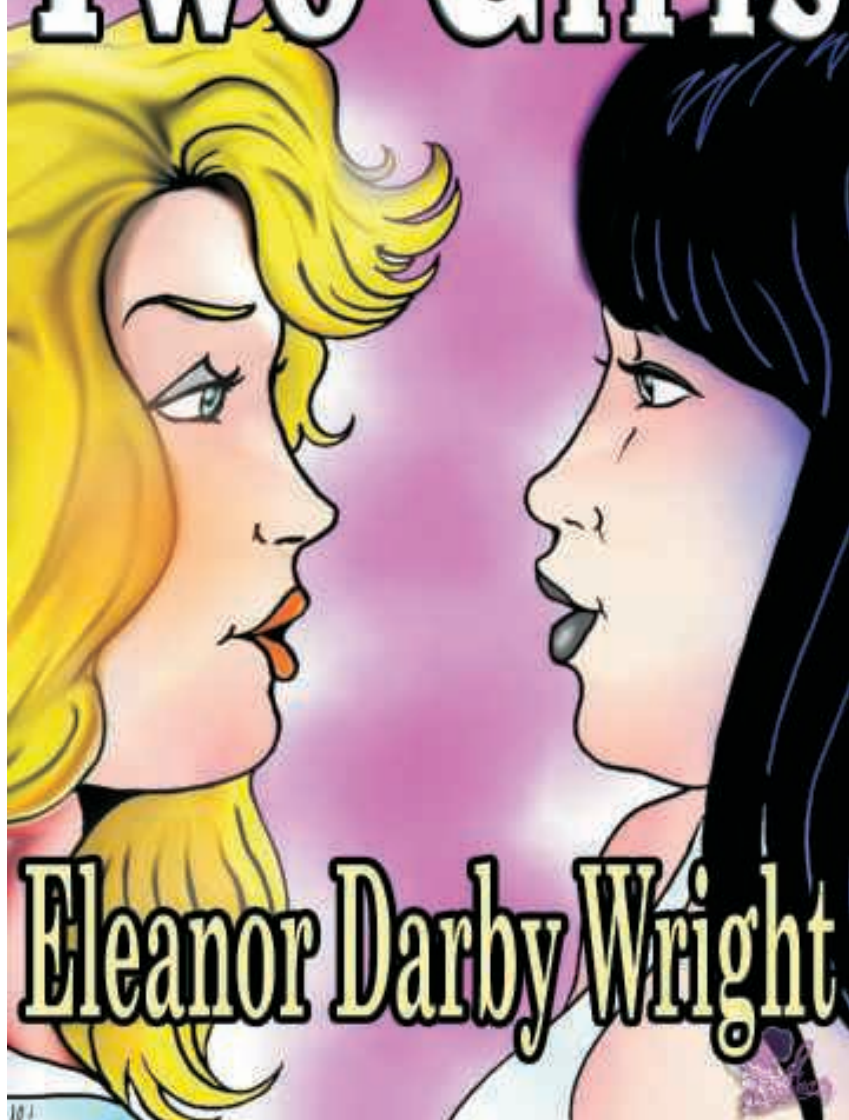


Two Girls



Eleanor Darby Wright



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TWO GIRLS

by Eleanor Darby Wright

The first girl, all blonde hair with red ribbons, put the dollies in the pram and showed the other girl, a brunette with braids, blue ribbons twisted through them, where the mummies had to take their babies. That was what the blonde girl was calling both the little girls as they strutted together in their long dresses down the garden. The babies were her large collection of dolls.

"Thank you so much for bringing Melissa to play with Alice," the smartly dressed, blonde woman beside the pool said to her friend, dark-haired, and darkly clothed. The brunette watched the little girls anxiously as they went out to the gazebo where the blonde wanted to stage a tea party for all of her dollies.

"Melissa," said the dark-haired woman carefully, still watching the bossy, little blonde arrange the dolls, showing Melissa how to place them and how to sit herself, her legs crossed just like her mother beside the

pool. She really did look like the mummy and the dolls like her little girls.

"Melissa is always kind," the dark-haired woman said. "She," she grimaced as she said the word, "has always been the helpful one. When I told her, what three years ago now, how she could help Alice, come over here and play with her and her dolls, she didn't want to, of course, at first, but she is, she is ..."

Kate Allen, Melissa's mother, was stuck for words on how to describe the little girl who smoothed her dress beneath her bare legs and crossed them with a smile as Alice pointed imperiously to her friend's pink skirt.

"Very kind," Melissa's mother murmured finally, aware that Beatrice wasn't paying her any attention at all. Bea's focus was solely upon her own daughter and with very good reason.

"It was such a shock that Susan was gone before I invited Melissa and you over. Her Charlotte wasn't half as nice a girl as Melissa. Susan left without even a word as well," said Beatrice Mainwaring crossly. "Not a word, not even an intimation that she and Jeff were even having any trouble. Just one day she's here and Alice is so happy playing with Charlotte. The next, they're gone and Alice is bereft."

"She was ill again, herself, wasn't she?" asked Kate Allen quietly.

"Yes," said Beatrice. "Brought on, the doctors said, by the stress of her best friend leaving. I asked her if she'd like me to invite William over but you know how she is. She doesn't like boys very much, even now. Never has. Far too rough. Then, we heard why Charlotte was gone. She had the same thing as Alice and had had a relapse. Susan should have told us, you know. We haven't told Alice even now, three years later, that Charlotte will never be coming back."

"She looks pretty well today," said Kate thoughtfully, watching as the blonde girl hugged her girl friend, just as Beatrice had hugged her, as the two girls put the dollies down in the pram and baby cribs, kiss-

ing them as mummies had to do, according to Alice, before their afternoon naps.

"It comes and goes," said Beatrice, watching her daughter like a hawk. "When I told her that there weren't any other little girls her age anywhere on the estate, only boys like William, or the Sebastian twins, she was very quiet. I was at my wit's end when Alice mentioned Melissa, and how nice she had been, that one time when she was over with Charlotte, dressing up in the Halloween costumes with the two of them.

"How the girls giggled! Susan and I didn't know why. Melissa was gone before you came to pick William up. Alice said she wouldn't mind if Melissa came, but not William. But you do live quite a distance away now, don't you, Kate, all the way across the tracks. I hope you don't mind me using that term."

