

China World

Chapter 1

"You're late, Penelope."

Miss Huang was frowning. She carried in her hand a riding crop that Penelope knew to have a lead center, giving it more weight.

"Two strokes."

Penelope had been disciplined in front of her co-workers and clients several times before in this way, but she never got over the indignity of it. No white girl ever did – guanxi made sure they remembered it and felt their pride wounded for a long time. She bent over the nail-drying desk at the front of the salon and --

*THWACK!

*THWACK!

Her heart leapt to her throat at the stinging pain that slashed across her toned butt. It would definitely leave a mark, and now whenever she sat down to do a service her bottom would hurt.

"Sorry, Miss Huang," Penelope muttered, crossing her hands in front of her waist and bowing to the frowning Chinese woman. Then she hurried over to her client, a mid-20s working professional who found nothing unusual about the fact that a girl had just been spanked in front of her. If anything, she seemed impatient.

Suya Pham, the woman getting the luxe pedi was actually Vietnamese, not Chinese but Penelope had to treat her with about the same deference.

"Where is Sarah? She was supposed to do my pedicure today," the woman said.

She talked to Penelope in English due to the social stigma against white girls speaking Mandarin, Vietnamese or any language aside from English.

"Sarah is sick. I am covering for her today, Miss Pham. She tells me so much about you – you are so beautiful today!"

The raven-haired young woman smiled – they always did at the flattery – and glanced down

at her phone.

"84% huh?" the Vietnamese businesswoman said, apparently reading through the reviews that Penelope's previous clients had left about her.

She was perching her bare feet on either side of the pedicure bowl, as though thinking about whether she trusted Penelope enough to let the new girl attend to her pedicure. Suya had on black trousers that she had hiked up to the knee, and a smart-looking powersuit as her top. She looked down at the chipped red polish on her toes, shrugged her shoulders, and gracefully placed both of her dainty feet into the warm basin of water.

Penelope emptied an aromatic blend of salts and minerals into Suya's footbath, and the woman immediately smiled and relaxed her whole body. Meanwhile, the welts on Penelope's backside were fresh as ever. Every twist of her torso, every time she reached for a manicuring implement, they'd cause her pain.

There were about five clients in Lotus Nails right now, at ten thirty in the morning. With how often people called, Penelope knew she was in for a busy day today.

Suya took a phone call, chatting away in Vietnamese as Penelope lost herself in her work. The smartwatch told her how long each step of the pedicure should take. It also displayed a timer, that counted down to her next client's appointment. It was a big offense to keep an Asian woman waiting; so Penelope needed to be quick. But there was no half-assing it or rushing it, either. Even if Penelope had no enthusiasm for the job, she had to perform well. There would be consequences if she stayed at 84% for too long.

Rhonda started doing Suya's manicure while Penelope did her pedicure, and this helped the time pass better.

"You have like, the best complexion ever! What's your secret?" Rhonda asked, making Suya blush again and shake her head bashfully.

Rhonda's alabaster complexion was nothing to scoff at, either. In Penelope's world, Rhonda might have been the type of woman to have a vacation home at Martha's Vineyard and do modeling

just for fun. She was a timeless brunette beauty with big blue eyes a sly smile. Suyu rolled her eyes and half-denied the compliment even though she was obviously thrilled to hear it.

"It's this face oil I use," Suyu replied, 'that and regular facials."

Penelope spent a long while massaging the tension out of Suyu's feet. The massage was the longest portion of the pedicure and probably the most important to a girl's job security. The entire time, Penelope was smiling and generally acting submissive, broadcasting the idea that she was happy to serve in any way.

"Would Misses place her feet in the water now?" Penelope asked, following the script Lotus Nails gave to her.

Rhonda could improvise with the clients because she had been here longer. But a newer employee like Penelope was expected to follow the employee's manual, with its humiliating grammatical errors and suggestions. At least Suyu wasn't the sort of client who insisted on talking with the girl doing her nails – Penelope disliked improvising her own backstory considering she wasn't from this planet.

Almost no client asked her about it, in any case.

Suyu was quiet: Penelope and Rhonda both understood to let her remain quiet, and efficiently finished their task of beautifying the woman's hands and feet. Other white women sat on similar pedicure stools in the salon, taking back-to-back clients on such a nice day. Many of the customers wanted the longer foot massage – why not? If you bullied the technician enough, it was practically free and white women gave the best foot massages.

All across the city and the world, white girls toiled and slaved away to create a comfortable life for Chinese benefactresses. There was unimaginable luxury for the ruling class in New Beijing – but it was a wonder of the world for other reasons from that.

