

To Eris – Human

Payton Chronicles Book One

By Ann Snizek

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Sample Chapter Only

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Dedicated to the memory of my father.

Thank you to my family for all your love and support.

And thanks to everyone that helped me make this book

the best it could be.

**Special Thanks:**

To my husband for his constant support and love, to the rest of my family for your encouragement, and also to Mr. Jamie C. Ruff, author of *The Peculiar Friendship* for your wonderful feedback and editing.

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## Prologue:

Where to start, I suppose, is the hardest part to decide on. I'm usually good once I'm on a roll, but the beginnings have always been difficult. After all, the whole idea is to make you want to know more instead of falling asleep or running away screaming for someone to put you out of your misery. For instance, who would ever read the first few pages of a book and says, "That sucks. Let me buy it." Well, no one I know would ever do that... sober anyway.

Several possibilities of where my story truly begins flash across my mind, but since you can't read my mind I guess I just have to knuckle down and pick one. I'm not sure if it's the right one. I'm not even sure how accurate it is. You may not understand now, but here goes...

I don't know what time it was, but the lights were on, so it had to be after dark. My dad had his steamer trunk sitting open in the dining area. My parents' room opened off this space. The bedroom light shone on the trunk like a spotlight, and drew me to the odd scene.

I walked up and watched, in mounting anxiety, as my dad hurriedly arranged his clothes, a few notebooks, and pictures into the trunk -- tucking them in amongst the clothes for protection. While I didn't understand the full extent of it, I did know that they had been fighting a lot, and fear began to boil up within me.

"What are you doing, daddy?" I asked, afraid of the answer I would receive. All the other times we moved he always packed my things first, and he never spent a night away from me before.

"I'm packing, sweetheart."

I knew about packing. We had moved several times already, but something about what I saw seemed wrong to me. "Can I go with you?" I asked, my voice cracking slightly.

"No."

He didn't stop, slow down, or even look at me. I suppose the difficulty and the heated emotions of the situation made it impossible for him to manage, but at the time, it crushed me. I was daddy's little girl. I couldn't imagine how he could just leave me like that. My memory fades there as I started crying. My entire world crashed down around my tiny head, and the

darkness swallowed me whole.

I now know that he felt he had no other choice. While I don't really remember my parents fighting much in front of me, I knew they fought. The tension had grown so thick that even at four I could feel it. The reasons didn't matter to me though. My daddy was leaving, and devastating my already broken family. I only recall seeing him a couple times after that.

If I had known how broken my family really was, I wouldn't have blamed him for all those years. At least I don't think I would. It's one of those things we'll never know. He was gone, never to come back.

# Chapter 1

After many years of issues that make dysfunctional look like fun, I found myself in another new town, starting my life with a supposed fresh start. My mom told me that I'm the new girl, a girl of mystery, and can create any life I want for myself. Yeah, right. I had an imagination, but I couldn't perform miracles.

How could a shy, awkward, nerdy, sixteen-year-old girl reinvent herself overnight into an outgoing, confident, even semi-popular person? I didn't have a clue, but I became determined to find out if the possibility existed. I started wearing make-up every day, and replaced most of my oversized, ugly clothes, that I used to hide myself, with ones that almost fit. Although, there was only so much I could do with what thrift store bargains my mom bought. I even tried to do something with my thick mass of plain, straight brown hair.

It wasn't the first time I tried a new start. We moved at least every six months of my life, whether we needed to or not. None of my previous attempts of a "do-over" ever worked for more than a week or two. I usually made friends easily enough. Okay maybe not friends, but they'd talk to me for a while. For some reason it never lasted.

I hoped this time would be different. The apartment complex we moved into had two rows of three 8-unit buildings. At least a dozen other high school kids lived there, and even some cute guys. An open, grassy area separated the two rows of apartments and their parking spaces. A pathetic playground closed off the far end so that the driveway looked like a U with the country road leading to and from town connecting the top of the U and the playground at the bottom. The area was beautiful with a National Forrest bordering one side of the property. Unfortunately, we had an upstairs apartment overlooking the parking lot and grassy island.

