

A row of five stage spotlights hanging from a metal truss at the top of the page.

IZZY WONG'S DRAMA DISASTER



CHAPTER SAMPLER
MARTY CHAN

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: In this middle-grade novel, Izzy Wong has found a new mystery to investigate for her podcast when someone uses AI to create insulting memes of a classmate. Izzy will have to risk losing her new classmates' trust to sleuth out the culprit before her parents make her give the principal the information she's gathered.

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*To George Chan, who left
this world with a true mystery
that I may never solve.*



AUDITION

Hello, I'm Izzy Wong. You're listening to a preview of *Nose for News*, an investigative podcast about what goes on in today's schools. Last season I investigated a case at my former school, Forest Lawn Elementary. A student had flooded the girls' bathroom, causing damage to the library, hallways and Ms. Berenstein's fifth-grade classroom. All attention had turned to the school's prankster—Doyle McTaggart. He claimed he was innocent, but no one believed him because of his track record of pantsing kids and sabotaging lockers with shaving cream.

But something about the case smelled off, and it wasn't the toilets. With some hard-nosed investigating, I exposed the real culprit, or I should say, culprits. A brother and sister team—Jonah and Tessa—tried to frame Doyle as revenge for a prank he had pulled on Jonah. I cleared Doyle's name and brought the right people to justice.

Expect something new this season. I'll cover the highs and lows of attending the prestigious Danforth School for the Arts. I'll report on how the best fine arts school in the city operates. Plus, I'll give a firsthand account of what it's like to be a new student and a budding artist. That is, if you'll accept me, Principal Weitz.

Click.

Behind a massive oak desk, a rail-thin man in a three-piece gray suit turned off my podcast and closed his laptop. He rested his elbows on the neatly arranged desktop pad and adjusted his black-rimmed glasses.

I shifted on the leather wingback chair, which made a farting noise as I moved. I sheepishly looked at Principal Weitz. Dad had told me the key to any successful meeting was maintaining eye contact. And this was an important meeting. Not just any kid could get into Danforth, the city's best performing arts school. To qualify, students had to audition, whether playing the piano, performing a dramatic monologue or presenting a watercolor print.

Nose for News was my audition. I hoped the podcast would show Mr. Weitz I was worthy of Danforth. He stroked his neatly trimmed mustache and surveyed me. I could feel his gaze probing me like one of the sensor beams from Dad's favorite TV series, *Star Trek*.

I cleared my throat and explained, "You see, sir, podcasting is a way to get across the—"

He cut me off. “Ms. Wong, I’m familiar with this genre. My concern is that you would be crossing two streams as a performer and a technician. I’m worried about the split focus and its impact on your ability to achieve your potential.”

“This is my passion,” I said. “I’ll work hard in both.”

His gaze intensified, and I could feel myself starting to sweat through my waffle-knit top. I resisted the urge to pull the shirt away from my damp armpit. Instead I did what Dad had advised and met the principal’s severe gaze. My eyes started to itch, but I refused to look away. Suddenly I had the urge to blink. *Don’t think about blinking. Nuts, I just blinked.*

Finally Mr. Weitz leaned back. He tapped his chin.

“What is your family’s background?”

“My dad is an illustrator.”

Mr. Weitz’s eyes widened. “Ah. A visual artist. What medium does he work in?”

“He’s a graphic designer for several important businesses,” I blurted. “He’s done work for a car rental company. And a few not-for-profits...”

Mr. Weitz plucked a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and removed his glasses to clean his lenses. I stared at the bronze plaque on the wall behind him:

**ART IS LIFE:
NEVER EASY BUT ALWAYS
WORTH THE EFFORT.**

“Mr. Weitz, I would love to be a part of this school.”

He smiled. “You’re not in the catchment, are you?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Catchment? I don’t understand.”

“Is your residence within two miles of the school?”

“We live across the city.”

He put his glasses back on. “If you were in the catchment, I could admit you into the technical arts program, no audition needed. But you’d have to submit a different audition piece for the acting stream. Something that’s more about performance than reporting.”