Kate Allen smiled. She didn't mind at all. Where she and Doug lived at present was across the tracks, across the river as well. And a very nice suburb it was, too. Beatrice could have found any of a dozen girls to play with Alice if she had only put her mind to it. But her friend was a bit of a snob, no, she was a lot of a snob, and always had been. Still, she was a generous friend and Kate could use her help.

"So it was Alice who was the one who suggested Melissa come over and visit, not me," Beatrice said with a tight smile. "I hadn't heard of Melissa before, until my daughter told me all about her. I guess when William was over and Charlotte was here, she must have appeared. Alice remembered how nice she was to both of them. She was such a nice mummy, Alice said. Nicer than me, I asked her and she said, much nicer."

The two women laughed at that, studying the girls at play. "That doll house," said Kate Allen. "Isn't that the one ...?"

"That we used to play with for hours?" asked Beatrice, standing up and picking up a tray with a jug of iced lemonade and two glasses. There were also cookies on a plate. "Yes, that's the one. Repainted, of

course. Excuse me, Kate, for a moment or so, while I prove to my daughter that I can be just as nice a mummy as Melissa."

The little girls looked up, the brunette reddening a little as she burped the 'baby' before gently laying it back in its crib. "Ooo, thank you, Mummy!" said Alice excitedly. "Look, Melissa! A picnic! I can't remember the last time I had a real picnic out here. It must be because you're here!"

"I think it's because you have such a nice mummy," said Melissa in her soft, gentle voice. She actually smiled up at Beatrice. "And because you are so well. Fresh air is really good for you."

"That's true, Melissa," said Alice's mother.

"Oh, Mummy," said Alice crossly. "You don't have to praise everything Melissa says. You've been doing that ever since she got here! I know, Melissa, after we finish our cookies, why don't we go in and play dress-up. I've got a stack of new outfits for Halloween and dress-up parties. You must come with me. She can, can't she, Mummy? I'll try, I really will, to get around the Crescent this year. Having Melissa with me will keep me going!"

"That's a very good idea, Alice darling," said Beatrice to her daughter. "Why don't I ask Melissa's mother if she can spend Halloween with you? Maybe she can even sleep over. Would you like that, Melissa? As you can hear, it would be a really great favor for us if you'd do that."

"Oh, Mummy!" snapped Alice as the other girl looked on, twisting one of her braids that had come loose. "Melissa is my friend now. She loves coming over to play. You don't have to ask her if she'd like to come over. She'll adore it!"

"I really don't know," said Kate as the girls disappeared into the house and Beatrice made her proposal to have Melissa over for Halloween, even the Saturday before, for the party she was having in the huge mansion that dominated Spring Hill.

"Melissa's really been so kind to Alice," said Beatrice persuasively. "The two got along so well today, right from your arrival. She looks so pretty in that dirndl dress you let her wear here. You watch. Alice is into very modern makeup and dressing, these days, when she does play dress-up. I bet the girls won't be coming down as Snow White and Cinderella but more like Christina Aguilera and Hanna Montana!"

"I should talk to Doug about ..." began Kate quietly, her voice much like the one Melissa used.

"Oh, he'll never miss Melissa," scoffed Beatrice. "He'll probably be glad that she's out of the house and visiting up here. Now, I'll have them both in bed at regular hours, Kate. Melissa can sleep right in with Alice if you'll let her come. You know Alice doesn't have anything catching." She sighed. "I was actually turned down by two different mothers I phoned yesterday, who didn't care at all about Alice, only about exposing their daughters to her."

Kate Allen grimaced. Such thoughts had entered her mind. And others, such as how Melissa might react to Alice's death. It could happen. Charlotte Sunderland had been in hospital many times with Alice, and always had appeared much rosier and healthier than the wimpy Alice Mainwaring. Kate also knew that Susan had worried a lot about what would happen to Charlotte if something ever happened to Alice. Then, it had all come out the opposite to what Kate would have predicted.

"I'll call you tomorrow," Kate told her friend as pleasantly as she could. No, it wouldn't be what Doug said that allowed another visit. It would be what Melissa said and whether she wanted to come back after this very long day with Alice Mainwaring.

Beatrice knew her daughter well. When the girls at last came downstairs, their long dresses were gone. The girls had makeup on their faces, Kate quite astonished at the vividness of her daughter's eyes and the glossy lipstick worn more stylishly than Alice wore hers.

Alice toted down a child's tape recorder. The two girls sang and mimed to the voice of Miley Cyrus, swinging their long, loose hair over their shoulders as if they were teenaged girls or something. Kate could not believe that Melissa was doing the same things as Alice, swinging her hips and smiling, even dancing with the other girl, both wiggling at exactly the same moments, most suggestively. Their voices were indistinguishable from one another. Clearly Melissa must have been watching more television than Kate had thought she was.

"Ooh, look at your glass, Melissa," said Alice as the girls had tea with their mothers and talked about the things they'd done in the bedroom, the clothes they'd worn and how long they'd had to wait until their nail polish dried.

Melissa frowned and blushed. "It's just like yours," said Melissa, taking a napkin and trying to wipe the lipstick off her glass.

"I gave you the Ravishing Red," said Alice. "It suits you, Melissa. You look so pretty. You should wear it all the time when you come over to play."

"Sure," said Melissa, glancing at her mother and smiling prettily. "Thank you for the compliment, Alice. You're really good in putting makeup on someone else. I looked really pretty in the mirror, thanks to you. And you look so beautiful as well!"

Kate's heart lifted at the way Melissa spoke to the very sick girl beside her, both of them wearing similar miniskirts and sequinned tops like the singer. Alice fairly glowed at being praised by the other.

At cleanup time, Melissa was the one to get the dollies from the gazebo and push them all back in the big pram to the veranda, where Alice was having to use a puffer for a while. Alice was definitely a different girl, thought Kate, so forward in so many ways, as her singing and dressing up had shown, and then seeming years younger with the way she played with her dollies. Kate guessed that the reason she liked Melissa

was that Melissa wasn't going to chide her over her choice of games for the two girls to play.

The girls went off with armfuls of dolls, giggling over the way that they walked like Hanna Montana. Alice showed Melissa how Christina walked, much more femininely and sexily. A laughing Melissa tried to copy her as the pair went over to Alice's bedroom.