I couldn't consider it a complete loss though since six guys usually tossed a football around on the grassy expanse. I could also see the group of girls that usually presented themselves near the front of Ashley's downstairs apartment, opposite my own building, where they had a clear view of the guys and, more importantly, the guys had a clear view of them. Ashley Berman, who

seemed the most outgoing teenager around, had come over and talked with me a couple times. Ashley had one of those personalities that you couldn't ignore. She knew how to manipulate people, especially adults, but there was something about her that made me more uncomfortable and self-conscious than normal... which is pretty bad.

One day, my mom was drinking -- as usual. What I said never mattered. She only heard what she wanted to. Especially when she'd been drinking, or got high -- which happened a lot. She didn't work. She told me all our money came from some rich family member who had died and left it to her in monthly installments. Anyway, I decided to go outside to the oh-so-comfortable cement and metal stairs in the breezeway. It had become my regular perch when my tolerance for being inside dissolved. Given my mom's inept ability to do anything for herself, I couldn't go very far. She had always been very careful to make sure that any bruises or scars that magically and mysteriously appeared on me were able to be covered by my clothes. I suppose that is why I liked warmer weather more -- less cloth covering the body usually led to fewer injuries.

I sat near the bottom and watched the neighborhood activities. The early spring day lifted my spirit, and as I walked out the door, I notice the great scenery -- Steve tossing the football with his friends. This lifted my spirits even more while simultaneously making my stomach tightened and my heart raced. I knew he wouldn't give me a second thought, but I couldn't help it. He was the typical, hot, varsity quarterback; the sports star of the small, tight-knit community -- recruited by the Texas Longhorns, where he would attend the next year.

As I sat down, acting as nonchalant as humanly possible, I turned my attention to the playground. Little kids usually avoided it, or maybe it was their parents that avoided it. That day, a couple little ones played on the swings with their moms. Then it hit me, literally.

The football bounced in an erratic way and smacked me in the head. I had heard the unmistakable sound of a punted football, but hadn't given it a thought until the collision. It didn't hurt much, but it sure embarrassed me. I instantly felt the redness flood over my face and neck as I picked it up. It didn't take much to embarrass me.

"You okay?" I heard Steve holler.

I looked up and saw Steve and one of his younger friends jogging over to me from the "playing field", and I don't think my face could possibly get any more red. "Yeah," I said, racking my brain to think of anything else to say, and panic started to take hold.

"Sorry about that. Brian doesn't kick very well. That's why he's still JV," Steve said as he teased his friend. He grinned before he turned back to me.

"That's okay," I mumble, my inside turning to mush. He had such a great smile. I held the football out for him to take, my own goofy grin plastered to my red face. Steve and Brian both chuckle.

"How you liking it here so far?" Steve asked, taking the football and tossing it from hand to hand.

My breathing stopped as if he flipped a switch and shut off the power to my brain. My heart raced more and I felt the clamminess building on my hands. Self-consciously, I folded my arms across my chest and looked anywhere except at the two guys.

"It's okay, I guess." I shrugged my shoulders, and my throat closed up.

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt. See you around," Steve said as he took a few steps backwards then turned and jogged off with Brian. They spoke to each other and glanced over at me a couple times.

Oh, my God. Could I have been any more pathetic? He actually spoke to me, and I couldn't do anything. He laughed, but was that to be polite, was he laughing at what I said, or was he laughing at me? God, I wish I could, just once, come out with something captivating to say. English was my best subject in school. I read enough... why couldn't I just talk?

"Steve, you need to learn how to catch better, or Texas will kick *you* out next year," Ashley yelled across the parking.

I looked up to see her walk toward me with her perfect smile spread across her face.

"I'm the QB, Ashley. I'm the one that throws," Steve said in response. To prove his point, he yelled out to one of his friends on the far side of the grassy island and heaved the ball to the guy, who had to run a bit to catch the ball.

"Good thing, 'cause if they counted on you to catch, you'd never be allowed on the field," Ashley said with a laugh, as she reached me. "Hey there, Eris. How's your head?"

Okay, before I go any farther... Yes, my name is Eris. It's also the name of the Greek Goddess of discord, and it was the only thing that even remotely made sense in my life.

"I'm fine," I said. I could feel my face was still red, but I couldn't do anything about it, so I tried to hide it with my hair. This reinventing myself wasn't working.

"Hey, do you want to go for a walk?" Ashley asked. "A bunch of us are bored, as usual."

We're going over to Jimmy's to get some drinks and stuff. I'll even make Steve buy you a soda for missing the football."

