

Danica Panica  
and  
the First Day of School

Kevin Miller

The Danica Panica Series  
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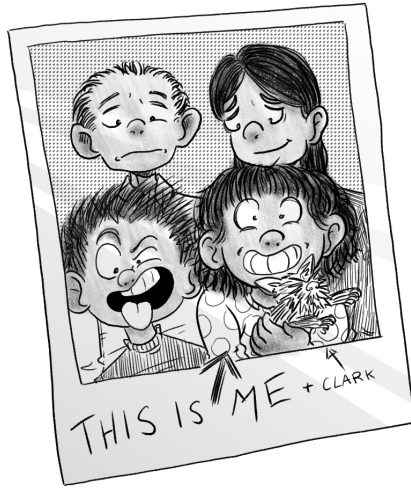
CHAPTER 1



# About My Name

Hi. My name is Danica, last name, Panica. You don't have to tell me; I know they *rhyme*. The kids at school remind me of that all the *time*. (See what I just did there?)

Don't ask me why my parents gave me rhyming names. Okay, go ahead, ask. It's because they thought it would be fun. Well, they were partly right. It is fun having a rhyming name. No one ever forgets it; that's for sure. But I wish my parents would have gone all the way and done it with my middle name too.



What names rhyme with Danica *and* Panica? How about Anika, Britannica, or Monica (sort of)? Any of those names would have been better than plain old Denise. Danica Denise Panica. Yep, that's my name. Why Denise? My parents say they like alliteration—whatever that means. Also, my mom's favorite aunt was named Denise, so there's that too. But I never tell people my middle name—only my middle initial. Danica D. Panica. That's who I am.

You should know something else about my last name. First, when my ancestors came to this country, they used to write it as Pănică. Don't ask me what those swirly things above the *ă*s mean or how it was pronounced way back then. I don't think my ancestors knew either because it wasn't long before they got rid of those swirly things, and now it's just plain old Panica. But that's not the thing I wanted to tell you about.

The important thing about my last name is that in addition to rhyming with my first name (but not my middle name), it also tells you a little bit about who I am. Okay, I lied. It tells you a *lot* about who I am.

You see, I have a bit of a problem that I'm afraid to tell you about—probably because being afraid *is* my problem. That's right, I'm kind of a chicken. Actually, I should probably delete “kind of” and just say, “I'm a chicken.” That's because I'm afraid of almost everything—especially chickens!

But the list also includes snakes, spiders, dogs (and some cats), horses, fish, bees, mice, germs, deep water (especially when I can't see the bottom), needles (the poke-you-in-the-arm kind that they say will only hurt for a second but always hurt longer than that), pills (especially big ones), heights, darkness, loud noises, open spaces, closed spaces, thunderstorms, flying (especially when the plane starts to shake and bounce), doctors, nurses (because they're the ones who tell you the needle won't hurt that bad, and it always does), dentists (and their drills!), hospitals, clowns, ghosts, beards (yes, beards, especially the thick bushy kind), things under my bed, things in my closet, getting lost, being stuck in a crowd, being left all alone, speaking in front of the entire class...

Do you get the picture?

You might think, *Well, of course, with a last name like Panica (root word—panic!), who wouldn't be afraid?* That's just the thing: no one

else in my family is like me. In fact, I come from a long line of brave people. First, my ancestors left their home country and got onto a dirty, smelly ship that was full of rats and flies and diseases and spent weeks feeling seasick as they sailed across the ocean—with their kids—to go to a place where they didn't know anyone and couldn't even speak the language. Pretty brave if you ask me.

Then they built a life here, and their kids and grandkids and great-grandkids and great-great-grandkids did all sorts of other brave things, like becoming farmers and doctors and teachers and train conductors and trapeze artists (well, at least one of them did).

My parents are brave too, and as much as I hate to admit it, so is my little brother. First name: Ivan. Middle name: the. Last name: Terrible. At least that's what I call him. I'm sure he has some other name too, but I've never bothered to learn it.

Okay, I lied again. His real name is Ivan Peter Panica. Get it? *Peter Pan-ica*? What can I say? My parents aren't only brave. They have a sense of humor too.

I may have inherited a bit of that as well.

CHAPTER 2



# My New Least Favorite Season

Have you ever been part of one of those conversations where everyone names his or her favorite season? I sure have. And up until a few years ago, my answer was always the same.

Fall.

After all, who doesn't love the beautiful colors, the crunching of leaves beneath their feet, pumpkin spice in *everything*, cooler weather (which means a completely new wardrobe), and knowing that the two best holidays of the



year, Thanksgiving and Christmas, are right around the corner?

That's right, for the first five years of my life (at least as far as I can remember), I thought fall was the bomb. But all of that was ruined one day by a seemingly harmless little six-letter word.

