

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a wooden door with two glass panes and a brass handle, set in a brick wall. The door is slightly ajar, and the light from the panes is visible. The brick wall is made of reddish-brown bricks. A metal handrail is visible on the right side of the door.

THE KIKI MOORE SERIES

# THE CURSE AT E STREET SCHOOL

B. PAYTON SETTLES

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# CHAPTER ONE

“Right through there, honey. Take a short nap.” The school nurse nodded toward the open doorway leading to a closet-sized room off her office in the E Street School building.

Kiki kept her head down, avoiding eye contact. She scuttled through the doorway to a cot set up against one wall. “Thanks, Nurse Henley,” she whispered in the general direction of the stout, white-uniform-clad woman.

As she lay on top of a scratchy wool blanket, trying to find a position where her joints wouldn’t ache, Kiki heard, “Is that girl contagious? If she’s too sick for P.E. she should be sent home.”

“No. Mental. Pre-rheumatic fever.” Miss Henley’s voice dropped so low Kiki could barely make out the words. “Her father brought the family back from Germany—he’s military—and then had to go back, leaving the mother sick in the hospital. Her mother’s home now, but the stress of it all gave the poor kid aching joints just like rheumatic fever. She’s under doctor’s orders to rest in there every day instead of going to gym class.”

There was a clucking, disappointed sound. Kiki could picture Miss Henley crossing her arms over her chest and scowling. “She’s a pretty little thing,” the other woman said, “with that dark hair and them big brown eyes. Skinny, though. War time rations aren’t meant for children like that.”

Kiki put the paper-covered, thin pillow over her head to drown out the voices and pictured the house on Vierstrasse in Bad Kissengen, Germany. She saw its brick steps and heavy front door, then remembered her sister helping her mother into the Jeep parked in the driveway. *Joan looked unhappy, with her face twisted in that frozen smile.* The sound of Daddy’s voice, more gravelly than usual, was so clear he could have been there with Kiki in the nurse’s office. “Relax, Emily. I’ve got everything under control. You’re getting the V.I.P. treatment—we’re flying back to the States on a troop carrier—you’ll be making friends at the Presidio

hospital before you know it.”

Without warning Joan’s haughty tone intruded on Kiki’s thoughts. “*Jah Wohl*, of course it’s all your fault, Kiki. If you hadn’t gotten involved in that cellar business, Mama probably wouldn’t have gotten sick.”

*No matter what I do, it’s wrong. I rescued Mama and found the treasure, but instead of being rewarded, we got sent back to the States. I miss our friends, Harold and Peggy. Ach du lieber, I even miss that little boy ghost!* She thought of Roland, the German Shepherd they’d had to leave in Germany, and began to cry.

After ten months in Germany, the Moores—well, Mama, Joan and Kiki—were back in California. The journey to Germany had taken two weeks—they’d crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a troop ship—but their return to the States in an airplane took only one day. “That’s her,” Daddy had said when their Jeep rolled onto the Bad Kissengen runway. “She’s built to carry troops. On this flight, it’ll be us and some cargo.” He had opened the Jeep’s canvas door and hurried across the tarmac with Mama, leaving the girls to lug their duffel bags toward the waiting craft.

Now they were back in the States, in a town called San Rafael, California. They were on their own—Daddy found them a house and returned to Germany as soon as Mama was out of the hospital.

*If only we’d gone back to our ranch in Napa. We would have been happy there, especially if Daddy stayed with us.* Kiki squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the memory of the night Daddy had left: Mama’s face suddenly white, the sadness in her eyes as she told Joan and Kiki to go to their rooms. Then, as they hovered in the hallway, Daddy’s softly rumbling voice and the sound of the front door closing. *Gotta think about something else. Can’t lose it here at school. They already think I’m crippled. They’ll put me in the looney bin for sure.*

Kiki sensed a presence other than her own in the tiny room. She opened her eyes and sat up. A shadow moved from beyond the door, in the hallway. “Nurse Henley?” *Why is she hovering out there?* Terror, a feeling way too familiar, enveloped Kiki. She jumped to her feet. “Who’s out there?” *Is it a ghost? Some kid who died in this place?*

From the outer office Nurse Henley called, “You awake, child? The bell’s about to ring. You might as well get up.”

Thoughts of ghosts forgotten, Kiki left the nurse's office and joined the line of students filing past. *I hope I can remember which classroom is Z level General Science.* As she walked, she dug a wrinkled paper from her pocket and looked at a map of the school's interior. *There it is. Last door on the right.*

The door was slightly open. She slipped inside, head down. The teacher, a tall, gaunt old lady with metal-framed glasses and hair pulled back in a bun, pointed to an empty desk by the windows. Kiki clutched her book-bag and hurried across the worn linoleum. The students' faces were familiar; they'd been in every class she'd had that day. No one acknowledged her presence as she entered the room. *Is it my fault Z is the level for dumbbells?*

The buzzer sounded. The teacher cleared her throat—evidently the signal for silence, since everyone stopped talking—and took the roll. There were only two other girls in the class, Suzy and Glenda. *They wear even more make-up than Joan! Why do they want to look so old? Maybe they are old—at least, older than me.*

“Open your books to Chapter Three.” The teacher—Miss Robbins, according to Kiki's wrinkled class schedule—dropped a textbook onto Kiki's desk. “Michael W., please read the first two paragraphs. Out loud.” Miss Robbins didn't crack a smile.