The girls hugged and kissed on the cheeks, leaving lipstick bows on each other which made them giggle, like little girls, when it was finally time to go. "It's been such a lovely afternoon, Kate," said Beatrice, smiling broadly as the girls walked arm-in-arm out to Kate's car. They could hear Alice telling Melissa all about the new car, a Caddy, that her mother had just bought.

"We both enjoyed it," said Kate. "You could come to us ..."

"No," said Beatrice quickly with a shake of her stylish blonde hair. "I don't mean to disparage where you're living, Kate. I'm sure it's very nice. But we've everything here if Alice ever has a difficulty. The ambulance can be here in four minutes, if it ever came to that.

"But we'd love to see you both again. Would next Saturday be all right? We might even think of a little trip to Spring Hill Mall. They've a new dress shop there that has the most gorgeous new girl's fashions, which would be perfect for our two little girls." Not really so little, Kate wanted to protest, certainly not with the way Beatrice liked to dress Alice. "They do need new party dresses for the Camerons. Everyone there always dresses up fancily. They tried to get the children dancing last time we were there, but it's going to be a different party this time, with a clown and a show."

"Melissa might enjoy that," said Kate noncommittally. "Oh, what's this?"

"I heard about Doug being laid off," said Beatrice sympathetically. "And you, Kate, with another child on the way. You know me, I can't bake at all! You'd throw out anything I tried to foist onto you! It's just a

little something for you, a belated birthday present, we can call it."

Kate was stunned at the money on the check. "I don't ..."

"Just bring Melissa over soon," said Beatrice cheerily. "That's all the re-payment I'll ever need. To see our girls getting along so well!"

Melissa waved from the front seat all the way down the driveway before she settled back into her booster seat.

"That didn't go so badly, did it?" Kate asked cautiously as they turned onto the roadway that led to Springwater Bridge.

"No, Mummy," said Melissa, her legs in the shiny black shoes and long white socks up to her knees looking pretty. Her little tartan skirt was smoothed down by a hand with red-tipped fingers. Kate would have to stop at the pharmacy and get some nail varnish remover for Melissa. She never wore nail varnish herself, did Kate. Alice had not only put Ravishing Red on her daughter's lips but on her fingernails as well.

"Mrs Mainwaring would like you to go back there next Saturday," said Kate cautiously. "She wants to take Alice shopping for a party dress, and you as well, if you come next week."

"A party dress?" asked Melissa quietly. "For me?"

"With new shoes with heels and stockings," said Kate neutrally, waiting for Melissa to object most strenuously.

"Mrs Mainwaring gave you some money for me coming over today?" asked Melissa carefully, pushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture that Hanna Montana made all the time. Melissa did look very pretty with her long hair unbraided and streaming over her little top.

No-one could have told that it was a wig, not with the gestures Melissa had learned from Alice, in the times she'd been over in the last year to meet her delicate friend. Twice, Alice had been bed-ridden. Melissa had been the one to set up Barbie dolls and dress them,

to look like her, just as Alice wanted. Kate wondered whose idea it had been to leave Melissa's hair loose and unbraided. She did look very pretty, feminine, as she sat delicately beside her mother.

"You see everything, don't you?" asked Kate Allen, as they turned the car finally down the hill and joined the stream of traffic to the Bridge, passing the expensive mall Beatrice wanted to go to, with the girls, next time. Kate normally shopped at much less expensive stores. It was a pity Spring Hill wasn't large enough to warrant a Wal-Mart.

"She did say something about re-payment," said Melissa quietly.

"Oh, she'd never ask for the money that she gives me," said Kate Allen. "That's just to help us until Daddy gets his job back. No, the two of you having fun is all the repayment Alice's mummy needs from us."

"I have to come back then, for her to see that," said Melissa thoughtfully.

Kate sighed. "I guess so," she said. "But if you were sick ... they wouldn't even let you onto the estate. Beatrice is deathly afraid of Alice, in her weakened state, catching anything like a cold."

"It could kill her?" Melissa asked as the car crossed the Bridge, and the railway tracks. Yes, they'd definitely entered a world, not as privileged as that of the Mainwarings.

"Possibly," said Kate. "But it's a convenient excuse if you don't want to go back there."

Melissa sighed and sank back in her seat, clearly thinking about it. "Alice only has a few months to live?" she asked again. Kate noticed that the vividness of Melissa's darkly fringed eyes were because she hadn't cleaned her face of makeup as well as she should have.

"That might be true," said Kate, pulling into the pharmacy parking lot. "We need nail polish remover for your nails," she said to Melissa, "and makeup tissue removers. I'll have to teach you how to do that if

you go back. Alice is into tweenie girls' games, growing up much faster than boys do."

"She's into games," Melissa agreed with a sigh. "Well, I suppose it won't hurt to go next weekend. Alice might have some other girl friend, besides me."

"She's taught at home," said Kate. "So she doesn't get much chance to meet girls her own age. I told Bea she ought to be in grade school, or ballet classes with other girls, but Alice's mother's so afraid of germs and stuff. All her instructors come to her home to teach her. Will you come into the shop with me, Melissa?" she asked as she parked, careful to keep her face from showing any sort of feeling, one way or another, about Melissa going in with her. Melissa had had the shakes very badly the first time she'd had to go out in public, with her mother, in her new dress and shoes.

"All right," said Melissa with a confident smile at her mother.

"Good," said Kate. "We'll go on and get some food items I must have as well after I've been to the bank. Come on, poppet. Look out for that door and come and help me."

So, Melissa was a good, little girl and helped her mother. Doug luckily wasn't home when they got back. So the little girl was able to help her mother get the parcels in and get them unpacked before Kate insisted that she get out of the 'good clothes' she was wearing, Melissa's only girl's clothes, and get back into her jeans and tee-shirt.

Kate wouldn't let her child go out until all her makeup was removed and all the nail polish made to vanish. "There," she said at last as her son, William, reappeared after the wig was unpinned and set on its block in Kate's room.

William shook his longish hair and shivered. "Can I go over to Han's?" he asked, picking up his soccer ball and testing it to see that it was hard.

"Sure," said his mother, making sure that there was no vestige of Melissa on her son's skin or hair. It would be awful for him if someone challenged him about

dressing up as a little girl. He'd apparently done it to amuse Charlotte and Alice once before. Unfortunately, Alice had liked 'her' better than she'd ever liked 'him', William Allen. The check in Kate's hand made her feel very guilty, as she thought about what her son had done, to earn it for her.

