

Paris Pan Takes the Dare

● Chapter One Excerpt ●



Where should I start? The first time I felt my life hanging in the balance? Or the moment I believed the deceased had a way of talking to me? Or maybe I ought to begin with the second I walked into that school.

Looking back, I should have been suspicious from day one, but now I know that when you want something badly enough, you'll do anything to get it.

You'll lie to your friends.

Steal from your family.

Eat a *whole* box of orange Creamsicles.

You might even go as far as taking The Dare.

But now I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's start from the beginning—my first day at Sweet Water Elementary.

The principal and I stepped down a hall that led to my seventh-grade classroom. "Paris Pan," Mr. Carlisle said, "it's not every day we get a new student. I'm sure Mrs. Wembly's class will be more than eager to meet you."

We stopped in front of a door, and he bent down to look me in the eye. His big forehead shined under the fluorescent lights. "You play basketball, Miss Pan?"

I wrinkled my face. What a weird question.

I shook my head.

"Well, little girl ..." Mr. Carlisle leaned in. "You'll learn. We'll make something out of you one way or another." He straightened.

I faked a smile.

There was no way I was playing basketball.

Mr. Carlisle swung open the door. Then he gave me a shove, and the door smacked shut behind me.

The teacher noticed me right away, and, man, did I notice her. She was wearing a giant sweater in crosswalk-yellow and pink pants. "You must be our new student," she said brightly as she led me to the front of the room. "Class, meet Paris Pan."

I counted the kids staring back at me.

Seven boys. Three girls.

This was the entire seventh grade?

"Who wants to get Paris a desk?"

Two boys jumped up and raced to the back of the room. They grabbed empty desks and dragged them up the aisles. Mr. Carlisle wasn't kidding—these people were desperate for someone new. I took off my backpack and studied the two boys pushing furniture toward me. One of them was cute, though he could definitely use less hair gel. The other boy was as skinny as a green bean and just as plain to look at. I picked the desk touched by the cuter boy and slid into the seat. A squabble quickly erupted over the other desk.

"Jay! Tom!" Mrs. Wembly tapped at the board. "Sit down."

Somehow, Cute Boy won and plunked down beside me. I guessed his name must have been Jay since Mrs. Wembly had said his name and glared at him first. His lanky friend Tom scraped another desk across the floor and pulled up to my right. My neighbors studied me like I

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was a museum piece. I felt their gaze move from the top of my pony-tailed head, down to my straight-cut bangs, to my flat nose and pointed chin. I fidgeted in my seat.

“You Japanese?” Jay whispered.

I inwardly groaned. Just because I have “almond-shaped” eyes and black hair does not mean I say *Sayonara* and eat sushi. I tried to pretend I was invisible, but this was some challenge in my sister’s hand-me-down jacket. Verona thought everything should be hot pink.

Mrs. Wembly turned toward us, math problems on the board behind her. “Tom, what’s one hundred percent of one hundred?”

The answer chimed in my head. *One hundred, duh! Obviously, a trick question.*

“Tom?”

I looked at Tom. He was searching the depths of his brain.

A hundred, just say it. Say it.

“Zuh-zuh-zuh zero?”

Holy moly! But what made me really wince was the way he said his answer. His speech impediment was fifty times worse than how my parents talked, and they spoke *Chinese*. I rested my forehead in my hands, wondering how I was going to get through the rest of the day. I should have done more to stop us from moving this time—like lying in front of the U-Haul instead of the usual hunger strike.

It was only a few days ago, at the end of January, when my parents slapped the SOLD sticker on the sign in our front yard. Daddy builds each house we live in and before the paint has a chance to dry, he sells it and moves us to the next one. And it doesn’t matter what time of year it is that we move either. Right before school ends. After it starts. Mid-semester. Daddy always says, “When house close, we go,” and go we do.

I’ve led a nomadic lifestyle since I was eight. That was when Daddy quit a corporate job as a construction manager and started building homes on his own. This means I change houses about every seven or eight months, which has resulted in three things. One, in the middle of the night, I’ve almost gone to the bathroom in a closet twice. Two, my school transcript is longer than any Harry Potter book. And three, my life-long friend roster has only one name on it—my dog’s.

Nevertheless, Daddy and Mom assured us Sweet Water was not just another move. They insisted that this place would be nothing like we’d seen before, and they proved it when we took the tour.

I sat wedged between my siblings in the back seat of our car. Verona jabbed me in the ribs. “Scoot over!”

I jabbed her back. “Can I help it if your rear takes up a zip code?”

“Paris!” My brother Athens pushed my arm. “Your elbow is over the line.”