New Beijing was such an economic and cultural powerhouse that it could enforce its ludicrous stance on immigration and citizenship. Almost no men were allowed to live in the city. At most, they could ride the train in from New Guangzhou across the river, but only when there was

truly no other alternative and only for as little time as necessary.

For this reason, the city attracted some of the brightest minds in the world: doctors, engineers, physicists, and artist types who wanted to do their work without worrying about a man taking credit, or intimidating them or harrassing them in whatever way. Then when they arrived here, they were delighted to have newfound leisure time due to the enormous pool of low-paid white girls doing all their chores. Many found the lifestyle addictive and started getting into it on levels they hadn't expected. Some women didn't even wash their own hair anymore, as a show of status.

But here at Lotus Nails, Penelope was in a good mood. She was ahead of schedule, and saw that Suyu gave her a 5 star review. There was a whole ritual surrounding a girl receiving five-star review: Penelope's smartwatch played a distinct noise and flashed brightly for a while, announcing to the world what a good servant she had been.

Rhonda took notice.

"Oh, you got a fiver?" she said, tapping Penelope's smartwatch affectionately. Penelope just nodded and smiled, but the smile evaporated when she saw her next client.

It was Jie Sing, the impossibly high-maintenance daughter of some real estate person. Although the technicians were required to act polite towards her, every one of them wished that Jie would go to another salon and leave them alone. There was no pleasing this woman – if she noticed even a hair's breadth between the polish on her nail and her cuticle area, she would complain at the front desk. The woman's black leather stilettos cost more than Penelope would make in an entire fiscal quarter, and she always expected someone else to remove them for her.

"Can we have a different girl detail my shoes this time? Rhonda missed a lot of dirt last time," Jie said to Miss Huang at quite a loud volume.

The salon owner, who was such a terror to her employees, was all smiles and nods for Jie Sing, who was almost certainly a member of the People's Council. Penelope knew that Jie could have spoken with Miss Huang in Chinese, but would never miss a chance to express her displeasure

to as big an audience as possible. Rhonda slumped her shoulders and apologized for the inconvenience to Jie, but the girl barely took notice.

"Ariel! You do her shoes," Miss Huang said, spurring the pixie-like girl to action.

As Jie sat down to get her pedicure, Ariel spirited away the woman's high heels. She took them to an area near the front of the window and began the arduous task of detailing them. It consisted of taking a toothpick wrapped in cotton and going over every bit of the footwear, scraping away every last speck of dirt. She couldn't miss a spot: Ariel even had to scrape out the gunk trapped between the grooves on the bottom of the shoes.

Ariel was smiling as she worked, and Penelope wondered if the girl had been broken down to such an extent that she actually found this job tolerable or if it was just for the sake of appearance.

In Penelope's view, it was demeaning, difficult and pointless work – the shoes would just get dirty again as soon as Jie walked out of Lotus Nails. But Chinese women adored having white girls detail their shoes in such a fashion. Most businesses had a girl like Ariel whose sole job was to meticulously clean womens' shoes. And many women took it one step further and had a shoe-shine girl as part of their household staff.

Young white women might spend their entire careers doing such mindless chores: a pretty blonde with milky white skin kneeling in the foyer, cleaning shoes that were hand-stitched in a sweatshop by another white woman.

"Katie, please focus on my feet," Jie warned, bringing Penelope's attention back to where it belonged.

'Katie' was a semi-acceptable slur that Chinese women used when they didn't care to remember a white girl's name. It was based on an old racist joke: 'why are so many white women named Katie? Because it's easy to spell: K.T.!'

"Sorry, Miss Sing," Penelope responded, observing that the polish on the woman's toes hadn't grown out one millimeter since her last pedicure.

She was careful at every step of the way, using only the most gentle motions to remove the girl's nail polish or push back her cuticles. There wasn't much to do: a girl like Jie got pedicures so regularly that her feet were in nearly perfect condition. Her toes were a little short, but her feet were small in general and very pretty. There was maybe a hangnail to cut, but most of the job consisted of making Jie happy: did she want to talk? To be appreciated? Or just be silently catered to?

The timer was always counting down to her next client. Jie chose a bright orange color that didn't match her mean personality, and complimented Penelope on her work applying it.

To Penelope's amazement, Jie was actually tolerable that day, and even gave her a five-star review! But her enthusiasm was undercut by the fact that she booked Penelope for her next pedicure in two weeks' time, and that would be a whole new chance for the high-maintenance woman to find something to complain about. No white girl was ever truly free from meeting a Chinese woman's expectations. Not for long, at least.