"You deserve some time with your friends, Will," Kate said hurriedly, trying not to think about what she might be doing to her son's psyche by encouraging him to dress as 'Melissa' to please Alice. But she couldn't just let him think she didn't appreciate what he did. "And thank you for what you did today, son. I know it was pretty strange but it did please one sick little girl and, whatever happens from here on in, you won't have to do this much longer, if, in fact, you even have to do it again, next Saturday."

Alice was standing in the doorway, smiling and waving as Kate and Melissa, sitting so primly in her new, green tartan skirt and new black kitten-heeled shoes, drove into the Mainwarings' long driveway.

"You don't have to do this, William," said Kate to the little girl who sat so composedly beside her.

"Mrs Mainwaring gave you more money last weekend, didn't she?" asked Melissa in the voice she always used now, when she'd taken on what Kate Allen thought of as her 'Melissa persona'. They were visiting Alice almost every weekend since the sick girl's phenomenal revival of late, Beatrice putting it all down to Melissa's influence.

"We don't have medical coverage and she's helping us out," said Kate, with a quick glance at the dark, bewigged girl beside her, waving and smiling back at the other excited girl behind the glass outer door. Undoubtedly, what was causing Alice to be so excited, thought Kate, was the prospect of the party that afternoon and early evening at Shaun Cameron's house.

"And she'll keep helping out, won't she, if I keep coming out here to play with Alice. Isn't that right?"

asked Melissa quietly. Kate shivered. This 'girl' sometimes scared her as she seemed, as William never did, to be able to see right into and read Kate's mind.

Melissa unbuckled herself, unlocked the door and let herself out. Before Kate could help, Melissa was taking out the suitcase with her clothes for the weekend.

"Claire was just thrilled that Alice's friend, Melissa, could come over," Beatrice had gushed on the phone, not letting Kate get in a word. Kate was already stumped by Bea's continual calling for Melissa to come and play with Alice, to shop, to go to the park with the other girl, even to swim in the pool. That had meant buying Melissa a girl's bathing costume, one with a frilly skirt all about it, as well as a girl's swimming cap, one decorated with flowers.

William hadn't liked the packages she'd brought into his bedroom and put into his 'special' drawer. He'd asked and been quiet then for a long time. Now, he said the same thing about the party that he had about swimming. "I suppose I have to do it," he'd said with a sigh. "But there was a match this Saturday."

William wasn't old enough to play for the school but he liked to go and see the older boys. They liked him as well as William and Doug often joined in impromptu soccer games in the local park. "You'll be playing out here in a couple of years," the older boys often said to him.

"My son's going to be a football player," Doug always said. The real game, not this sissy stuff, he'd say to Kate when William was off, chasing a ball that the older boys were too lazy to go after.

"I'll tell Bea you can't go to Shaun Cameron's party on Saturday," Kate said to Melissa after the phone call invitation. "You missed a match for swimming ..."

"Shaun Cameron?" William had asked, a frown on his clean, unlined face. "He's the only boy Alice says she likes at all. She calls all her boy dolls, Shaun, and she's always tucking them up in bed with her Barbie dolls in the house we play with."

"She doesn't mention William?" Kate had asked lightly.

"Never mentions him at all," said William without a flicker of a smile. He sighed. "This'll mean a lot to Alice. I suppose we'll have to go."

"Bea wants a sleepover as well," said Kate to her son. "I can cancel that at least."

William sighed. "Alice was saying I had to stay over if we ever went to a party," he said carefully once more. "She said it's what girl friends do after parties. They lie in bed and tell each other everything that went on, who was nice, who wasn't. You have to tell what happens if you have to do a forfeit outside the closed door, all that sort of stuff. They call it Postman's Knock. Did you go to parties with games like that, Mummy?"

"Not at this age," said Kate with a light, quick laugh. "Alice has a vivid imagination, doesn't she? It will be things like musical chairs and Pictionary, I'm sure, at Shaun's party. He might have a magician or a clown to amuse you all."

"That would be better," said William in relief.

But Kate felt quite apprehensive when she saw the very pretty, party dress Alice was wearing. Bea had bought it for her at Spring Hill Mall, several weekends before, and another, in red, and not black and gold, for Melissa.

"We'll hang it here," Beatrice had said gaily as Kate said that Doug wouldn't like another family buying dresses for Melissa. He'd have a fit, Kate knew, if he heard that Beatrice was buying pretty, girls' dresses, for his son. "Melissa can wear it when she goes to a party with Alice. Won't that be fun, Melissa?"

"Oh, yes," said Melissa guardedly, watching the dress being hung up among all the dresses Alice had. She'd forced a smile, thanked Beatrice for the gift, most prettily, kissing the other woman's cheek. She'd taken her mother's hand to walk to the car in the black kitten heels Bea had also bought her, insisting that Melissa wear them 'to get used to them'. Now, Melissa

was wearing them, the heels clicking like Kate's high heels, as Melissa rolled her suitcase to the front door of the Mainwarings.

"Melissa's here!" squealed Alice as she opened the door to let in mother and daughter. Of course, the little girls hugged and smiled at one another. "Oh, I can't wait to get over to Shaun's house for the party, Melissa. Can you?"

"You smell nice," said Melissa cautiously to her friend.

"Mummy says we can use her new perfume if we use it properly," said Alice, taking Melissa's hand and pulling her in. "Let's get you into your party dress, just like me!"

Alice was wearing stockings with her kitten heel shoes, Kate noticed. Melissa was hugged and made to feel really welcome by the girl who said how awful the last week had been, how lonely she'd been since Melissa couldn't come over earlier.

"Bea!" called Kate as she stood in the hallway, hanging Melissa's coat on the kiddy rack beside Alice's five or six examples of little girl's outer wear.

It took another call up the stairs and finally Beatrice came rushing down, the smile of welcome dimming when she looked at Kate by herself. "You came over alone?" Beatrice gasped. "Alice was so looking ..."

"She's already kidnapped Melissa," said Kate with a smile. "Unless I miss my guess, they've headed off to raid your perfumery, Bea."