We passed a sign that said *Sweet Water, Oklahoma. Where Life is Sweet!* I studied the stretch of land before me. Empty was more like it. The area was nothing like Tulsa, the last city I called home. Or Topeka, the city before that. Or even Branson, the town before that ... I mean, where were the expressways? The traffic lights? Um ... *the curbs*? We passed one dirt road after another. RR 2 ... RR 9 ... RR 15—even the streets weren’t named after anything. In twenty minutes, we saw only three places: Foster’s Woods, Sweet Water Lake, and the town center—a line of old buildings and a beat-up gas station. *Lovely.*

“No mall?” Verona whined.

“No movie theater?” Athens said.

A stray dog stood by the side of the road. He didn't look happy to be here, either. "No nothing," I concluded.

We kept going and came upon two more buildings. Daddy stopped the car.

"Children," he said, "left is elementary. Right is high school for Athens."

Athens gaped at a building that looked more like a rusted warehouse than an institute for higher education. Above the doors, a banner featured a picture of a bumblebee announcing, *The Big Sting: Boys Basketball 7 and 0.*

The Sweet Water mascot was a dribbling insect. *Great.*

"Um, Daddy?" Verona said. "Where's the middle school?"

"Left!" he replied.

I looked hard for a building that wasn't labeled Sweet Water Elementary. "Where?"

Mom, sitting in the front seat, read from a piece of paper. "There! Sweet Water Elementary. Grade K through eight."

Verona and I studied a shoebox of a school across the street. Then we stared at each other. "No way!"

So here I was, sitting in a classroom at a school of only ninety-seven people, learning what a hundred-percent of anything was.

I checked the room for clues I was in the wrong place—possibly the third grade—when a tiny wad of paper suddenly landed on my desk.

Someone was trying to communicate.

I put my hand over the wad, slid it to my lap, and opened it.

Wanna have lunch? TYPTTFY = Tap your pencil two times for yes. And I don't take no for an answer. Mayo

Mayo? And what happened to the "w" in *answer*? I glanced over my shoulder. A girl with dark red hair and freckles sprinkled across her nose grinned back at me. I bit my lip and did the math: lunch with one person was better than lunch with no one.

I tapped my pencil twice.

When the bell rang for lunch, I stood up, but before I could get anywhere, Cute Boy and his friend, the rocket scientist, closed in on me. The rest of the kids got their coats and headed for a door that went outside.

Tom put out his hand. "Huh-huh-hi."

Before I could respond, Mayo stepped in front of me. "Leave her alone, Tom. She's having lunch with *me*." She gripped my wrist and pulled me toward the door.

When we got outside, she let go of me at the top of some steps and tugged on her jacket. She stood tall, nose up and chest out. The country air and country food had treated her well in all departments.

I rubbed my wrist. "Thanks." I think.

"Tom plus Jay equals Stu-pid, Paris," She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Don't let them dumbify you."

The boys walked by. Jay puckered his lips at us, which changed my mind about how cute he was.

Mayo shook her fist at him. "Keep your lips out of our way, or I'll let you have it!"

"I'd like to see you try." Jay smooched the air again and winked. "C'mon, Tom." They headed down the stairs. Tom glanced back at me.

"Loose Lips and his dimwit sidekick are trouble, Paris." Mayo sat on the steps and pulled me down with her. "You got that?"

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I nodded and surveyed the schoolyard: children scrambling all over rusty playground equipment—a tetanus epidemic just waiting to happen.

“I know it’s not much,” Mayo said, gesturing at the staircase. “But at least these steps are ours.”

“Hey, Paris.” A girl I recognized from class sat beside me. “I’m Dana.” She set down her lunch bag and put out a hand. We shook. With big, blue eyes and dark, long lashes, Dana looked so innocent, like Bambi.

“So has Mayo figured out if you’re a freak, yet?”

“Dana!” Mayo said.

“I was just kidding.” Dana studied me. “So where’s your lunch?”

I shrugged. “Um ... in the cafeteria?”

“You’re funny, Paris,” Mayo said. “We don’t have a cafeteria. Here.” She handed me half a ham sandwich, then dumped some Cheetos on her lunch bag. “The first thing you have to learn here is that we girls stick together. In a school this size, friends are few and far between. Isn’t that right, Dana?”

“Yup.”

And so the lessons on “How to Survive Sweet Water Elementary” began.

First, the schoolyard. Mayo mapped out the grounds by dragging a stick through the mud, pointing here and there as she laid out the territory. “The benches by the fence are where the seventh grade boys prowl. But don’t bother with them; they have the IQ of fish. The picnic tables are where the eighth-graders hang, and if they bother to speak to you, don’t trust them. It’s a set-up”

I spotted my sister at the tables, with new friends circling her like paparazzi. While I have always been the wallflower at every new school, Verona is usually the It girl. She has that indefinable quality that draws people to her like monkeys to a banana. Where she got It from in our family, I have no idea.