“My mom needs to be close to the television station.”

“And why is that, Ms. Wong?”

“She’s going to be the anchor for the six o’clock news.”

Mr. Weitz raised an eyebrow. “Which news station?”

“Central City News,” I said.

He pocketed his handkerchief. “An admirable station. They sponsored our production last year.”

“That’s great to hear,” I said. “And I should let you know that my mom is a big fan of the arts. She loves live theater and concerts.”

“Well, the high school music program has a retrospective of Sondheim songs next month. I’ll be sure to set aside some complimentary tickets for her.”

“Thank you. I’m sure Mom will be grateful.”

“Now about your place in Danforth,” he said. “It is unusual for me to enroll a student in two streams of study, but I understand these are unique circumstances for your mother.

It's an abnormal request, but I think we can manage. I hope your mother can appreciate the effort."

"Thank you, sir. I'll let her know," I said, feeling lighter. My armpits felt drier as well.

Mr. Weitz stood up and extended his hand. "Welcome to Danforth, Ms. Wong."

I shook his hand and beamed. "Thank you, Mr. Weitz. You won't regret this."

The new chapter of my life was about to begin at the Danforth School for the Arts, and I couldn't wait to see what it offered.



FIRST DAY

The first day of school can be intimidating for any student, especially if you join in the middle of the year. I wave at Dad as he drives away from the student drop-off zone, then walk up to the two-story historic building that houses the Danforth School for the Arts. I feel like throwing up and dancing at the same time. A brisk winter wind cuts under my winter jacket. My old school had a track-and-field area for phys ed. Here, an outdoor stage sits in the middle of the snow-covered field.

Classical music blares from the loudspeaker. I'm not sure what the music is for, but the students begin to file into the school. I think it replaces the school bell. I'm going in with the crowd. The hallway bustles with activity. The kids are different than my former classmates. Few hoodies. One hockey jersey. A lot of girls wear ballet leotards with pink legwarmers. Another bunch of kids look super retro. Funky '70s tie-dyed T-shirts, '80s-style pastel pants and '90s

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grunge plaid shirts tied around the waists. I slice through the crowd and head to the office. The administrator stands up from her desk as I walk in. Her hair is tied back in a bun, and her outfit makes me think I've walked into a business office.

IZZY: Hi. I'm starting school today. I'm Izzy Wong.

MS. COLLINS: Nice to meet you, Ms. Wong. I'm
Ms. Collins.

She extends a hand. I reach out to shake it, but she waves me off.

MS. COLLINS: Turn off your recorder, Ms. Wong.

IZZY: I'm documenting my first experience at school. It's
for my project.

MS. COLLINS: That's admirable. Have you received
approval?

IZZY: Not yet.

MS. COLLINS: Then the recorder stays off.

IZZY: Okay. Sorry.

Click.

Ms. Collins handed me a file. "Here is your schedule. You'll alternate days between the acting stream and the technical arts stream. I trust you had the chance to go over the school handbook."

“The pdf you sent my parents? Yes. Thank you. It was interesting,” I said, using Mom’s code word for boring. The thing was forty pages long and took me over two hours to read. The rules and regulations were staggering. Most of them had to do with etiquette in rehearsals and performances. Some had to do with academic performance and cheating. Then there was a section devoted to food. No nuts. No peanut butter. And no oranges. Weird.

“Take a seat, Ms. Wong,” she said.

I sat on the bench by the door. Ms. Collins lifted a phone receiver and pressed a button. She spoke into the receiver. “Ms. Tenisha Benson, come to the office. Ms. Tenisha Benson. To the office, please and thank you.”

I scanned the photos on the walls. All of them were black-and-white headshots. One of them caught my eye. Blake Jameson?! He was one of Hollywood’s hottest actors. He had been nominated for an Oscar for his last film.

“Excuse me. Why do you have a picture of Blake Jameson? Did he go here?”

Ms. Collins beamed. “Yes. He’s our pride and joy. One of our finest students. We all knew he was destined for greatness, even when he got in trouble.”