"I... I don't know. I'm not sure," I stammered. The thought of Steve buying me a drink seemed overwhelming. Okay, it might sound absurd to most of you, but I've never had a boyfriend, I can't even talk to guys most of the time. So, having a guy buy me something, even as simple as a soda, seemed like an awful lot to me.

"You need to ask your mom? I can go with you," Ashley said and stepped past me to go up the stairs.

I wanted to object, but I couldn't find the words. Besides, if I wanted a new life, I had to start somewhere, right? So, I followed her to the door and let us both in. Mom sat on the sofa drinking a beer and reading the bible -- a combination I never could understand.

"Mom, Ashley's here," I said and hastily grabbed up a few empty beer bottles from the kitchen table.

"Hi Mrs. Payton," Ashley said in her put-on voice. "My mom is sending me to the store for some bread. I wanted to know if Eris could walk to the store with me. I don't want to go alone."

The fact that she lied didn't surprise me, but the ease with which she did it completely amazed me. I held my tongue. I always had a difficult time lying convincingly, and I didn't think my mom would let me go anyway. To my surprise, she agreed with a simple, "Sure, whatever" and a wave of her hand.

Ashley smiled again and turned to me, asking, "You ready?"

"I guess." I said, since I always had my empty wallet in my pocket.

Without another word, Ashley led the way back outside and across the parking lot to her apartment. I followed along like a lost little puppy, still totally amazed at my mom's response. She had only seen Ashley a few times, and hadn't even talked to her before. My mom never let me go with anyone she hadn't personally picked and interrogated, more out of fear of CPS and distrust than actual concern for me.

"How did you do that?" I finally asked in a hushed tone.

"Do what?" Ashley said as she grabbed her wallet and keys all chained together and hooked them to her jeans.

"Get my mom to agree so easily," I said.

"Oh, that... I don't know. Parents just love me, even my own." She rolled her eyes and

grinned mischievously while she spoke. "Come on. Let's go."

We walked back outside. By that time, four of the guys that had been playing with the football and two other girls that were normally with Ashley had converged in front of Ashley's place. Feeling awkward, I tried to hide behind everyone, but Ashley wouldn't let me. She continued to call attention to me by talking, or prodding my arm, or something. I felt almost like a pet instead of a friend. Walking half in the road and half on the sidewalk, the mass of teens went the mile it took to reach the convenience store, Jimmy's Gas Stop, at the edge of the "city limits." Someone had rearranged the letters in the sign so that it actually read "Stop Jimmy's Gas."

When we invaded the small store, the old man behind the counter got irritated. I could see his face go from annoyance to burning red with anger as the other kids tossed chips, or snack cakes, across aisles to each other. None of them listened to the poor man until he threatened to call the cops. One of the guys nudged Ashley, and she hollered at everyone to settle down, buy their stuff, then wait outside.

"It's worse than listening to my little brother scream," she said in complaint, even though she had been involved with the commotion only moments earlier. "I can't even hear myself think."

I didn't know who the guy was that urged Ashley to step in. I'd seen him around, but couldn't remember hearing, or even seeing, him talk with anyone. The whole scenario seemed off to me, but something about this guy stuck in my mind. I pushed the thoughts aside when Steve handed me a soda bottle and pocketed his change. Mumbling my thanks and belatedly trying to tell him he didn't have to get it for me, I worked on swallowing the knot in my throat.

"Yeah, no problem. It's the least I could do." He smiled as he leaned confidentially closer to me, and I held my breath.

I opened my mouth to say something else, but he had already turned and gone out the door. So, I took a sip of my soda instead and followed one of the other girls outside -- certain that my attempted cover-up looked as odd as it felt.

Outside, my comfort level dropped even more. The kids that had finished in the store all stood around, joking, laughing, and occasionally wrestling with each other. I didn't even know their names, other than Steve, and I didn't have the nerve to ask. So, I found an out-of-the-way spot to watch.

Ashley took longer than I thought she should, and I started to look around while I waited. A

field bordered the gas station parking lot, and led back to the National Forest that also bordered the apartments. The field seemed normal to me. Like most of the fields around, it only had a sparse covering of wildflowers at best, mostly dandelions or daisies. For some reason the trees that stood silently about a hundred yards back off the road mesmerized me.

"Hey Eris, where you going?" Ashley called to me.