S-c-h-o-o-l.

Once I learned that fall meant school, it went straight from being my favorite season to my least favorite season. Summer jumped to the top of the list instead because the start of summer meant the end of school. Only somehow school managed to ruin summer too because the moment school was over, I would pull out my calendar and count how many days I had until I had to go back to school again. Then instead of enjoying my summer, I would look at that calendar and know that no matter how much fun I had, by the end of each day, I would be one step closer to the thing I dreaded most.

Just so you know, it's not so much school that I hate. In fact, I enjoy a lot of things about school, such as art class and...okay, maybe not too many things. But there's one thing I dread about school more than anything else.

The first day.

Think about it. New classroom, new teacher, new kids, new smells, new subjects, new schedule—so many things to adjust to all at once. But this year it was going to be worse than ever because in addition to all the above, I was moving from grade three to grade four, which meant I would have to adjust to one more new thing.

A new school.

That's why when Mom called and called and called that morning for me to get out of bed, I pretended I was asleep. I didn't just pretend I was asleep, though. I pretended I was in a deep coma or that I'd taken that medicine they give you at the hospital to knock you out before an operation or that I'd pricked my finger on a

spindle like Sleeping Beauty and fallen asleep for one hundred years.



But my mom didn't fall for any of that, and before I knew it, she had plunked Karl, our cute little Yorkshire terrier, onto my chest, and he started licking my face. (Mom knows that no one can resist that little guy.) So I finally dragged myself out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom.

And when I got there, who do you think

came marching out with his hair sticking up in every direction and a great big goofy grin on his face? You guessed it, Ivan.

“Don’t you just love the first day of school?” he asked, his feet pounding down the stairs as he ran off to eat breakfast. “I can’t wait to get there!”

*That kid really is terrible*, I thought as I slammed the bathroom door.

And to think he used to be my favorite sibling.

## CHAPTER 3



# What? Me Worry?

I took a long time in the bathroom, and I took an even longer time eating breakfast. Eventually Mom caught on to my stalling tactics, and she told me to run upstairs to get dressed. That's when I remembered there was at least one good thing about the first day of school.

New clothes!

As part of our back-to-school wardrobe, each year Mom lets Ivan and me get a new T-shirt with a cute or funny saying on it. Nor-

mally, I get to pick my own T-shirt, but this time Mom said she wanted to surprise me. I was a little worried about that, seeing as she's so old and all and would probably come up with something super lame. But she told me to trust her, so I did.

Turns out that was a good choice because she got me this pretty white shirt with a bee sniffing a flower on it. What did the shirt say? "Don't worry, *bee* happy." Pretty clever if you ask me. And as my mom said, it couldn't have been more appropriate, considering all my panic problems.

What did Ivan's shirt say? "I'm so broke I can't even afford to pay attention." I know, it took me a while to get it too. But like my shirt being perfect for me, his suited him perfectly. Not only is that kid always broke—he spends every dollar he gets on candy and video games, "rotting his teeth *and* his mind," as my dad says—he can't pay attention for more than two

seconds. Unless he's in front of a video game, that is. Then the real problem is trying to pull his attention away from it.

Unable to stall any longer, I grabbed my new lavender Fjällräven backpack with the rainbow straps—something else that was great about going back to school—and headed out to the car. Mom and Ivan were already there, waiting for me.

“Hurry up!” Ivan yelled, leaning out the rear driver's-side window. “I want to play football with the guys before the first bell!”

“I'm coming, I'm coming,” I said, dragging my feet on the sidewalk just to spite him, though I didn't drag them too hard because I didn't want to scuff my brand-new, blue-and-white checkered slip-on Vans, which I had begged my mom to buy me when we found them on sale (yet another not-so-bad thing about going back to school).

Ivan's school—my old school—was our first

stop. He was so eager to get there that he had his seat belt off and his door open almost before our car had stopped moving.

“Don’t forget your backpack!” Mom said as he was already halfway out the door. He reached back inside and grabbed his backpack—his same old Spiderman one as last year—from the backseat, then took off again.

“Have a great day!” Mom called after him, but his mind was already on something else—football, no doubt.

See what I mean about that saying on his shirt? Almost nothing can hold that boy’s attention for long.

The drive to my school took about five minutes. Mom decided to use that time to give me a little pep talk...at least I’m sure that’s what she *thought* she was doing.

“So your first day at the new school. Exciting, huh?”

She smiled at me, but I stared at her like she



was a cleverly disguised alien who had secretly taken my real mother's place. "Excuse me?"

"You know, new teacher, new kids, new classes, new clothes..."

*Am I hearing my mom right?* She had just named some of the *worst* things about the first day of school—apart from the bit about new clothes.