“Did he get in a lot of trouble?”

She perched on the side of her desk and crossed her arms. “Skipped a class or two. Turned out he was doing auditions for commercials. Our acting teacher, Ms. Harbin, set him straight and told him to concentrate on his dramatic skills. Look at where it got him.”

A few minutes later a girl sauntered in. Her black hair was tied in a ponytail, and she wore a blue T-shirt with a cartoon drawing of Grogg sipping coffee. For a second I thought she could have been the daughter of the actress who played Ahsoka. She was stunning.

"Ah, Ms. Benson," Ms. Collins said. "Thank you for coming to the office."

"Not a problem, Ms. Collins. Is this the new student?" Tenisha asked.

I extended my hand. "Hi. I'm Izzy Wong."

She shook it and flashed a welcoming smile. "Tenisha. Everyone calls me Ten. Because that's what I am. A ten!"

Ms. Collins smiled and shook her head as Ten took a bow.

"Come on, Izzy. Let's find your locker." Ten opened the door and ushered me out. "Later, Ms. Collins!" She blew a big kiss.

When Ten closed the office door, her mood changed from sunny to surly. She narrowed her gaze at me, her brown eyes looking me up and down as if I were a stray dog that had peed on her leg.

"What's your stream?" Ten asked. "Music? Dance? Acting? Visual arts?"

"It's hard to explain," I said. "I want to make podcasts, so I'm in two streams. Acting and technical arts."

Ten's face scrunched up, confused. "Both?"

I nodded. "It's an experiment. I'll spend a bit of time in both programs."

"You should have gone for the acting stream. That's where the real fun is."

I could guess what stream Ten was in. “Your stream?”

“Can’t you tell? I’m a triple threat. Acting, dancing and singing. I have the lead in the next show. I’m playing Wendy in *Peter Pan*.”

“So when did you start at this school?”

“Fourth grade. I got in on my first audition.”

“You can audition more than once?”

She nodded. “Yeah. But only once per year. You have to wait until the following year if you want another crack at getting in.”

On the other side of the doors, I could see an open area filled with long tables and plastic chairs. I noticed the food-serving window, as well as another set of double doors at the far end of the room.

“The cafeteria is the common area for everyone.”

“What’s on the other side?” I asked, pointing.

Ten shrugged. “That’s for the upper grades. This space is for all the students, so don’t let any of the older kids kick you out.”

“Got it,” I said. “What’s on the second floor?”

She rolled her eyes. “Technical arts and some music rehearsal rooms. It’s mainly for the techies.”

“The who?”

“Technical arts. Your boring half.”

“What are the students like?” I asked.

“You’ll see. One warning. Be careful. Oh, and here’s your locker.”

“Thanks,” I said, slipping off my coat. I pulled out a combination lock and stowed my gear while Ten leaned against the lockers.

“Why do I have to be careful?” I asked.

“If they know you’re one of us, they might give you a rough time. Especially River.”

My nose for news began to twitch. “What about River?”

Ten sighed. “Acts like he’s in charge and has no time for us actors. He can be mean when he wants to be, so don’t get on his bad side. Come on. Let’s get to class.”

As we walked into the sixth-grade classroom, I felt all eyes turning to me. Dad would say it was like Captain Kirk had been transported into the Klingon war room. I scanned the class to get a read on my new classmates. One boy smiled. The rest of the kids narrowed their gazes.

“In. In. Come in,” a woman’s voice said.

Ten looked at the woman and introduced me. “Ms. Bernard, this is Izzy Wong.”

“Thank you, Ten. You can take your seat now.”

Ten bowed with a flourish. Most of the kids groaned. I guessed they had seen Ten’s bowing act before. She strutted to her desk while Ms. Bernard strolled over to me. She looked like a hurricane had hit her. Her beige smock was covered with paint splatters. Her frizzy black hair seemed to shoot out all sides of her head like Medusa’s snakes. When she lifted her hand to shake mine, her turquoise bracelets clanked against each other.

“Welcome to my humble hovel,” Ms. Bernard said. She waved her arm around the room.