Startled, I spun my head to look toward Ashley. That's when I realized that I had wandered into the field about twenty feet without knowing it. I walked back to join the group, who all stared at me. Along the way, I stumbled in a dip on the ground. My face reddened as several of the other kids chuckled.

"Where were you going?" Ashley asked again. She shook her head, but smiled.

"The flowers," I said with a shrug.

I couldn't think of anything else that wouldn't make me look even more dorky than I did. I didn't know why I had walked off. I hadn't even known I was doing it. Thankfully, no one pursued the subject and we slowly made our way back to the apartments. I managed to trail at the back of the pack and sipped my soda in silence.

Before we went far, I looked back over my shoulder at the trees. I couldn't see anything special about them. As I turned forward again, a movement caught my attention from the edge of the trees. Whipping my head back around, my pulse raced and I strained to see something, anything, but nothing moved. Not even the wind.

"Nothing good lurks in shadows. Best stay clear of them trees, girl," said an old lady walking toward Jimmy's.

Where had she come from? The woman stood uncomfortably close, and smelled of alcohol. I knew the smell well. My skin crawled and the hair on my neck stood up. She sniffed and wiped her nose with her dirty sleeve before shuffling away.

I looked up to see that the group of kids had gotten quite a bit ahead of me. I jogged most of the way to catch up, and then just walked fast, trying not to shake up the soda too much. None of them walked fast anyway, which made me wonder how long I had been looking into the trees. They didn't even seem to notice that I had fallen behind.

Well, no one except the odd guy that nudged Ashley in the store. He kept looking at me, but not in the "hey I like looking at you" way. His attention irritated me. It seemed an odd mixture of curiosity and caution. Not exactly the kind of look I wanted to inspire in anyone, much less

an attractive guy. So, I avoided eye contact and pretended he wasn't even there.

I didn't know what it was that drew him to my attention, but I had to find out who he was. If not, it would drive me nuts. He had an oddly compelling presence about him. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered why he wasn't the "pack leader" instead of Ashley, and why I never heard him spoken to directly in any conversations.

When we finally returned to the apartments, Ashley and one of the other girls walked me to my building, and I pulled up the courage to ask about the silent companion. "Who was the guy that nudged you in the store just before you had everyone settle down?" I tried to say it as inconspicuous as possible, but somehow I don't think it worked... it never did.

"What guy? No one nudged me in the store," Ashley said nonplussed.

I probably should have dropped it there, but I couldn't. "The tall guy, taller than Steve even. He has dark brown hair and blue-green eyes and wore a loose, black t--shirt with a cracked up happy face that said, 'I am no longer a danger to society.'"

Ashley's eyes widened and her voice trembled. "There was no one around taller than Steve. You couldn't possibly know that shirt. He's been gone for... You only moved in two weeks ago. You couldn't have seen it." Her hands began to shake and she glanced around nervously.

"Sure I did," I said. "I've seen him several times before, and he walked right by you most of the way back here," I couldn't understand why Ashley had such a reaction to my question, or description.

She shook her head fiercely in refusal and backed away from me. I noticed the look of fear, pain, and guilt collect on her face before she turned and ran across the lot to her apartment.

"Good going Eris," the other girl said in a hushed, but obviously debasing voice. "Matt disappeared a month before you moved here. No one has seen him, or heard from him since,"

"Who's Matt?" I asked.

"Ashley's older brother," she said. "He got into a fight with their parents and took off one night. I don't know how you found out about his shirt, but that was pretty cruel of you to do that to Ashley. Especially after all she's done for you. She's the one that wanted to include you in our group. I gotta go." She took off before I could say anything else. The sting in this girl's voice and the look on Ashley's face stunned me into silent immobility.

The girl ran to catch up with Ashley, grabbing the third girl's arm and dragging her into the apartment with her. The slam of the door jarred me loose and the guys that still waited outside

Ashley's place all turned and stared at me. I could feel their eyes follow me as I made my way up the stairs and around to my door. How could I have known? Why didn't they just admit that the guy had nudged her? It obviously couldn't have been Matt if he had disappeared over a month ago, but I had seen someone. The urge to discover the truth gnawed at me. I really had to find out who he was.