Penelope made it to lunch without incident, except for the burning pain in her wrists from administering so many foot massages. Space was such a premium in New Beijing that the girls didn't even have a break room: just a couple of stools located in the supply closet. It was a stark contrast to the open, expansive feel of the salon floor and it neatly summarized the relative status between the two groups.

She sat on a little wooden stool and gulped down the nutritional pink slurry that she and every other white girl ate for all of their meals. It tasted awful, like underripe bananas and charcoal. It would coat her mouth with foul grease that took hours to entirely dissipate, but gave her sweet-smelling breath that Chinese women enjoyed and commented on, usually in backhanded ways.

"I wish my breath smelled as sweet as yours! White girls smell so good, and you don't even have to worry about deciding what to eat," a plump Chinese woman would say, eating her garlic chow mein in front of a drooling servant girl.

The slurry was so cheap to produce that it was a cornerstone of the entire world's work

force, but especially New Beijing's enormous white labor pool. Penelope had heard rumors that it cost less than six yuan per day for a person to live on that pink goop – half the price of a single cup of coffee. Naturally, the money that society saved by giving white girls so little, it spent lavishing Chinese women with that much more. Penelope's eyes always went to the food women brought into the salon: it was like they enjoyed devouring it in front of an audience.

Chinese women would share a bite of food with their servants sometimes: this was considered a good deed. Especially if it was the last scraps of a meal, or a part that the mistress didn't want anyway. It boggled Penelope's mind that people had come to accept these things as normal, all these degrading rituals, and that she would have to participate as well!

Penelope nearly screamed the first time a Chinese woman offered her the bitten head of a shrimp, seriously expecting her to suck the meat out of it when the woman had already taken the best bits and coated the thing in her saliva. She was spanked furiously for refusing the woman's generosity that day, and never made the mistake of refusing food again even though she had been offered even less appetizing things since. And Penelope also had a social obligation to thank the Chinese woman for her generosity, and make a big show of enjoying something like the fibrous shell of a soybean that probably wasn't fit for human consumption anyway.

There was a screen in the breakroom, showing a historical drama and Penelope got lost in it for a little bit as she sipped her unpalatable smoothie.

Two young women sat in a mansion, dressed in a style that Penelope associated with the American antebellum. Everything about them said grace and sophistication, from the lacework on their petticoats to their spotless floors and windows. It was jarring for her to watch these serials because white women almost never had a speaking role. They were in the background, though: scrubbing floors, washing dishes, cleaning the womens' riding boots. Most media had a similar message: that the life experience of the Chinese woman is enviable, but who cares about her personal foot masseuse or her laundry girl?

The women carried parasols and were walking around examining the fields re-enacting the

colonization of what was then known as America. In the twenty thousand acre fields were healthy white women, picking all manner of crops and doing the labor necessary to prepare them for their mistress' needs. White hands picked the tomato, and washed it, and cut it up into slices to prepare a salad. All enjoyment went to their mistress, then another white servant cleared the table and prepared to do the same thing all over again the next day for little or no money. The Chinese had won such treatment from their fierce terms of surrender after a lightning conquest of the North American continent.

It happened this way: through bacteria. The Middle Kingdom always had a bias in favor of men. Women were at the lowest margins of society, and families did not celebrate the birth of a daughter. The country considered many policies to get rid of the unwanted gender, some quite dark. Eventually a court scribe had an idea: why not send the women to this little-known country across the ocean to some kind of labor colony?

When the Chinese settlers arrived, they brought with them the rinderpest virus that completely destroyed the white population. For some reason, the virus affected men to a much greater degree than it did women just as it greatly depressed rates of male child birth. Armies would fall before they could even reach the battlefield – then Chinese soldiers would pick up their perfectly good weapons and march on, conquering the nation with little more than a skeleton crew. They would always send the women with the first wave of scouts, who quickly developed reputations for being witch-goddesses that could only be satisfied by absolute surrender. It was about this time that Chinese women developed the cultural fascination with having their feet serviced by reluctant white girls; a trend that continued and evolved to this day.

Chinese officers and their wives would march into the homes of white women whose husbands had succumbed to the White Plague, sometimes walking in on them as black maids massaged their feet or waxed their legs. When the maids were freed, they had plenty of ideas on how to get even with their former mistresses, now that the tables were turned. This became the strategy for how The Middle Kingdom kept control of the Americas: they told the underclasses,

"you can have power and revenge, just remember who gave it to you."