Kiki opened the textbook, eyes unfocused and concentrating on making it through the last class of the day at this gigantic, unfriendly school. Michael W. stumbled through the paragraphs, mispronouncing most of the words. When he finished Miss Robbins said, “Does anyone here know what that's called, when a fire starts all by itself?” There was no response. From behind her hand Kiki whispered, “Spontaneous combustion.”

Miss Robbins, close to Kiki's desk at the front of the class, looked sharply at her. “That child doesn't belong in this class,” she muttered. She called on a boy somewhere behind Kiki to read the next page.

The buzzer finally sounded and Miss Robbins excused the class. Kiki was halfway out the door when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, she looked up at the stern-faced Miss Robbins.

“Check in at the office before school tomorrow. I'm having you moved up to Y level. You'll be in different classes.”

*So, I'm not a dumbbell after all? “Danke sehr. I mean, thanks,”* Kiki whispered as Miss Robbins' turned away.

“Hey, new girl!” Michael W. the tall, rosy-cheeked blond boy who had done such an awful job of reading, smiled just behind Kiki in line. “Bet you’re glad this school day’s over. The bad news is, you have to do it again tomorrow!” He chuckled, then snapped his mouth shut in response to the principal’s glare. Kiki dared a look back at him as the line moved toward the big front double doors.

The line disappeared as soon as they got outside; students hurried either to the old yellow buses lined up next to the curb or walked, in twos and threes, down the sloping sidewalk toward their homes. Kiki stood alone for a second, trying to remember what she was supposed to do. She glanced back across the straggly grass to the nurse’s window. A woman in an old-fashioned dress stood looking out. *Is that the shadow I saw? Is that woman a ghost?* Kiki squared her shoulders. *I can’t think like that. The nurse thinks I’m mental: I have to prove I’m not.*

“Hey, new girl! You walking home?” Michael W. stood by bus #3.

Kiki looked at her schedule. On the bottom line, clearly printed, she read: Bret Harte—Bus #3. “No. I’m taking your bus!” She hurried over and climbed up the metal steps.

All of the seats in the front were taken; students looked the other way when she passed them, pretending not to notice her. The bus driver, a woman whose muscular shoulders looked like they belonged on a man, stared at Kiki in the rearview mirror. “Find a seat, kid. We gotta get movin’.”

As Kiki dodged the feet sticking out in the aisle, a girl at the very back of the bus called, “Down here, new kid!” and elbowed the person next to her. “Make room.”

Kiki exhaled, not even realizing she’d been holding her breath. She hurried down the aisle and dropped onto the seat. Looking sideways, she recognized the girl from General Science. “Thanks, Suzy. Or is it Glenda?”

“Suzy. Where you from?” The tall, freckled girl whispered, brushing her red pageboy away from her mouth. Kiki wondered if there was a No Talking rule on the clanking, grumbling bus.

“Germany.” Kiki looked away, out the dirty bus window. *Will she think I’m a German?* “I’m not a German,” she blurted. “My dad’s stationed there.”

A little smile replaced Suzy's pout. "Really? That's so patronotic!"

"You mean ... er, yeah." Kiki relaxed for the first time all day. "My dad's in the Air Force."

"My mom wanted to work at the shipyards but she didn't qualify." Suzy's face became stern. "We're loyal Americans, though. Anybody sez otherwise gets this!" She held up a balled fist.

A boy on the seat in front of Kiki turned around. "Hey, new kid; You *spreckenzee doich*?" He made a Hitler salute. Suzy immediately kicked the back of his bus seat. "Shut up, Doofus!"

The bus's air brakes hissed as it pulled to the curb at its first stop. "This is where I get off." Suzy stood and stepped into the aisle, then turned toward the boy she'd called a doofus. "Mess with the new girl, Alfred, and I'll hear about it," she snarled before hurrying along the aisle.

The boy kept his eyes forward for the rest of the bus ride. Kiki stayed on guard at first, wondering how much clout Suzy had, then relaxed and studied the passing scenery. *This town is light years away from Bad Kissengen. People here look like they have enough to eat. And the stores are all open. The buildings aren't as pretty, though. Of course, they're not bombed-out. That makes up for the lack of window boxes and cuckoo clocks.*

When the bus pulled over a third time, she looked out the window anxiously. *That's not my street, is it?* She pulled Mama's note from her pocket and read, in her mother's spidery handwriting, "Corner of Irwin and Bret." "Hey, new girl," someone called. "This is where you get off."