The school week dragged on with final exam preparations. The school had a weird way of working their schedule. Everyone had full days -- every day --, and the exams were thrown in throughout the two week, but not for everyone. This ended up stretching exams into two weeks of torture. I have no idea how or why they did it that way, but maybe that was the point.

The nasty looks and cruel laughter the other kids at the apartments shot my way didn't help any. Apparently, they all decided to avoid me by physically and pointedly keeping their distance from me. I tried pretending that it didn't bother me, but it did.

The mysterious guy only appeared in the early evenings, after school let out. Every time I saw him, I watched intently, fascinated by him. For a while, I thought that maybe he was a ghost, but I noticed several things that seemed to disprove this idea. His clothes would change, and even though he didn't talk to anyone -- he sometimes seemed to interact from the sidelines. He even laughed along a couple times. Also, no one ever walked through him, or anything like that. He was just... there.

Chills shot up my spine every time he looked my direction, but I self consciously turned away before making eye contact. The first time his eyes did meet mine I froze and couldn't look away. For some reason it seemed to surprise him that I didn't turn away. He even looked around him as if to determine if I were looking at him or something else. Realizing that he was my focus, his face softened and he grinned at me. I couldn't read the expression on his face, but I managed to pull my gaze down to the book on my lap.

All my hopes of Ashley or her friends telling me more about this guy us shattered when I pulled up the courage to speak to Ashley at the bus stop on Friday. She glared at me and looked as if she would claw my eyes out if I didn't leave her alone.

When Saturday rolled around, my mom decided on one of her moods that I didn't want anything to do with. The only way I could avoid her was to go outside and sit on the steps, but that didn't last for long either. Ashley and her friends sat across the parking lot and took turns shooting me dirty looks, and laughing maliciously. Tired of all the scrutiny and ridicule, I

walked off behind the building. All eight apartments in each of the units opened into the central breezeway -- where the stairs divided them into two units of four under each roof. So, no one really went back there very often, especially the back of my unit with the forest only about a hundred feet away. I enjoyed the solitude and tried to relax into nothingness as the sun warmed my skin.

I scanned the tree line, watching birds fly around. The trees didn't let much light through beyond the first few feet. Some sort of movement in the darkness caught my attention. Straining my eyes, I made out the vague shape of a person moving from the shadows to the edge of the trees staring back at me. My pulse raced as the person stepped closer and recognition reached me. There stood the guy I had been studying. He lifted his hand in an odd wave, and I swung around to see who he could be waving at, but I was alone. When I turned back to him, he grinned and beckoned me toward him.

Thoughts of horror films and books flashed across my mind, but before I knew it, my feet had already started forward. My mind freaked out, partly screaming at me to stop, partly overcome with curiosity and an odd feeling of comfort -- which only scared me more. The words of that weird, old lady echoed in my head... *Nothing good lurks in shadows*. However, I continued forward.

I walked past the first tree and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Why didn't I stop? It was more compulsion than a conscience effort -- I could either walk, or fall flat on my face. Finally I froze about ten feet from him. I could see him clearly as he smiled at me and I noticed the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Thank you for coming over," he said. Shock struck me. He actually spoke and his voice sounded warm.

"It's not like I had much of a choice," I said. Surprising myself with the grumble in my voice, I folded my arms across my chest. I'd never been able to feel comfortable around new people, and as contradictory as it sounds the security I felt around him made me more nervous. "Who are you, why are you here, and what do you want from me?"

"I need your help." His smile faded and he looked past me toward the buildings.

I glanced over my shoulder, but didn't see anything except the back of the complex. Looking back at him, I squinted my eyes to study him some more.

"Are you Ashley's brother?" I asked.

"Yes and no," he said looking at me with a neutral expression.

I waited, but he didn't elaborate. I hated games like this. My mom played them all the time, and it always irritated me.

"Care to explain?" I asked, actually being able to show my irritation.

He smiled at me again, although it didn't reach his eyes, and something inside me fluttered as he spoke. "Half of me used to be Matt, but now --. It's complicated. Call me Nelson."

My mind reeled at his answer, my jaw dropped open, and I stared at him in disbelief. "How can you be two different people?" I asked, not really wanting to know the answer. I even flinched after the words left my mouth.

"Well, we joined in a kind of symbiosis, or more accurately chimera, and I live with certain traits of each as my own being, called a hybrid," he said. His face scrunched up as if he didn't believe the words himself. A grimace that seemed to expect to get smacked, or hear a scream of terror, or something pushed its way onto his face.