Penelope heard that cities like New Shanghai (once called Atlanta) were similar to New Beijing but with black women holding the power. White girls still took all the inferior social roles, preparing comfort food and styling their own hair into blonde afros to emulate Afro-centric notions of beauty.

Girls told stories about the place: in that city, black women really enjoyed being tattoo artists but didn't go for tattoos much themselves. Lily-skinned Penelope was happy she hadn't landed there; she had little pain tolerance, a dislike of needles, and found the idea of being some walking canvas for proud black women to ink up however they liked wholly offensive. More strangely: If New Beijing was the city of foot worship, New Shanghai was where white women learned the art of worshipping black women's clits. There were plenty of seminars and bootcamps to train them how to do it better.

It stemmed from some old wives' tale about how white prostitutes for black mistresses showed more resistance to the White Plague, which was all the justification women needed to support an entire class of people dedicated to worshipping their pussies in the best ways possible even after the White Plague passed. Relaxed social mores meant that New Shanghai had 'coffee shops' where black women could nestle into sofas and have obedient white women lap at their sex, on demand, for as long as they wished like it was some kind of casual massage. The dark-skinned women thrived on such attention; New Shanghai had some of the best universities in the world.

Penelope had to admit they came up with some incredible research there. The pink sludge had been invented by black scientists. Between its affordability, ease of production and the way it condensed so much caloric energy into so little space, it was competitive with anything that scientists from Penelope's world had produced.

It had solved world hunger: no longer did people starve, they just submitted to eating lousy-tasting gruel for the rest of their lives. And if someone fell on hard enough times to depend on the pink smoothie, it was generally a lifelong commitment. It supposedly re-programmed a person's

intestinal bacteria with its antibiotics such that they had a hard time eating normal food except for a bite here and there. The fact that people put antibiotics in her food made Penelope feel like they were just cattle. Perhaps there were birth control hormones in there too? Or some kind of chemical to induce submissiveness in a huge swath of the population? Could such things exist here?

The unfortunate blonde girl looked down at her watch. Two minutes until her break ended, but Miss Haung expected each of her employees to cut their breaks short to show their appreciation for the job. She carefully placed her reusable bottle back into the little fridge and returned to the salon floor.

She missed the sensation of being full, of sharing a good meal with friends. As she approached her next appointment, Penelope reflected on the fact that every social interaction required her to take the position of less power. It wreaked havoc on her self-esteem and the mind-rotting media she was constantly exposed to only made matters worse.

Her next client was a young Japanese mother, unusually tall with long, slender feet. She gave Penelope a curious expression, like she recognized her from somewhere. As Penelope began trimming the woman's nails, she was playing around on her smartphone.

"I thought it was you!" The Japanese woman declared triumphantly. "You're Bikini Girl!"

She showed a video someone had apparently taken of Penelope when she first arrived here. It was titled 'Crazy White Girl Can't Find Home' and whoever did the filming kept making cutting remarks and chuckling each time a woman refused to help Penelope. Although the Japanese woman clearly meant to humiliate Penelope by this distressing video, this couldn't be more helpful! If she studied the video closely enough, she could find the street where she had been arrested. She had already tried to unseal her court documents to discover such a thing, but all of her efforts failed so she still didn't know where that tanning booth was.

This could be her first clue.

"Haha, yeah. I was sooo drunk," Penelope said, acting like a the stereotype of a silly gweilo to throw off suspicion. The woman seemed unsatisfied.

"Drunk, huh? You said 'New York...' How did you hear about such a place?"

Penelope's heart started to jackhammer, and she knew her smartwatch was recording it. This woman wasn't just a client – her narrow brown eyes studied Penelope carefully and her black hair was pulled into a ponytail giving her a stern almost authoritarian appearance.

What could Penelope say? The woman was right to be suspicious about such a phrase. There were no history books anymore – nearly all information had been digitized and certainly the information that the underclasses had access to. History had also been heavily edited, with Chinese historians purging most mentions of the US except to call it a backwater colony with considerable resources, in need of strict governance. The world narrative was China's own history: its expansion, the changes of its governing bodies, the beliefs of its citizens. At nowhere in Penelope's education should she have learned what New York City, or Brooklyn, or a dollar was.

"I don't know. I must have heard some other girl say it when I was drinking," Penelope lied.

"Where were you drinking at?"

Penelope racked her mind, trying to remember the name of the bar that Sarah frequented and the last time she had been there.

"Rose's," she replied.

The Japanese played with her smartphone a little bit, probably checking Penelope's geographic history. Her smartwatch recorded all of that, obviously.

"There's no need to be afraid!" the woman said, flashing a smile that didn't quite touch her eyes.

