BOOK ONE: RISE OF THE EAST

Chapter One

September 1991

Jen Mo-Li eyed the family of three who stood in nervous silence before her in the captain's cabin as the ship rocked gently with the rise and swell of the Hudson River. Jen tapped her pen on their names printed neatly on the list attached to her clipboard. The pen, a black Montegrappa from its signature class, had been a twenty-fifth birthday gift from her father. She had used it constantly since he'd presented her with it the previous December; not because she particularly liked the pen—in fact, she hated it because of its significance as a pat on the head—but because it made Father happy.

Even for all the wealth he had accumulated since arriving penniless in the States in the sixties, Jen struggled to imagine how he could justify spending over $10,000 on a pen when so many people needed help.

It served as a stark reminder that, given only slightly different circumstances, she could have easily been in this family's shoes. Were it not for her father's fortune, it might be her name attached to a clipboard, earmarked for some grubby Chinatown apartment instead of her gilded cage.

"You will have to learn how to speak English," Jen informed the Cho family with kindness. The mother—Cho Hu—smiled and nodded as if she understood, though clearly she did not. To spare her feelings, Jen repeated herself in Chinese. "I'm guessing you have not memorized your American names yet, either?"

Hu, her thin husband Feng, and their skeletal teenage daughter bowed their heads in shame.

"We are so sorry, Ms. Mo-Li," Feng said without lifting his eyes. "We have not had the opportunity to learn."

"It's okay." Jen put a reassuring arm around Hu's shoulders. "I understand three months aboard this ship has not been conducive to learning a new language. But one of the first things you must accustom yourself to is that here, your family name is spoken and written last."

The Cho family, like so many others, had paid $35,000 for their passage to America in what was little more than a floating hell hole. Jen would have gladly sacrificed a portion of the Mo-Li family's profit for a more dignified voyage.

Tired, close to midnight, Jen still had many undocumented immigrants to process. She and Eddie had been stuck in the captain's cabin of the Bright Horizon since 9 p.m., processing those who had set sail from Hong Kong in search of the American Dream. The ship was decrepit, infested, and ill-suited for the journey, but it made the trip three times a year.

“Hao de,” Jen said in perfect Mandarin. “You are David, Cynthia, and Lucy Chin. Your accommodation address on Mott Street is listed here. You start work at Lo Sin Fat Dry Cleaners at 7 a.m., Monday. I will call you in two weeks to collect your first payment.”

The Chos had paid half of their passage already; the rest they would work off at high interest, another point of contention between Jen and her father. She continued, “There is also the address of the Chinese Christian church you are required to attend. We shall look forward to seeing you there every Sunday.”

Cho Hu squeezed Jen’s hand. “Thank you so much for this opportunity, Mother Mo-Li. We will work very hard. And we will not let you down.”

Jen smiled and dismissed them. Another family, equally worn and desperate, filed in with Eddie Sun, her ever-unsmiling bodyguard.

And so the night wore on, with Jen Mo-Li balancing her family’s ruthless business with her own conflicted sense of duty and compassion—until the name missing from her list, **Gong Shu Li**, forced her and Eddie to search belowdecks, where danger awaited.