, *Fujianese man smuggled by Sister Ping, later became a key Golden Venture snakehead*

Yang You Yi, *Fujianese Golden Venture passenger and lead folding-paper artist in the prison in York, Pennsylvania*

Chinatown



The Snakehead



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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 Whitestone, 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