Her desk reminded me of her smock. Both were disaster areas. Paint cans, canvases and paintbrushes were scattered everywhere. A lone clean paintbrush sat in a glass jar on her

desktop computer monitor. On the wall behind the desk were student paintings of what looked like half-eaten pies. The floor around the desk had a drop cloth that looked like an impressionist painting.

“I’m guessing you’re the visual arts teacher,” I said.

She crinkled her nose, perplexed at my guess. “No, I teach music.”

I backpedaled. “Oh. Um. I’m sorry.” My ears went red. “I just thought with all the...I mean, there’s your smock...and the paint.”

Ms. Bernard broke into a grin as the class laughed. “I’m kidding, Izzy. I’m the math teacher.”

I laughed hard. “Good one,” I said.

The class fell silent, and I cut my laughter short.

She put her hand on my shoulder. “No. I *am* the math teacher. All this is my way of putting the *A* in STEAM.” She smiled. “We’re working out fractions with paintings of pies. Pop quiz! This one has what fraction left?”

Ms. Bernard tapped her finger against a pie sketch with a quarter slice missing as she surveyed the class expectantly. Everyone slipped lower in their seats, the universal body language of students who did not want to answer.

“Izzy? Do you know how much of the pie is left?” she asked.

“Three quarters...?” I said.

She clapped her hands, her blue bangles clacking in stereo. “Good! Correct. Now can you express your answer as a decimal?”

“Um...zero point...seven...five?”

"Absolutely right. You're going to be a great addition to the class. Addition. Math. Get it? I'm sure my math keener does." She beamed at me.

The kids groaned at the pun.

"Thanks," I mumbled. *Oh great.* First day of school, and I had outed myself as a math geek. I glanced at the students.

To my surprise, they looked relieved. Ten mouthed a silent *thank you*. I didn't know what was happening, but I guessed the kids were not fans of Ms. Bernard's pop quizzes.

"Since Izzy is new to the school, do you know what time it is?"

Suddenly the kids perked up. Hands shot up in the air. A kid wearing a Spider-Man hoodie blurted, "Two truths and a lie!"

"Dion, hands," Ms. Bernard chided.

"Sorry, Ms. Bernard," Dion said. "But I'm right, aren't I?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dion. You guessed right. Izzy, here are the rules of the game. You have to give us three statements about yourself. Two of them must be true and one of them has to be a lie. Once we hear them, we deduce which is the lie."

"Sounds fun," I said.

"I'll give you two minutes to think about your truths and lies," Ms. Bernard announced.

"Is it okay if I record the session?" I asked. "It's for the project I want to work on. I'm making a podcast of what it's like to be a new student at Danforth."

She raised an eyebrow. "A documentarian? You're our first! I like the idea, but we can't record without permission."

“Oh,” I said. “It’s just that this would be the perfect opener for the episode. Getting to know each of the students thanks to this awesome icebreaker of yours.”

She narrowed her gaze. “I see you’ve learned the fine art of pumping the tires.”

I smiled sweetly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ms. Bernard laughed. “Tell you what, Izzy. I’ll put it out to the class. Whoever wants to be recorded can, but you’ll have to give me the SD card until the admin and the students’ parents give the green light. Deal?”

“Sure,” I said.

Ms. Bernard brushed her hands against her paint-splattered smock and turned to the crowd. “Okay, students, what do all of you think about Izzy recording our game?”

A ton of hands shot up, but not all. My gaze zoomed to one of the reluctant kids—a boy with magnificent blond hair who was slouched down, staring at his desk. His hands fumbled with his pencil.

Ms. Bernard nodded. “Okay then. For those of you who aren’t comfortable with being recorded, Izzy will turn off the recorder during your turn. Let’s get started.”

The kids cheered. The boy with the beautiful blond hair smiled, looking relieved. I pulled my recorder out of my pocket.

MS. BERNARD: You have three minutes to come up with your statements.