"Oh, the little minxes," said Beatrice affectionately. "Alice has been so excited all morning, knowing you and Melissa were coming."

"I don't think she noticed me," said Kate dryly but the remark went right by Bea. "Did I see Alice was wearing stockings today?"

"Of course," said Beatrice, rolling her eyes. "Well, it's a party, isn't it? A girl has to look pretty! She insists on stockings and a garter belt today. Oh, and a party dress, ribbons to match and high heels, as she calls the kitten heels we bought the girls three weeks ago!"

"Melissa ..." began Kate.

"Will wear the same as my little sexpot," laughed Beatrice. Kate frowned and wondered if she should tell her friend again that Melissa wasn't exactly a girl, as pretty as she appeared to be. But Beatrice should know that.

"I should go and help," Kate began.

"No need," said Beatrice complacently. "Let's find a drink, shall we? I think that hubby of mine replenished the gin and vermouth yesterday. Let me make you a martini!"

"But Melissa ..." said Kate, knowing she must confront Beatrice with what they were doing to her 'daughter'.

"Alice laid out all the clothes Melissa is to wear on the bed they're sharing," Bea went on as if Kate hadn't spoken at all. "We had to buy a new one, a queen-size, if you can believe it, for all the dollies Alice likes to sleep with. There's barely enough room for a friend on a sleepover. That's what Alice is really excited about. She's never had a sleepover before!"

"Neither has Melissa," said Kate dryly.

"You watch," said Bea, steering her friend to the drinks area of her beautiful living room. "We'll have quite the fashion show in a few minutes. Both of those girls love dressing up so much. We did, too, I remember, when we were little girls."

"We didn't wear French perfume," Kate said sourly.

"Only because our mothers couldn't afford it," laughed Beatrice, stretching out on a long sofa, cocktail in hand. "The beds we shared, Kate! Can you believe how small they were! The only dollies we had were rag ones, with buttons for eyes!"

"Different colors when one wasn't missing entirely," said Kate, having to smile at the memory.

There was a noise and a swishing in the hallway. Girlish giggles followed before Alice's head appeared around the doorframe. "Are you ready?" she asked,

smiling at the two ladies in the living room. There was a rustling noise behind her.

"Ready for the fashion parade?" asked Bea with a laugh. "Put on the music and begin."

"You put on the music, Mummy," said Alice, laughing, and there were more rustlings and swishings from the hallway.

Bea got up and put on some classical music. Alice entered first, not in her party dress but in one of her mother's dresses, holding up the front like a medieval lady at a dance. Melissa followed, wearing one of Alice's Princess dresses, all in yellow. It was Melissa's petticoats that made all the noise.

She is so pretty, thought Kate with a gasp at the makeup on Melissa's face. The girl pouted as Alice had done, and, hand on hip, strutted and rustled her dress, pirouetting opposite the ladies, showing off the bow over her tush and the pretty, yellow, high heels, Alice's. Kate noticed in surprise that her daughter was wearing stockings, just like Alice. Her eyelids were darker than normal as were her eyelashes. Her mouth, red with lipstick, was more bow-shaped than Kate had ever noticed before.

"You did that yourselves?" asked an admiring Beatrice, clasping her daughter. Melissa came to Kate, who recognized the perfume on her neck and arms as the same one that Alice was wearing. Oh, but Melissa was so soft and girlie as she snuggled up to her mother, lifting her long dress, showing off her stockings and heels.

"Gemma," said Melissa with a smile, "helped us."

"Alice made our upstairs maid do your makeup, Miss Melissa Allen?" Bea asked in delight. "Who helped you into your new clothes?"

"I needed her to help me with my garter belt," said a serious Melissa, deliberately, Kate was sure, not looking at her.

"You look so pretty in that dress, Melissa," Bea enthused. "Your dark hair sets it off beautifully. All right, Alice, you girls can get dressed properly now in

your party dresses. You don't want to be late for Shaun, do you?"

Alice let out a squeal, seized Melissa's hand and the two girls hopped, skipped and danced out of the room, disappearing up the back stairs that the maids used. There was the sound of laughing, female voices.

"They have to show off for the maids," said Beatrice. "And, Kate, you can go, really. I'll call you tonight when I've got the girls to bed. I'm sure they'll have a fine time at Claire's. What can happen with a magician and eating and drinking? There's no time for the hanky-panky my over-sexed daughter thinks happens at every party she goes to."

"And then what did Tom do?" whispered Alice as she cuddled up to her friend, in a nightie the twin of Alice's.

Melissa hesitated, a chill going through her as she remembered Tom's hands on her, so unlike Alice's feeble, soft hands, stroking the silky, puffed sleeves of the nightie Melissa had to wear. Should she really tell her friend what had happened to her when she and Tom had been out in the Postman game, behind the door?

Tom, after all, was so much older than the little girls. He'd known exactly what he was supposed to do. He'd done what Alice would have loved to have done to her. Melissa hadn't been able to move as Tom crushed her arms to her sides and kissed her. She'd tried to turn to stone and pretend it was nothing, even when Tom's tongue slid over her lips. He'd moved her head from side to side and the weirdest of feelings had overwhelmed Melissa. It was as if she really was a girl, as if she liked being kissed forcefully by a strong, muscular boy, Tom.

"Your lipstick was all smeared when you came back," whispered Alice slyly to her friend. "Mrs Cameron noticed! That's why she pulled Tom out of

the game and wouldn't let him come back and play any more with us."

"Oh, that's why," whispered Melissa with a shudder. Just thinking about it made her lips compress as they'd done with Tom kissing her. He'd whispered to her to close her eyes and enjoy herself. When his tongue ran eerily across her lipstick, he crushed her in her swishy dress against him, she really feeling so girlish, especially when his lips moved from side to side and she'd had to do the same.

"Now, wasn't that really nice?" Tom whispered to her. She'd shuddered as she'd nodded to him as he leant over her, making her lift her arms about his neck. He said it would help her enjoy kissing him. Oh, it did. They did it again, with her pressing into him, as a girl should, her heart beating a thousand beats per second as she kissed a boy and liked doing it.

They kept on as Tom wouldn't knock on the door as he was supposed to. Finally, they heard the other boys and girls in the game knocking on the door. When it opened, everyone saw her with her arms about Tom's neck, sitting in his lap on the stairs.