I glanced away and listened to Mayo. I needed to focus on building up my own posse of buddies

“...and the playground equipment,” Mayo continued, “is reserved strictly for *children*. Don’t be caught dead near any of them. Kids in grades below us are ... well ...”

“Below us,” Dana finished.

I nodded. It made sense.

Mayo stabbed the stick toward one end of the yard. “And *that* over there should be avoided. At all costs.”

My gaze followed the stick. A tire swing hung from an oak tree, and another girl from our class was sitting in it. “Why?” I said.

“Paris, are you blind?” Mayo jerked her head toward the tree. “Can’t you spot the school reject when you see her?”

Oh. I studied the girl sitting in the tire. I hadn’t paid much attention to her in class. I had only noticed she was sitting closest to the teacher’s desk. Her hair was done up in Pippi Longstocking braids, and she was reading from a book—no one within twenty feet of her. Her face was so pale she looked like she was made of chalk.

“That’s Robin,” Mayo said.

“It’s so embarrassing that she’s in our grade,” Dana added.

Mayo shook her head. “What a *freak*.”

The way she said *freak* made me flinch. “What’s wrong with her?” I hoped we didn’t have too much in common.

“All she does is rock in that swing with some book.”

I swallowed. I loved reading.

“But that’s not her only problem.” Dana sucked the last ounce from her juice box.

“No, it isn’t.” Mayo pointed a finger to her ear and did the cuckoo sign. “That girl is mental.”

“Mental?” I studied Robin harder. Aside from the pasty complexion, she looked normal to me. “What do you mean?”

“First of all,” Mayo said, “the braids and the jumper she’s wearing under that dumpy coat should be a major tip off. But in case you need more proof, Robin hardly ever talks. I can probably count up the number of words she’s said this year on my fingers.”

I raised a brow. That was a little odd.

“Yeah, and get this, Paris,” Dana said. “Mrs. Wembly pretends like that’s okay—”

“Like she’s normal when she’s SO not,” Mayo said.

I was getting the picture. “You mean she’s like ... uh ... verbally challenged or something?”

“Yeah, that’s putting it nicely,” Mayo said. “I don’t care what you call it—*challenged*, *Freak*, same thing. Mental.”

Phew!—my similarities with Robin ended at the books. I had no problems talking. My fatal flaw was embarrassing myself by talking.

Mayo dropped a rock on the dirt. “This represents Robin’s tree.” She drew a wide circle around it. “Do not enter The Freak Zone. Robin’s got something no one wants. Understand?”

Understand? Oh, yes. At every school, there’s at least one freak. Often I feared that freak would become me, being the new kid and all. But fortunately, I’d been on quite a lucky streak. Other students had always been more worthy. At the last school, it was a sixth grader who had a terrible overbite and had to wear headgear. The school before, it was a fifth grader who must have weighed 500 pounds. So at Sweet Water, it made sense that Robin—the wordless wonder—was the shoo-in. *Thank goodness*. I smoothed my hair and tried to sound cool. “I totally understand.”

“Great.” Mayo tossed the stick and dusted off her hands. “Dana, I think Paris will do. What do you think?”

“Three’s a magic number,” Dana said.

“All right then.” Mayo smiled. “I hereby declare ourselves a trio until further notice.”

Woah. Wait a second. *I was in?*

Mayo leaned forward and shifted her knees toward me. “Now there’s something we’d like to ask.”

Mayo and Dana looked at me, expectantly.

“What?”

“I’m having a birthday party,” Mayo said. “Wanna come?”

“Birthday party?” She was inviting *me*?

“I’ll be thirteen on Friday, the 5th,” Mayo announced.

“But it’s no party when you have only two people,” Dana said. “Can you make it?”

I did everything in my power to remain calm—Mayo and Dana were presenting an opportunity I rarely encountered.

Perhaps there were benefits to living in a speck of town.

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Perhaps the mere fact that I represented 25% of the female population in the seventh grade was a good thing.

Perhaps, I, Paris Pan, after four years of moving, was finally friendship material.

I turned to Mayo. "What should I bring?"

She patted me on the back. "Well, a present, I hope, and a change of clothes. It's a sleepover."

"Bring a flashlight, too," Dana added.

"Flashlight?"

"Dana, not a word," Mayo warned.

Dana shot Mayo a look. "I wasn't going to say anything." She scooted in close. "Are you afraid of ghosts, Paris?"

"Dana!" Mayo flung a Cheeto at her. "Friday." She elbowed me. "When we can tell you in private."

"Sounds great to me," I said, like I had no idea about huddling under blankets and telling ghost stories.

Mayo talked about her birthday party theme while I finished my sandwich. I glanced at Robin swinging back and forth with her book. Seeing that girl made me glad I'd made it into Mayo's circle of friends.