"You're going to do great, honey. I just know it," she said.

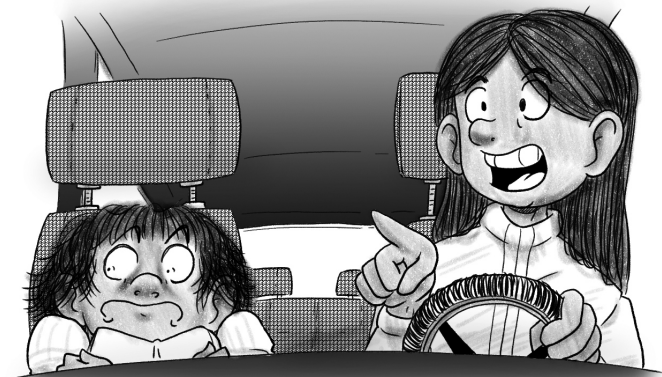
"I'm glad one of us does," I replied, hugging my backpack to my chest as I sank back into my seat and stared at my shoes.

"Remember what your T-shirt says," Mom continued. "Don't worry, be..." She glanced over at me as if she expected me to complete the saying.

"Red light," I said, pointing at the windshield.

Our car lurched to a halt just as a crossing guard stepped out onto the street and held up

a stop sign. Mom waved at her and smiled as a pack of kids swarmed onto the street, heading toward school.



“Oh, look! That little girl has a backpack just like yours,” Mom said—as if that was a good thing! I peeked over the dashboard to confirm it, then sank back into my seat.

“Oh, and that boy has shoes like yours too!”

This time I didn’t even bother to look. I just sank down even farther. If that seat could have

swallowed me whole, I wouldn't have complained one bit.

“Don't worry, *bee* happy?” Suddenly, the slogan on that shirt didn't sound so clever after all. In fact, at that moment, I wished the entire world would just *buzz* off.

## CHAPTER 4



# Imagine That!

I'll admit it. As much as the first day of school gives me the willies, I'm always super curious about who will be in my class and who my homeroom teacher will be. I'm especially curious about any new kids who show up.

Last year we had a girl from South Korea named Na-yeon who could hardly speak a word of English. In fact, she was so shy she hardly spoke any words at all. Everyone else seemed to ignore her, so at recess I asked her if she wanted to hang out with me. That is, I pointed at the

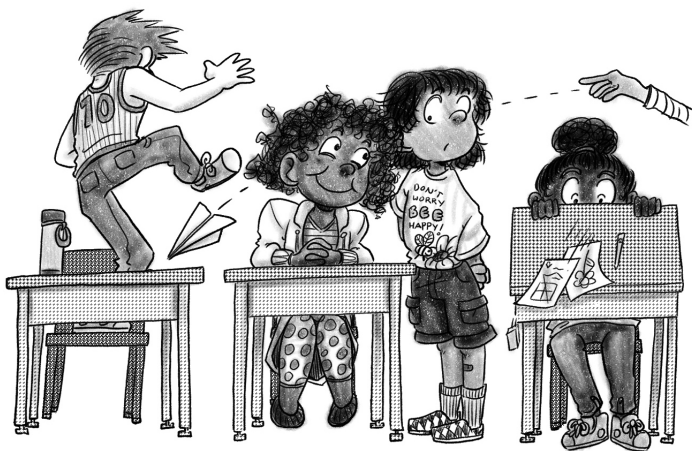
swings and then waved for her to follow me, which she did, a big smile on her face.

We got along pretty well at first, or at least I thought we did. Most of the time I had no idea what she was saying and vice versa, but that didn't stop us from chattering away. Then as soon as she could speak some English, you'll never guess what Na-yeon did. She dumped me to hang out with the so-called "cool kids."

In case you're wondering, that happens to me a lot—people dumping me, that is. Mom says it's because all my anxieties can be hard for some people to understand. I get that, and I try to be a good friend and keep my fears to myself, but every time it happens, it still hurts.

As I looked around my new homeroom, I didn't see anyone from South Korea, but I did notice a new girl with short dark hair sitting near the front who looked terribly uncomfortable, her eyes glued to her desk. I don't mean her eyes were *actually* glued to her desk—that

really would have been uncomfortable! It was just that she was studying her desk like she was memorizing it for a test. Meanwhile, everyone around her was talking and shouting and clowning around. It sounded like feeding time at the zoo. And with all those sweaty boys jumping around, it smelled like it too.



With a couple of minutes left before the first bell, I decided to go up to the girl and introduce myself. Maybe I was about to make a new friend.

“Hi,” I said, walking up beside her desk. “I’m Danica.”

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at me. “Really? So am I!”