"Next year," Tom whispered in her ear, making her clip-on earring shake so enticingly, "you can be my girl friend at my birthday party, sit in my lap, and make out with me."

Melissa had wanted to ask Tom what he meant by 'making out' with him, trembling as she let him keep his arm about her waist. The knocking had been louder as Tom kissed her again, his hand on her thigh, stroking her, but it was Mrs Cameron who'd intervened, not Shaun's older sister who'd been running the game. "We're going to start musical chairs," she'd said sweetly, helping Melissa untangle herself from Tom's protective arms. She'd kept her arm about Melissa as she'd escorted her into the girls' game, that had begun first.

"Tom did kiss me," Melissa finally confessed in a conspiratorial whisper to her friend who was stroking her hair, demanding to know the truth.

"Show me," said Alice, putting her arms about Melissa's neck. Her nightie slid against Melissa's. Her leg began to slide over the other girl's, between them, and Melissa had a hard time holding the other girl off her.

"It wasn't like that!" she protested in a whisper as Alice slipped her scented face right against Melissa's and kissed her cheek.

Alice giggled. "Show me," she whispered. Slowly, cautiously, Melissa showed her.

"He pinned my arms to my sides," Melissa whispered, feeling so embarrassed as she gave her friend the details Alice seemed desperate to hear.

"So you pretended you couldn't struggle against him," Alice said in a voice only Melissa could have heard in her newly pierced ear. Alice's tongue actually licked the little earring Melissa knew her mother would be furious about. She'd have to tell her that Mrs Cameron's daughter had done that, had done it for all the girls at the party who didn't have pierced ears. She'd put huge danglers and bands into their ears which other girls said was so pretty and so great! Now Melissa had sleepers to keep the holes open so she could wear pretty earrings, again.

"I did tell him not to, and, and I did struggle!" hissed Melissa but her best female friend giggled at the lie and didn't believe her anyway.

"I'll be Tom," Alice said, her arms gripping the girl beside her. "He slid them around you and pulled you against him?" Melissa almost screamed for the other to let her go. She felt as terrified as she had, when Tom did that to her, the first time. Alice kissed her, right on the lips, as Tom had, but she wasn't fierce and hungry, if those were the right words, as Tom. Kissing Alice was like kissing a soft dolly. Melissa had done that many times to please her friend when they'd put their dollies to bed.

"Now, you be Tom," whispered Alice, letting go. Slowly, Melissa put her arms about the other girl's waist, crinkling her soft nightie, her skin so smooth below. Alice immediately threw her arms about Me-

lissa's neck, kissing her mouth as fiercely as Tom had, earlier that afternoon.

Melissa clutched the other girl but Alice's legs were over hers and she was trapped. "There," giggled Alice from the dark. "That's how he did it really, didn't he?" Melissa knew she was blushing as she finally admitted to her friend that she'd lied about how Tom had kissed her.

"I knew because Vanessa," Alice went on with a giggle, "was telling me months ago all about Tom and how he likes kissing girls. How do you like me kissing you, Melissa?"

"B-Better than Tom," said Melissa nervously.

"See, we have to practice with one another," whispered Alice, her long hair mixing with Melissa's on her pillow. Gentle kisses followed. "We girls have to be experts in this and teach the boys how to do it properly. That's what Sherrie, Shaun's sister, was telling us, while you were out, necking with Tom."

"I wasn't!" protested Melissa, trying to wriggle clear of Alice, but the other girl hung onto her, giggling even more.

"You were so and I only have you to practice with," said Alice with a tiny cough which Melissa knew meant that Alice was getting too worked up. She must always slow down what she was doing, Aunt Bea had warned Melissa, if Alice began coughing repeatedly, and call Bea to her daughter's side.

Melissa lay very still as Alice gently stroked her and kissed her again. "You can do this to me, Melissa," said Alice, yawning suddenly. "We're girl friends, you and me, and girl friends help each other, don't they, to be really good girls later on with boy friends. You'll always tell me what the boys like to do to you, won't you, Melissa?"

"They're afraid of touching me. Shaun was. He said he didn't want to be the one who killed me." Alice shivered. "It was nice of him to be so considerate, wasn't it? If only he was a girl like you. Your skin is so soft and smooth and silky like your dresses and you're so

gentle. I really enjoy being all girlish with you, Melissa. You like it when I'm the same with you, don't you?"

Alice was in the doorway, as usual, waving at Kate arriving with her daughter. Even though they'd parked across the driveway as usual, Kate could see that the little girl was in a pink tutu, her hair in ribbons, her legs in pink tights and ballet shoes.

"Good heavens," Kate said nervously, looking at the sweet-looking, fashionably dressed daughter she'd brought to be Alice's companion at some Halloween party. "She surely can't be expecting you, Melissa ..."

But Alice did expect a blushing Melissa to be a ballerina just like herself. She fluffed out the tutu, the ruffles bouncing against her legs as she got up on her toes and did a little pirouette.

"I'll show you how to do this, Melissa," Alice said. "It's really easy! I bet no-one at the party will know that you aren't in dance classes with me!"

"Alice!" snapped Bea Mainwaring, limping down the stairs with a maid to help her. "I've told you, again and again, to come and get me, when we have guests at the house. You aren't the hostess here just yet, my girl!"

Alice looked suitably chastened and stood with her hands behind her back, tears actually forming in her eyes, Kate Allen saw in surprise.

"Gemma," said Bea to the maid. "Would you please take Melissa up to Alice's room, help her to put her clothing away and get into the second set of ballet slippers and tutu? She can come down and I'll do her hair for her. I'll need the rest of the pink ribbons I left on top of the nightie I was putting out for Melissa."

"Oh, Bea," said Kate as Melissa gave her a very strained look but went off docilely with the smiling maid and a very excited Alice. "Melissa doesn't have to stay overnight ..."

"With your Doug coughing his lungs out all night long," said Bea. "No, don't ask how I know, Kate. I don't know how the pair of you stand it, particularly a girl as delicate as Melissa."

Kate Allen's eyes grew larger in surprise at Bea's words. It was as if the other woman had forgotten entirely just who Melissa was when she wasn't at the Mainwarings' mansion.

"Oh, Kate," said Bea earnestly, taking an envelope from her apron pocket. She was actually trembling as she did so. "I hope you won't mind. But I know, with Alice, how much things cost for a child. I can't think what you must be paying for an adult as well as for your new little one. Benjamin is what, three months' old now!"