IZZY: Day one of school at the Dan. I’m excited about getting to know the other kids. Our teacher,

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Ms. Bernard, has asked us to play two truths and a lie. I know this game because almost every teacher at Forest Lawn used it to kick off the school year. All the kids there knew each other so well, it was impossible to lie. But now I have a clean slate. I already know my three statements, and by the looks of the classroom, so do the others.

I grab a seat at an empty desk and wait.

MS. BERNARD: Okay, time's up. Everyone ready? Please don't volunteer to go until you know your three statements. Remember, you're trying to trick each other. No giggling.

She and most of the students turn their heads to look at a red-haired girl, who starts to laugh.

MS. BERNARD: Zara. Come on.

The girl covers her mouth and finally stifles her giggling.

ZARA: Sorry, Ms. Bernard.

MS. BERNARD: Izzy, do you want to go first?

IZZY: Sure. Here are my three statements. I am an only child.
A dolphin nearly killed me. And my uncle is Jackie Chan.

Ms. Bernard points to Ten, who has her hand up.

TEN: I love acting. I played Denzel Washington's daughter in a movie. I have two cats.

Kids burst out laughing at the Denzel line. I think I know which one is the lie.

DION: I came this close to getting a lead role on a TV show. I make YouTube videos about parkour. I'm originally from Spain.

LILY: I shot a rifle. I have three goldfish. I'm named after my grandma.

MATTHEW: I live next to the school. I love *Lord of the Rings* because it's *precious*. Oh, and I have a brother.

The class groans at Matthew's impression of Gollum. I suspect they've heard it a few times.

RIVER: I'm allergic to oranges. I hate Harry Potter books. And I love playing Dungeons & Dragons.

KIDS: Lie!

MS. BERNARD: Shh. No guessing yet. Next?

MEGAN: My cat starred in a commercial. I've been to Disneyland three times. And I have 10,000 followers on Insta. No, now 10,004.

Some of the kids boo until Megan glares at them. They go silent. The giggler stands up.

ZARA: I play the alto sax. I play the piano. (*Giggles.*) I play the drums.

The blond boy with the magnificent blond hair stands up.

MS. BERNARD: Brody is up next. Izzy, please turn off your recorder now.

Click.

This was going to be an amazing segment to kick off the podcast. Everyone sounded interesting. I only wished I could have recorded everyone, because Brody had the best stories.

For the record, most of the kids thought I was related to Jackie Chan, which was a complete lie. I busted some of the kids, but I was surprised at what was true. Megan was a social media star, River was allergic to oranges, and Lily did shoot her grandpa's rifle. Then there was Brody Hogan.

He claimed he'd acted with Blake Jameson in a short film. Then he said he'd turned down a part in a Hollywood film because he was allergic to dogs and the part called for him to have a dog. Finally, he told a story about losing his aunt in a car accident four years back and how it had impacted his every decision since. He'd choked up as he talked about how much he missed her smile and mocha tarts. The entire class had fallen silent when Brody was done. Ms. Bernard had wiped away a tear.

It turned out the aunt story was a lie. All I could think was this guy was a seriously good actor.

For the rest of the class, Ms. Bernard introduced us to the order of operations—parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition and subtraction. My eyes began to glaze over as she explained which had priority. This was way less fun than the icebreaker game.

I was relieved when the music played for the next class. All the kids headed off to their stream study programs. The schedule was split between the core subjects, like math, language arts, social studies and science, and the program stream (like acting, technical arts, drama and fine art). The core classes were during the first and last block of the morning, and the first and last block of the afternoon, and the stream classes were sandwiched between.

This would be my first day of technical arts, and tomorrow I would be with the actors. I pulled out my school map.

“Excuse me, but where is Mr. Singh’s class?” I asked Ms. Bernard.

She waved over two boys who were about to head out. “Matthew, can you show Izzy to the technical arts class?”

One boy shambled over while the other lingered at the door. The freckle-faced boy thumped his fist against his chest and bowed his head. “Hi, I’m Matthew Dreeshan. Follow us.”

He led me to the other boy, who bobbed his head and said, “River. River Arcand.”