

WHITE WASHED
by Candace Kade

Chapter 1: MADDY

I've had a lot of odd jobs. Gambling at the tea houses might be the most unconventional one.

Holding my warm porcelain cup of gun powder green tea, I study the man in front of me. He has an ageless quality that makes it hard for me to peg down how old he really is. His expensive suite has ashes on it from chain smoking. He puffs out thin streams of curling poison over us and drums his fingers impatiently on the felt green table top.

Mr. Big Bets, as I call him, comes here every day. He's not here to chat but to make money. His weathered face and sharp eyes study the neat lines of green and white tiles with a calculating expression. His eyes never stray. His tea is always cold before he remembers it's there.

Like Mr. Big Bets, I too, am only here for one thing.

Money.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no gambler like him. Though, I do enjoy the feeling of destroying people twenty or thirty years older than me in mahjong. But I come because I need money for a replacement hockey helmet and stick. This is the fastest way I can get it. Mom and dad can't afford it and there are only so many ways to make money as a fourteen-year-old American living in China. Most Chinese kids can't get a conventional job like a cashier or barista or anything until they're eighteen.

Once I turn eighteen, I'll need a tourist visa to stay in the country. If I want to work, well that's a whole other type of visa and a pain in the butt to get. So I resort to other methods of making cash.

When I was little, my photography business was a wild success. And by photography business, I mean, people paid to take *my* picture.

Chubby little white kids were a rarity back then and any time my family went in to public, guaranteed someone would just snatch me up like a photo booth prop. There's probably a whole photo album worth of pictures floating out on the interwebs of me with complete strangers.

All of us kids get annoyed by this—even my brother Alex, though he had it the easiest. It seemed the younger the child, the more the gravitational pull to snatch them. My sister Ellie also had it bad what with her red hair and all. At least no one fingered my hair like they did with her.

Anyway, one day, I got tired of people imposing their peace signs and selfie smiles upon me. So I came up with a brilliant plan. If I couldn't make the pictures stop, I might as well be compensated for my trouble. The next time someone attempted to drag me into their photo opt, I held up my hand and charged fifteen yuan. The woman had looked surprised but then laughed and handed me the money.

I think I was more surprised than her.

From then on, I always asked for money. I didn't always get paid, but in the times when I didn't, the people would leave me alone—also a win. I made over one hundred yuan before my parents found out about my business and made me stop. Oh well, I'd already purchased all the Chinese jump ropes, hack-y-sacks, and pencil boxes I'd wanted.

Since then, I've discovered many other innovative ways of making money. This latest discovery, that I'm really good at most card games and mahjong, led me to this tea house.

The man on my right leans forward on his bamboo chair and snatches up a mahjong tile and expertly slides it into his existing row. He puts down a set of four tiles.

Uncle Zhong as I call him, is only here to be with his friends and have a good time. He reclines comfortably in his chair with the ease of someone retired and unconcerned about finances. His friends crowd around, watching him play and mostly, staring at me.

“Does she speak Chinese?” One of the friends whispers but I overhear.

“Nope, I don’t speak it at all.” I respond in Shanghainese.

The man almost falls off his chair in disbelief.

Uncle Zhong slaps his friend on the back, laughing. “The little foreigner is one of the best players here.”

Anyone else who calls me “little” or “foreigner” will get an earful from me. Only Uncle Zhong can get away with it. He always treats me same as one of the other players. He’s also harder to play against because he doesn’t make the same mistake most people do when playing me for the first time. He doesn’t underestimate me.

One look at my gangly growth spurt arms or white skin and they go easy on me. It’s not until I start flipping over my tiles that they realize their mistake. That’s the best part about mahjong; getting to the end and proving that I’m one of them, that I belong.

A woman I’ve never played before, spits out a sunflower seed and grabs a tile. She has hair tinted purple and floofed four inches off her head. She smacks her plum red lips and I know she didn’t get what she was hoping for.

I go next, and pull one of the tiles that look like two wiggly green lines. It’s exactly what I need but I don’t show it. I keep my face an impassive mask as Mr. Big Bets draws his last tile. Uncle Zhong draws, then the woman, and I take the remaining one.

There’s a moment of silence only broken by the sounds of song birds colliding harshly with the grating shuffle of mahjong tiles several tables over.

Then we all flip over our remaining tiles at once.

Mr. Big Bets and Purple Hair Lady stare in horror at my hand. Begrudgingly, they throw wadded blue fifties and red hundred yuans down on the table. I collect them swiftly, afraid they might reclaim them if given the chance.

Uncle Zhong chuckles as he hands me three crisp fifties. “Well played foreigner.”

I fold the money into my grungy sweat pants and stand. “Thanks everyone. Until next time.”

As I leave, I hear the whispered murmurs and feel their eyes following me out through the maze of chairs and tables to the pagoda bridge. I weave my way through old men chatting and sitting surrounded by cages full of brightly colored birds.

I pass a mossy, lily covered pond and through a thick green garden until I reach the main road. It’s an intersection with hundreds of people crossing the eight lanes in droves.

Bikes, mopeds and pedestrians shove me around. That’s when I spot her.

At first, I think the flash of brunette hair is dyed. Then I notice the face. There’s a foreigner waiting to cross several feet to my left. Her pale blue eyes are wide and darting around her as hordes of people close in around her.

Did I look like that when I first moved here? I hope not.

My hand drifts to my pocket to make sure my money’s still there. I feel a sense of pride at all those large bills. I’ve come a long way in four years.

Prior to Shanghai, my family moved an average of every two years. Just enough to get into a routine, pick up half of the local dialect and sort of make friends.

This is by far the longest we’ve ever lived anywhere. I speak an entire dialect, belong to a local hockey team, know my way around town, and have, for the first time, bothered memorizing my home address.

But it's probably too good to last.

The swarms of people around me grow restless. I look up at the light and see it's still red and cars are zooming past but I start crossing anyway.

Others follow suit so that a wave of pedestrians overwhelms the cars and force them to stop despite their yellow light. On the other side of the intersection, pedestrians do the same. We pass through a wall of humans going the opposite direction as we meet in the middle.

Glancing back, I notice the foreign girl still standing hesitantly back on the curb waiting for a less chaotic time to cross. Soon enough she'll learn you have to make your own way in life.