"Four," murmured Kate, hoping the 'little one' had slept for her husband. Doug had told her she must go over and see Beatrice and Charles Mainwaring to keep in with them. Who knew, they might even think of another charitable donation to a needy family, Doug had said with a cough.

Still Kate hadn't told him about Melissa. She'd bundled William into the car and stopped at a gas station where Melissa's wig had been attached. Melissa had changed into her latest new dress, stockings and undies from the largesse of Bea Mainwaring. By the look in her friend's eyes, Kate guessed that more was coming. She felt terrible as she knew she'd accept it.

"We do have plenty, Charles and I," Bea was going on hastily. "Did your read the business section of the *Gazette* today? No? Well, it had the latest on Charles' new acquisitions. If he can pay twenty millions for a trucking firm and half a dozen ranches, he can definitely afford to help out one of my nearest and dearest friends, and Alice's dearest, most darling friend as well!"

"I can't take this ..." Kate began but Bea opened the envelope for her. Kate blanched at the number in front of so many zeroes on the check.

"No, don't say anything further," said Bea. "Just having Melissa here this year again for Halloween is payment enough. I do have a favor to ask you, later on. We're going away for a holiday ourselves soon, get some sun. We'd love to have Melissa come with us. I know she'd love it as well! Alice is all excited about it but I've asked her not to say anything to Melissa until I've talked to you, Kate!"

"I don't think Melissa will want to be away for that long," said Kate nervously, the check almost burning a hole in her hands as she looked at it again. Yes, it was real. They could pay their medical bills and get that therapist for Doug. And the new bed for Benjamin, new clothes, maybe even the new washer they needed so desperately.

"She won't mind if you ask her, Kate," said Bea Mainwaring with a smile. "She's such a good, little girl, isn't she? She always does what her mother wants her to do. Alice's tutor will be coming, too; so Melissa can get help with any school work she'll be missing. Three weeks of sea and sun! You'll hardly know her when she gets back, Kate!"

Kate didn't know the pretty, laughing schoolgirl who got off the bus with her best friend, Alice. "Melissa," she said tentatively, as the girl was smiling, laughing and blowing kisses to the boys still on the bus just as the blonde, Alice, beside her was doing.

Melissa's smile faded as she looked at her mother. "Mum!" she said, her voice sounding different, more lilting, more girlish, than Kate remembered it. "What, what are you doing here?"

"I've come to see you," said Kate, looking at this girl in her short, green, tartan skirt, sweater and girl's blouse. Her long legs were in skin-toned stockings or tights just like those of the girl beside her, who was staring open-mouthed at Kate. "I think it might be time, young lady, for you to come home. You might want to get to know your baby brother. And your fa-

ther, for that matter. He's so much better, you know. He's started work at Fast-Gro this month."

"That's one of my father's companies," the blonde girl said to the lovely, ash-blonde girl beside her. Melissa's hair was thick and swirled about her neck. It was all her own hair, thought Kate with a pang of distress, pink barettes holding it away from her ears and the gold rings in each ear.

"So, D-Daddy's not home d-during the d-day?" stammered Melissa, putting the girl's purse she'd been carrying into the briefcase with her computer. Her heels, about three inches' high, Kate could see, clicked on the sidewalk as the girls began to walk, arm-in-arm, along the crescent to the Mainwaring house.

"No, he isn't," said Kate. "In fact, he's away on some project. It'll be quite safe for you at home."

It hadn't been safe when Doug had found Melissa all dressed up, a perfect Hanna Montana, to go to a party with Alice, Shaun and Tom Cameron. "It's a fancy dress party!" Kate had tried to tell her husband. "Alice Mainwaring wanted William ..."

"No son of mine is going to a party dressed like a girl!" Doug had roared. He'd tried to grab Melissa but she'd danced behind her mother, biting at the lipstick on her bottom lip. Doug's effort had only brought on a violent, coughing fit that had left him with his head in the sink as Kate had called a cab which arrived very quickly. She'd sent her daughter off on her date with Tom Cameron.

Oh, the rows with Doug that followed, as Kate had reminded him of all the things that the Mainwarings had paid for about the house, how the medicines he was taking and the doctors he was seeing, came about because William was such a close friend of Alice Mainwaring.

"She likes our son dressed up like a girl?" Doug had sneered.

"Yes," Kate had said, shivering as she said it. "William doesn't like to do it, but he does it, out of love, Doug, for you!"

"Then he can stop!" Doug had cried hoarsely as Benjamin began to cry at all the shouting in the house.

"You'll die," Kate had said simply. "And while you slowly waste away, the three of us will get thinner and thinner, and the house will be foreclosed upon. We won't have enough money to bury you."

"Unless William dresses up like a girl," Doug had said with a grimace.

"He'll never do it in front of you," Kate had promised, crossing her fingers. "You wouldn't have seen him today if you'd stayed at the bar with your friends as you said you were going to do."

Doug swore. "You help him with his makeup," he said, looking as if he was one step from the grave. "He wasn't just a boy in girl's clothes, was he? He was a girl. You've turned my son into a real girl! What kind of mother are you?"

"One who's trying to keep her family from the gutter," said Kate Allen, her whole body trembling. "One who's very proud of both the sons she's raising on her own."

Doug hadn't argued again, not after she'd showed him the next check she'd received from Beatrice, the bills she'd received from the clinic, and how she was using one to pay the other.

"William's going to Alice's," Kate would say now. Doug would look angry but he'd stay in his room as mother and daughter left. Melissa often carried or played with Ben, in his car seat, until they arrived at the Mainwarings. Off she'd go with Alice, to ballet classes, together, to parties, to horseback riding with other girls from the upper crust of Spring Hill, shopping, of course, and eventually, holidays with the Mainwaring family.

Melissa had been away a month, her letters and photos from Bea arriving faithfully. 'Her own hair!' Bea had written just before they started back. Kate had

shuddered at that picture, not so much because of the short, thick hair the girl wore like so many girls did, nor because of the earrings and lipstick on her mouth. No, it was the bikini Melissa wore, just like the one Alice was wearing, both girls clearly padded. Yet they sat there, so girlishly pleased with themselves, while a couple of young, foreign boys smiled over their shoulders, each with a hand around the posing girls' waists.