“Hmph, imagine that,” I said, not nearly excited as she seemed to be about our sharing the same first name. “What’s your last name?” I asked, hoping for the best but fearing the worst.

“Panagopoulos,” she said. The first syllable almost gave me a heart attack when she said it, seeing as it was the same as the first syllable of my last name. “What’s yours?”

“Panica,” I said. “Danica Panica.”

“Neat. It rhymes.”

I forced a smile. “So they tell me.” I couldn’t imagine what choices her parents would have had if they had wanted to give her a name that rhymes with Panagopoulos. Christopoulos? Alexopoulos? Stephanopoulos? Luckily for her they didn’t even try. Her last name was enough of a mouthful as it was.

Before I could ask about her middle name just to cover all the bases, the bell rang.

“Well, nice to meet you,” I said. “Maybe we can hang out together during recess.”

“Oh, yes, I’d love that,” the other Danica said. I could tell she was desperate for a friend. And who wouldn’t be? It was bad enough being at a new school. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to go to a new school and not know anyone.

I’d struck out with Na-yeon the year before, but maybe things would be different this time. After all, with a first name like Danica, how bad could the new girl be?



## CHAPTER 5



# Nice to Meet You!

The chaos came to a sudden halt when we heard a strange sound coming from the back of our classroom. Someone was strumming a guitar chord.

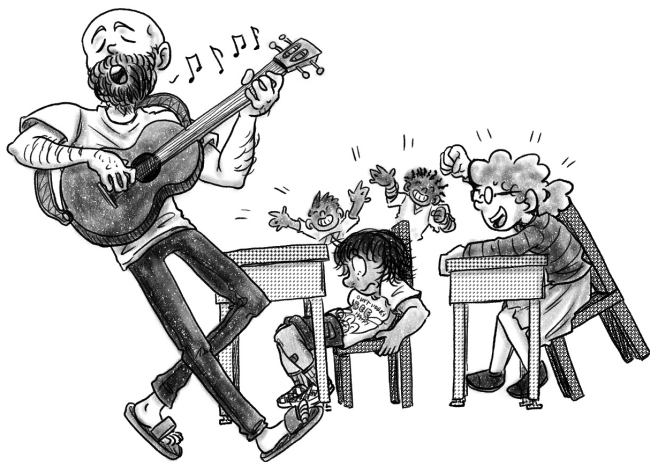
We all turned around to find out who it was, only to see a tall, gangly man with a shaved head and a bushy black beard holding a guitar.

*Uh-oh*, I thought. I already told you beards are a problem for me, right? And this one was huge. There was no telling what was hiding in there. Not only that, I didn't recognize him at

all. Was this guy really our teacher? Or had one of the buskers wandered in from the subway, looking for us to throw some coins into his guitar case like Mom let me do whenever we took the train into the city?

Before I could ask him, he strummed his guitar again and began to sing.

“Hello, hello, what’s your name? Hello, hello, what’s your name? My name is Mr. Cooper, your name is...” He smiled and nodded to a girl with long blonde hair sitting in the back row.



“Anna!” she sang, a big grin on her face as she played along.

He nodded and smiled as he continued to strum and sing. “Nice to meet you!”

He moved down the rows, singing the song to each student in turn, and wouldn’t you know it? Every one of them jumped right in, with two students at a time singing the “My name is…” part, after which Mr. Cooper would sing, “Nice to meet you!”

As he moved down my row, I tried to make myself smaller and smaller, praying that by some miracle he wouldn’t notice me there. But sure enough, when he got to my desk, he did his smiling-and-singing thing, then turned it over to me. Instead of playing along, though, I just shook my head, my cheeks pulsing with embarrassment. I’m sure my face was as red as a ripe tomato, but I didn’t care. No way was I singing in front of all those kids.

Still smiling, Mr. Cooper kept on strum-

ming, but instead of looking at me, he turned to the rest of the class and sang the line from the song, only this time he changed one of the words. “Hello, hello, what’s *her* name?” he asked, nodding at me.

“Her name is Danica!” the rest of the kids chorused.

“Panica!” someone else shouted.

With that Mr. Cooper smiled and nodded at me, sang his “Nice-to-meet-you” bit, then moved on. As he did, I finally felt some of the blood leave my cheeks and flow back into the rest of my body.

I really wanted to believe that Mr. Cooper was a rogue busker who had somehow snuck into our school. At any moment Principal Kowalchuk and Hank, the school security guard, would show up and haul him away! Then our *real* teacher could take over. But as Mr. Cooper continued his song-and-dance routine with no one stopping him, *I realized this is for real.*

We had a bearded, singing, smiling school-teacher. Not only that, our classroom had not one but two Danicas. What else could go wrong?

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