Kiki nodded, relieved. She'd been so nervous this morning on the way to school, she hadn't noticed anything. *I know the way to the house from the bus stop, though. Just down the street.*

She stepped off of the bus into a quickly dispersing crowd of pre-teens. The boy Suzy had called a doofus—a short, wiry kid with freckles and a knit cap mostly hiding straw-colored hair—took off running in the direction Kiki planned to go. She plodded forward after him, head and shoulders bent forward and trying not to think about her aching joints.

"You tryin' to catch me?" The boy turned to look back at her, smirking.

He rounded the next corner at the same time Kiki reached her family's house. "See you tomorrow," she called out.

Mama, looking out the window, waved. Waved and smiled. *She must be feeling a little better.* Kiki hurried up the steps and inside, dropping her book bag on the floor so she could give her mother a hug.

"Oof, careful, honey. Remember my stitches!" Mama's voice had a lilt to it. "How was your first day at school?"

"Okay." Kiki kept her face turned away so Mama couldn't see her tear-streaked cheeks. She reached for the box of graham crackers on the kitchen counter.

"Do you have homework? Do you like your classes? Tell me all about it." Mama dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. "I hope our time in Bad Kissengen didn't make you behind in everything."

"I don't have homework. I hate my classes. And there's nothing to tell. E Street School looks like a prison; feels like one, too. Can't we go back to Germany, or at least to Napa?"

Mama's smile disappeared. "Oh, honey, I know it's hard for you, especially after the friendly little school in Bad Kissengen. We can't go back to Germany, though; you know that. And you know your father sold the ranch so he could buy this house. She paused. "If getting used to the seventh grade is hard for you, think about your sister; she's in high school!" She looked across the table as Kiki dipped graham crackers into a glass of milk. "Promise me you'll help Joan with her homework if she asks. You know everything comes easier to you."

"Okay. I promise." Kiki took a slurp of milk. "Guess what happened today in science? The teacher ...."

The front door slammed. "Anybody home? Am I at the right house? The right street? The right continent?" Joan sounded giddy. Happy.

"In here, doofus!" *I hope that's not a bad word.*

Mama frowned, as if the word had hurt her ears. Joan swung into the room, flushed and grinning. "I love it," she squealed. "I got a ride home from the cutest boy, and tomorrow I'm trying out for the cheerleader squad!"



Kiki was brushing her teeth, getting ready for bed, when the clunky black phone in the hallway rang. “Ouch!” The jarring, fire-bell sound made her bite her tongue. “Can I get that, Mama?”

Joan must have been standing right next to the phone. Kiki’s ears were still ringing when she heard her sister’s overly sweet, “Moore residence, Joan speaking,” and then, “Mama! Come quick! It’s Daddy!”

Both girls hovered near the phone until Mama’s stern look sent them scurrying down the hall. “How does he sound?” Kiki whispered to Joan. “Is he happy? Does he miss us?”

“Of course he misses us,” Joan choked on the words. “He just has to; Mama misses him so much!”

“Maybe he wants us to come back.” Kiki ignored the desperation in her voice. “I hope Mama will ask him about Roland.” At the thought of their German Shepherd, she gulped.

“We can’t go back. You know that. We have to wait here until his tour of duty is done; then he’ll join us and, maybe, take us with him where he’s stationed next. I hope it’s not until I’m through high school. I like San Rafael High!” Joan looked anxious.

“If only Mama hadn’t gotten hurt—and sick—I know it’s my fault; you don’t have to remind me—we’d still be in Bad Kissengen right now, on *Vierstrasse* with Roland.” Kiki’s voice trailed off to a whisper.

“If only. Famous last words. Hey, maybe if you found a skeleton or two around here, the Air Force would send us back to Daddy.” Joan’s smile was more of a grimace.

Kiki slouched back into the bathroom. *Joan still doesn’t get it; she probably never will. She just thinks I’m crazy—loony tunes, she called me. Daddy’s the only one who understands. That’s because he sees ghosts, too. I inherited this awful sixth sense from him. Oh, Daddy, how am I going to survive in a new town without you?*

Kiki’s thoughts turned to the woman she’d seen looking out the E Street School nurse’s window. *Was she a ghost? She wasn’t a nurse. And her dress was so old-fashioned, like in the time of Abraham Lincoln. Her hair, too. And she was so pale. Almost*

*transparent.*

Joan stuck her head in through the bathroom doorway.  
“Mama’s off the phone. Let’s go find out what Daddy said.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Payton Settles writes what she knows; all of her stories are set in areas where she has lived. She comes from a family of writers—her paternal grandparents ran Kansas newspapers—and a highlight of both high school and college was the editing of the schools' yearbooks. She lives in California, enjoying retirement from a career as a Reading Specialist.