

Jackie Truong arrived at the gleaming steps of Westminster Academy like a bargain-bin Hamlet—fully prepared to monologue her way through a personal tragedy if the audition went south.

Since auditions were scheduled the week before school started, she spent the entire summer break rehearsing. Although Jackie memorized every line until it came as easy as breathing, nothing stopped the constant jitters. Despite the excessive pep talks she'd given herself earlier, her stomach was preparing for gymnastics tryouts with a full-fledged somersault routine. She could probably wring a cup of water from her shaking hands.

Before her was an elaborate marble archway over great oak doors. Steadying her shaking hands, Jackie closed her eyes and counted to eight. Eight was lucky. When her time expired, she exhaled a low breath and pushed open the double doors.

The interior walls were painted a pristine white to match the glossy tiles. Framed by curved archways, grand staircases opened to winding halls while gold chandeliers dangled from the ceiling. This was it—her new boarding school for the next two years. Her move-in date for the dorms was scheduled the Saturday before classes began.

Jackie stopped before the theater door, chewing her lip. There it stood, the gateway to her future. Though on second thought, maybe she wasn't cut out to act. Her feet were tempted to carry her back out the door and to the safety of her bedroom. Closing her eyes, she counted to eight. Lucky eight. She'd give herself eight seconds to decide.

"You're in the way."

Jackie whirled around and almost stumbled into a student who towered over her. With a gulp, she inched away and stared upward to examine his face. Dark and intense eyes bore into her, the kind that could pierce right through anything. He was lean and tall, with deep brown skin and an angular face framed by thick black eyebrows. Angry red acne splotches clustered on his cheeks.

"Move." An irritated expression crossed his face. He pushed his glasses up his aquiline nose.

"Right! Sorry." Arms flailing, Jackie stepped aside and nearly tripped over her own two feet.

The stranger rolled his eyes and brushed past her, carrying himself furiously upright. She caught a whiff of a spicy and earthy scent. Perhaps with a bitter hint of smoke. He smelled rich—like money. His cologne was the aim of every expensive fragrance commercial.

"Well, hi! I'm Jackie? I moved here over the summer." Her voice sounded tight and quavering. She cringed and swallowed hard, wiping her sweaty palms on her skirt.

"Thought so. I would've recognized you otherwise."

Jackie twirled the ends of her red hair ribbon around a finger. She squinted at his name tag, which read Aarav Deshmukh in neat letters. "Aarav?"

"That's me. I'm the student director." He smoothed out the sleeves of his crisp black button-down.

"So you decide the roles?"

"Partially." Leaning against the wall, Aarav adjusted his glasses and folded his arms. "Since Westminster values the arts, the school prefers students to be as involved as possible. However, Mr. Wilson has the final say as the faculty supervisor."

He tilted his chin in the direction of the teacher, an elderly man with graying hair and a black vest. Mr. Wilson ambled down the middle aisle, leaning on a wooden cane.

Then Aarav cleared his throat. "Please find a seat near the stage. Mr. Wilson or I will call your name when it's your turn."

Despite the clock reading ten minutes until the official start of auditions, the theater soon grew packed. Aspiring actors found their places among friends to squeeze in last-minute practice and run lines. Gnawing her lip, Jackie followed Aarav into the theater and looked around.

At the front reigned a splendid stage while interminable rows of crimson cushioned chairs lined the audience. Inching forward, she traced over every polished surface, fingertips gliding against varnished wood tiles and opalescent glass inlays.

She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly: the theater smelled like old leather and sawdust. Wrapping her arms around herself, she chose a chair near the front where she could watch everyone else. Sliding lower in her seat, Jackie drew her knees to her chest and twisted her hair ribbon around a finger.

Meanwhile, Aarav lounged near the front with one leg crossed over the other in a figure-four position. One hand rested behind his head while the other clutched a clipboard. Mr. Wilson leaned a cane against a chair and sat beside him. Casually methodical, he called each person and scrutinized each performance with cold and calculating eyes, jotting notes on his clipboard.

Anahi Gomez, a black-haired sophomore, read for the sorceress while Damien Mitchell, a freshman with braces, read for the mayor. However, Aarav's expression remained frigid and unreadable. Not one of the multifarious auditions provoked the slightest emotion. Again, he scribbled notes, his silence punctured only by the occasional whispers to Mr. Wilson.

After each audition, the knots in Jackie's stomach twisted tighter and tighter while she tied and untied the red ribbon in her ponytail. As anticipated, numerous reads for Astoria—the leading role—included booming voices and insurmountable energy, gestures trembling with fiery anger. Although she wanted to support her fellow drama nerds, an icy fear skewered her heart. What if their performances precluded her from landing a role?

"Next: Jaclyn Truong for the role of Astoria."