"Everyone gets confused sometimes. Are you sure that it was at Rose's that you heard someone say this?"

Penelope nodded her head, aware that this might create awful consequences for innocent people. The woman had no accent on her English.

"Can you remember who said it?"

During this conversation, Penelope was still doing the Japanese woman's pedicure, going

through each step of the pampering routine while under interrogation herself. But when she was asked this specific question, her hands began to shake to such an extent it was hard for her to hold the nail scissors. Penelope had to obscure this fact by being as still as possible, moving her hands only when strictly necessary.

"I don't. Sorry, I was really wasted! I'm just so ashamed of acting like a dumb white girl back there."

She doubled down on the bimbo act, and apparently it worked. The Japanese woman snorted in laughter, and settled back into her seat.

"I think you would benefit from a re-education seminar," her client said.

She played around with her electronic device and Penelope got a notification that her schedule had changed. Instead of going to work tomorrow, she was to report to a Council Headquarters at eight AM. It was an indefinite appointment – no mention of what time it would end. The Japanese woman snapped her fingers to call Miss Huang over. At that moment, there was no doubt that this woman was a Councilmember.

The two spoke in Chinese, but the tone of the conversation was obvious. The Japanese woman was giving Miss Huang an order, and the salon owner smiled and bowed and quickly agreed to whatever was said. And now, Penelope had to begin massaging this terrible woman's bare feet.

"Seriously, don't be afraid," the councilwoman said, "if we thought you were dangerous, we would have dealt with it by now. We just think you're interesting... maybe different. Don't be late."

'Don't be late' was a way for a woman to end a conversation with an inferior such as Penelope. Now the girl was truly afraid for her life, which made the experience of giving a relaxing massage all the more surreal. Here she was stroking the woman's soles and running her hands up and down her calves, when that woman might decide to put her in prison or even execute her!

Penelope was 'different' when she first arrived. But now, living exactly the same as all the other subjugated white girls, she was changing. She wondered how long it was until she was exactly the same as all of them – when the memories of her own world became as delusional to herself as

they were to the rest of the women here. Would she even last that long, or would this 'headquarters visit' be the end of things? People disappeared here and when it was a white girl it was rarely worth a mention.

She had to find that tanning bed. Why hadn't she just climbed back inside of it and gone home? She also had to think of some impossible story for tomorrow to explain how she had existed for 21 years without documentation in a society that literally recorded everything. But for now, she had to apply a bold red varnish to adorn the woman's slender toes, and thank her for visiting Lotus Nails.

The councilwoman did not leave a review for Penelope, nor did she pay for the service in any apparent way. The rest of the day, Miss Haung treated Penelope like she was radioactive, communicating as little as possible and keeping her distance. Rhonda alone spoke with Penelope, and it made the vulnerable girl feel like at least someone cared.

"Don't worry about tomorrow," the brunette girl said, "I've been there before. It's just a little hypnosis and a few shots, then study time. You'll be back here on the day after, I bet."

There was little comfort in this prediction – a bit of torture followed by a return to her natural place beneath Chinese women's feet, pampering and adoring them?

"Let's go to the bar tonight," Rhonda said, "Take your mind off it. It's really not a big deal. Like, not the best thing that can happen, but... you need to smile more."

Penelope understood the point, and smiled even though it scared her the way Rhonda told her to smile in a sharp, serious whisper.

"Okay, yeah!" was Penelope's response. She had to get above 84%, too.

She couldn't shake the feeling that this was her last night on Earth. Is this how those huddled masses felt, in all the history books she had read? To be wanted for questioning by the secret police, penniless, and subjected to ridiculous punishments for anything under the sun? And the timer on her smartwatch was always counting down – she had another service, this time just a long foot massage for a bored daughter of some oil baron. The girl wore Certier style bracelets as though they were

costume jewelry and was obviously hungover, commenting about how badly her feet hurt from dancing so much last night.

She wanted such a forceful massage it hurt Penelope's hands to administer, but she didn't dare let up the pressure that the high-maintenance girl wanted.

Under such conditions, Penelope might have gone mad except for one burning mission: to find that tanning bed and get home. Perhaps as a coping mechanism, she wholeheartedly believed that it was the solution to her problem. She was determined to escape, and to survive, and this was what kept the despair at bay. In her heart, she began plotting against the People's Council. Across the world, other white girls were doing the exact same thing, while similarly trapped in their own little worlds of abject servitude.

Did the smartwatches detect something as subtle as that? What determines if a spark becomes a single ash, or a forest fire?