Doug hadn't objected when Kate told him William wasn't coming home for a while. She'd lied and said Alice had had a relapse while the Mainwarings had been away. William had been a godsend, Beatrice had written her, in keeping Alice on her meds and exercises.

Melissa had only stayed at the mansion a week, Kate not even meeting her to talk to her about her holiday when Beatrice had had another bright idea. It involved Melissa staying with Alice on the luxurious Mainwaring estate. It hadn't taken any time for Bea to beg for Melissa to be allowed to accompany Alice, doing so much better with a girl friend like Melissa, to her new private school, where the Mainwarings wanted to see if Alice could possibly survive school, after all. Of course, Melissa would be attend the school as a girl. Bea would enter her as Alice's cousin.

"You both seem very healthy," Kate said to the schoolgirls as she strolled up the Crescent to her car in the long driveway of the palatial Mainwaring house. "But I could give you girls a lift up to Bea's front door."

"Why not?" asked Alice, smiling at Melissa and squeezing her friend's arm. She drew Melissa after her, onto the back seat of the Allen's minivan. "You should've brought Benjamin with you, Aunt Kate. Melissa and I would've loved babysitting him while you and your husband went out for a night on the town."

"We don't do that very often," said Kate, glancing at her quiet daughter, sitting, her legs crossed, in the back seat. It was amazing how feminine she was. She had painted fingernails and smooth hairless arms like her legs. Her waist was definitely much thinner than

her hips. There was a suggestion of shaping about her chest as well. Kate smiled grimly to herself as the girls got out and ran to the front door. Melissa's blouse was rather silky and thin and the reason for her shape was obvious. She was clearly wearing a bra that showed through her blouse.

"You're coming in to see, to see, um, Aunt Bea?" Melissa called to her mother.

"What do you normally call her?" asked Kate thickly.

Melissa looked as if she was in pain. "I've been living here a long time," she said slowly. "I, I share a, a room with Alice. I've been Melissa three months in a row since I was Melissa six weeks over the summer, and, there were the holidays, the month in Cancun and Florida. I'm really like a second daughter to, to Aunt Bea."

"So, what does Bea make you to call her?" Kate asked angrily, looking at the girl who was undulating so femininely, on her heels and in her dress, beside her, towards the house. Melissa even flicked her hair back as any girl would, carrying her briefcase in front of her with two hands as Kate had carried her books when she came home from school.

"She likes me to call her Mama," said Melissa, flushing.

"And she introduces you as her daughter when you and Alice go out," Kate said hotly. She must cut off this silly connection with the Mainwarings, right now! It wasn't worth the price she was paying and definitely not the price William was. She couldn't see anything of him in this elegant, girlish figure who led her gracefully into a newly decorated living room where she'd watched the much littler Melissa play dolls with a wan, sickly Alice.

"I asked her not to," Melissa said. "She was going to talk to you about adopting me. I told Mama I'd leave here then. We had an argument. Alice was really sick over it for a week. She couldn't go to school and

missed Shaun's birthday party which made her even sicker."

Melissa didn't mention that she'd missed going out with Tom Cameron, who really did seem to think she was his girl friend. He liked taking the girls home in a taxi, charged to his parents. He and Adam, his friend, could have intense kissing and necking sessions with the girls, who tidied up before they went into the Mainwaring house. Mama wasn't aware what her daughters were up to in the back seats of the taxi, always driven by Mike, outrageously tipped by Tom Cameron.

And yes, kissing Tom Cameron was much more intense and much more pleasurable than kissing Alice, as Melissa did so often. The girls always kissed when they went to bed, often cuddling together. When they were in their baby dolls, it was so pleasant and their kisses were sometimes intense, "just like kissing one of the boys," Alice said dreamily, when they really got into it. Melissa trembled as she agreed.

"So, what does she introduce you as?" Kate asked, hearing the sound of girlish voices headed towards them. Alice must have found her mother.

"I'm Alice's cousin," said Melissa, sitting in the armchair with her elbows in, her long nails on her stocking knee which was crossed over the other. With her shapely, smooth thigh in her stockings and her high heels, she was a picture of a perfect young lady, as Kate had sarcastically called her son. Melissa was padding her bra, too, as her mother had done before her, in her day.

"Kate!" gushed Beatrice Mainwaring, sweeping into the room, Alice beside her. "Why didn't you call that you were coming? I don't have anything prepared!"

"I didn't come here for money," Kate cut in curtly. That stopped Bea from going on with whatever she was going to say. Alice sidled over to Melissa right away and sat on the side of her chair, trying to make Melissa leave the older women together, while the two

young girls went off to whatever it was that young girls did in a house like this.

"Alice wants to get Melissa to the telephone," said Bea, smiling at Kate. "You wouldn't believe the hours the girls can spend texting and talking on the phones, both of them doing it, to half the boys in their school!"

"Mother!" said Alice in aggrieved fashion. "We aren't interested in more than a half dozen boys at our school. Shaun and Tom don't go to Parkhurst, and neither do Adam or Malcolm!"

"That's only four boys you've named so far," said Bea. "Now, Melissa, how did your day go at school? Did you audition with Alice for the show?"

"Yes, she did, Mama!" said Alice enthusiastically. "Miss Black was really impressed with the way Melissa danced. She might get to dance a lead! It isn't fair, is it?" Alice pouted but it was all fake and she was laughing. "I've been dancing for years and I'm in the chorus while Melissa's only been dancing this year, for real, and will be partnering Sandy and Alex all the time."

"What's the show you're doing?" Kate asked as she studied the pretty girl whom she called her daughter. Her plucked eyebrows were a thin line, shaped like a girl's. She was wearing makeup as well, Kate decided, subtle shading that made her face seem prettier. Kate couldn't help thinking of her as a girl, this daughter who was really her son.

"*Grease*," said Bea with a smile. "They recruit enough actors and actresses for two casts when they put it on. What's the part you'll be playing, Melissa? Are you our new Olivia Newton John?"

"No," said Melissa, shaking her long, thick hair but Alice was nodding her blonde hair, styled much like Melissa's. Now they were inside, Kate could see that the blonde streaks she'd seen weren't just sunlight. Melissa had highlights in her long, lovely hair as well as lightening streaks.

"Just no?" asked Bea.