At last, it was her turn. The final audition. From the left steps, she ascended the stage and shuffled to the center. Teeth digging into her bottom lip, she picked at her nails and fought not to stare at her feet. While her eyes scanned the audience for any smile of encouragement, fellow actors' eyes reflected cold and competitive stares. She wiped her sweaty, trembling hands on her jeans and tried not to drop the script.

"Start reading from page 88 whenever you're ready." Brow creasing, Aarav tapped his pen against the edge of the clipboard.

At his words, Jackie stood a little straighter and released a rattling breath. A tremulous smile flickered on her lips. Squeezing her eyes shut, she counted to eight before starting. Her eyes scanned the script, and she forced herself to read the print—the stage directions in sleek italics, the character names in glaring all-caps. Then she lowered it and looked up to face the audience.

As expected, previous auditionees bellowed with faces contorted in unadulterated rage. However, Jackie aimed for a more subtle interpretation. Despite the doubt scorching her mind, she would follow through with her original intentions. While her dark eyes sharpened, she raised her head and cast the audience a withering stare. In a low voice smoldering with fear, she began to recite the lines she knew by heart.

"You want fear? You want power? I shall destroy you, utterly and completely, burning your body and leaving you choking on your own blood. And for my own amusement, I'll carve out your eyes with my bare hands so you'll understand the darkness you've imprisoned me in all these years."

While Jackie uttered the final words, her body remained rooted in place. Forged from ashes and embers, her spine was steel and her heart was armor. Astoria's enemies were lower than dirt. No, she wouldn't yell, not with the sheer power coursing through her veins and spilling out her fingertips. Astoria would carry herself with restrained control.

No one moved and no one spoke. Jackie's words lingered in the silence. Holding her breath, she scanned the room. Despite Aarav's hardened expression, the hint of a smile tugged at his lips. Or were her eyes fooling her? Was she grasping at any shred of hope?

"Alright everyone, that is all for now. Mr. Wilson and I will release the list in two days." He clicked his pen against the clipboard.

A flurry of footsteps, a burst of chatter, and the students were out the theater doors. With slumped shoulders and head bowed, Jackie sighed and grabbed her bag on the way out, slinging it over her shoulders. The sun's warm rays greeted her, the last remnant of summer break.

Jackie tasted the metallic hint of blood. She pressed a thumb to her lips; the skin was torn and bleeding. She licked them furiously and sighed.

"Jackie." A lanky, suntanned boy ambled over to her, hands in his pockets and a crooked grin on his face. He had a head of blond curls, light blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles across his cheeks.

Jackie froze and her pulse quickened. "Yes?"

"You were great today. Even Aarav was a little impressed which doesn't happen often."

"I was?" Her voice came out high-pitched and strained. As pink tinged her ears, Jackie wrapped her arms around herself while her glance fell to her sneakers.

"Your audition was amazing." His smile widened and she met his warm eyes.

"Thanks." Akin to crimson camellias, her cheeks blossomed into a brighter red. She bit her lip and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Why was he wasting his time talking to her? Surely he had friends who demanded attention.

"Why haven't I seen you around before?"

"I'm new." The butterflies fluttering in Jackie's stomach were barely containable. "I moved over summer break since my mother remarried."

"First day nerves, I'm guessing? No worries, you'll soon fit in here. Name's Liam, by the way—Liam Sinclair." The boy held out his hand.

Jackie clasped her fingers around and shook it before jerking back her arm. She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans.

An unperturbed Liam flashed her a 100-watt smile. "Pleasure meeting you, Jackie."

...

Despite the lingering summer heat, the Astor mansion was cold and quiet. Shivering, Jackie pulled her sweater tighter and walked into the kitchen where she was greeted with the sharp scent of garlic and savory meat. The stove was on, the flickering blue flame warming a large covered pot. Leaning over, she lifted the lid to find *thịt kho*. It was a Vietnamese dish of braised pork and hard-boiled eggs marinated in coconut water, stained a warm golden brown from the coloring. Her mouth watered; she could almost breathe in the salty-sweet taste.

Seasoned with soy sauce and fish sauce with tablespoons of brown sugar swirled the flavors and memories of her childhood. Unsaid 'I love you's' were the salt and pepper in every act—lightly dusted between moments of Má preparing home-cooked meals no matter the hour, of Jackie dying her mother's hair to rid her head of old age.

At the sound of footsteps, Jackie lowered the lid and jerked away from the stove. Má padded into the kitchen, feet clad in fluffy slippers, dark hair in a loose ponytail. Heavy jade bracelets and gold bangles decorated her bony wrists. In the dim sulfur light, she looked younger, the lines around her eyes softened. “You’re home. How were the auditions?”

Automatically, Jackie reached for her hair ribbon. She twisted the ends around her finger. “Alright.”

“Just alright?” Má clicked her tongue while her eyes hardened. In contrast to her stony gaze, her voice sounded quiet and gentle.