"Yeah, right." I said and wrinkled my nose. "I don't think I want to know any more. I'll be going now." I turned to go back home. It would be safer away from this craziness. My mom's issues I could deal with. This guy... I didn't think anyone could deal with all the issues he must have.

"No! Wait," he said with clear panic in his voice.

Without me controlling it, my body spun back around and even slid closer to him. It felt as if someone had grabbed me. Like he had grabbed me. I wanted to scream, but nothing came out, and that only scared me more.

"Wait, please," he said. His face looked strained from exertion as he stepped closer to me, and I could see the desperation in his eyes. "I need your help."

Why would anyone need my help? Unless he needed some tutoring in school -- and I seriously doubted it had anything to do with school -- I didn't see how I could help him at all.

"With what?" I asked, my insides shaking.

"Well, you are the only one that can see me," he said, visibly trying to regain his composure. "And I was told that the only person that could help would be a human girl that could see me."

"Oh, God. Please tell me you aren't a ghost. I don't want to be insane," I said, "Or an alien. You aren't an alien are you?" Near tears in my panic, I returned to my previously abandoned idea. And, I still couldn't make myself run away from this guy.

"No, I'm not a ghost or alien. I'm alive and just like you... only different." He chuckled and some of the strain in his face faded.

"Well, that clears everything up nicely, doesn't it?" My panic instinctively kicked over to sarcasm. "Can I go now? I have to run away and get psychoanalyzed before my nervous breakdown is complete."

"You're not crazy, Eris," he said gently.

"Says the non-ghost entity, half Ashley's brother and half some unidentified being, who can make me move, or keep me from moving, and only I can see." I said, folding my arms across my chest again and prattling on. "Who, in their right minds would believe that I'm not crazy? After all, since no one else can see you, and probably can't hear you either, I'm standing here talking to the trees. I'm obviously not in my right mind, but I don't even believe me."

He chuckled softly again, this time reaching his eyes, and his face lit up with momentary amusement.

"I'm so glad that I can provide entertainment for you, but, since you aren't allowing me to run away, can you please tell me what you expect from me?" I asked as my panic and sarcasm started sliding into irritation.

He paced around for a minute and ran a hand through his floppy hair before speaking again. "First, I can't keep you from moving. I can nudge you, but you... you have too much energy of your own for me to control you, even if I wanted to. Secondly, I was told that you can stop my people from dying."

"And who was the brilliant person who gave you that idea?" I asked.

"Your dad, Dr. Payton," he said with a nervous look in his eyes and a habitual hand running through his shaggy hair.

Rage and pain flooded my mind and body, pushing any hint of panic and fear completely out. "Okay, what kind of sick joke is this?" I asked. "How do you know anything about me? And who do you think you are? There's no way you could possibly know my dad. I don't even know my dad. Who put you up to this?"

Nelson's eyes widened at my explosion. I realized that I had moved forward only when I got in his face and pushed him backwards. He apparently hadn't expected my reaction any more than I had. He fell to the ground and scrambled to back away from me.

"It isn't a joke Eris," he said. "I'm telling the truth. I met Dr. Payton a week ago. He said he

had been tracking you for the last six years." Nelson had his hands up defensively, as he rose and I felt a light pressure on my shoulders as if I was being held back.

I couldn't believe him. I had been the center of jokes and pranks too many times in my life. Kicking at the ground, I sprayed dirt, leaves, and twigs at him, growled, and stomped off toward home.

"Eris, please," he yelled from the ground. "We need your help."

"Go tell that to Dr. Payton," I yelled over my shoulder and slipped into the breezeway.

Hurrying to my apartment and then my room, I ignored my mom's comments about slamming the door, glad that she didn't come after me. I flopped onto my bed and started to bawl. How could I have been so stupid? I must really be having that nervous breakdown and gone insane. Everyone would laugh at me, the crazy girl who talks to the trees, until we moved again. I didn't know if I could handle five more months of scrutiny and ridicule from the entire neighborhood.

How did he know anything about my father? I hadn't told anyone. Probably my mom, I thought. After a few drinks, she would tell anyone how the cruel, heartless Dr. Payton had left her alone with a useless burden-of-a-child and utterly ruined her life. Of course, she always added a few choice words of her own.