She straightened and let her arms fall to her sides. “They went well.”

“That’s my girl. Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

Gathering ceramic bowls and chopsticks, she ordered, “Go wash up. I’ll have lunch ready soon.”

“I’ll help set the table.”

Her mother swatted Jackie away. “Just do what I say.”

Hands raised in surrender, she backed away and headed upstairs to her room.

Spacious and lavish, the bedroom flaunted decor that complimented the rest of the mansion. Dangling from the ceiling was a brass chandelier, dripping with teardrop crystals, with six lights encased in etched glass shades. In the corner stood a four-poster queen bed accompanied by an arched headboard and delicate scrollwork accents.

Everything about the space was too grand and priggish—nothing like the comfort of Jackie’s tiny white bedroom in her old apartment. Her collection of stuffed animals, fur worn and matted, contrasted the regal red and gold blankets. They didn’t belong in the matchy-matchy mansion.

And she didn’t either.

”Jackie, dinner!” her mother called.

“Coming!” She fixed her ponytail before running back downstairs. Her feet flew over two, three steps at a time, her hand on the railing serving as her only barrier from falling.

Already, Má was seated at one end of the dinner table. Two bowls of steaming white rice were laid out with the pot of *thịt kho* resting between them. With the ladle, she loaded a healthy spoonful into Jackie’s bowl while Jackie climbed into the chair. She swirled around the rice and mixed it into the seasoned broth. Next, she split the eggs open, digging out the yolk and stirring it into the mix, before eating the outsides.

"It's delicious. Mouth half-full, Jackie dabbed at her lips with a napkin. "Where's Mr. Astor?"

"Your stepfather is preparing for the school's opening orientation. Said he'll order food while out."

Orientation was scheduled the Sunday before classes; it was mandatory for all students. She still had to pack for move-in and figure out her class schedule. After her mother remarried, her headmaster stepfather was able to pull some strings for her admission into Westminster for junior year.

Jackie bit into the pork belly. Savory and tender and warm, it almost melted into her mouth. She chewed slowly, relishing every bite. As soon as Jackie finished the meat, Má began piling more on her plate. She dropped her chopsticks into the bowl, the wood clattering against the porcelain rim.

"You need to eat more. I made it so well this time," her mother said. "Besides, you're so skinny."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes but denying food from an Asian mother was like committing a federal crime. Sighing, she ate anyway, finishing off every bit of *thịt kho* even when she felt like her stomach would burst.

Deleted:

Heavy, deep red drapes pulled back to reveal a wide window, rusted light splintering through the patterned glass. The furniture matched perfectly from the mahogany combination wardrobe to the bookshelf of old tomes and exquisite vanity and giant plush armchairs.

THE ASTER ESTATE WAS HAUNTED.

The Victorian mansion, dark and looming with spidery trees, resembled a horror movie set. Although welcoming in daylight with manicured lawns and pristine flowers, Jackie dreaded what spirits lurked behind its towering stone walls. The labyrinthine interior consisted of eerie corridors and excessive vacant rooms. It was plagued with an everlasting chill that buried deep within the stone, impossible to chase away with lit fireplaces or a modern heating system.

Of course, no one would believe her suspicions about ghosts. Not her mother, Mr. Aster, and especially not her new stepsister Madison. As luck would have it, Madison was one of those perfect girls who had everything together. Each time Jackie stood next to her, she was painfully aware of how her hair didn't lie the same way or how her grades weren't as high or whatever else she wanted to compare herself with. They couldn't be more different if they tried. If the two had anything in common, it was that neither expected their parents' relationship to last.

Their parents met on one fateful day when Mr. Aster entered the Truong's All in Bloom flower shop, and a connection sparked. Jackie had thought the relationship would end soon. A wealthy businessman and a working-class single mother? Not a recipe for success.

However, her mother's life mirrored a romantic kdrama where the aristocratic gentleman from a powerful family fell for the woman from a poor background. Weeks turned into months, months into years, and soon enough, Jackie and her mother moved out of their tiny apartment and into the Aster mansion. And that came with a snobbish stepsister who unfortunately happened to be in the grade above her.

Alas, the three months of summer had not been enough for Jackie to adjust to her new lifestyle. Even worse, she would attend a new school—Westminster Academy, a prestigious private institution for the wealthy. She'd be lying if she wasn't at least a tad jealous of her mother.

Where was her own romantic moment? Where was Jackie's happily ever after?

In movies, the kooky but lovable heroine ran into the gentleman who would sweep her off her feet. She hadn't found a popular prince or the snarky nerd. In all the days she worked behind the desk of her mother's flower shop, not one devastatingly handsome boy walked through the doors. Astonishing how unfair life could be.

But never fear, for Jackie found solace in her new school's heralded drama department, which often won accolades and news features. At least she could live out her dramatic fantasies onstage.