



*Reluctant Press*

# Melissa Anne's Stories

Melissa Anne Rogan



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHAS

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**A 'YOUNG ADULT' NOVEL**

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## *Reluctant Press TG Publishers*

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## MELISSA ANNE'S STORIES

### A MODERN FAIRY TALE?

By **Melissa Anne Rogan**

In a modern, rational world, where science rules, there is no place for magic. After all, magic is only the way that the superstitious explain what they do not understand. Isn't it? Or is it? What scientists cannot comprehend is that belief is all. Magic exists, because people *believe* it exists. True, our modern way has forced that belief into more isolated parts of the world. But still the power is there, waiting...

People believe that people make stories. And this is true. But where there is magic, a story can take on a life of its own, independent of the people who made it. And if the tale and the power are strong enough, then the story repeats and repeats, imposing control on the environment, and perhaps even the people involved. Is this the reason for some of the weird and wonderful events that science has never come near to explaining? Who knows?

#### ***Once upon a time.....***

Paul and David Richie ran laughing through the forest, dodging the trees in an ebullient game of tag. Paul was twelve; his brother, David, almost fifteen. In all of their short lives, they had never experienced country like this. Born and bred in the suburbs of London, they were city folk, through and through. In the city they had been born, in the city they had grown up. Their knowledge of the countryside was slim.

Their father, George Richie, was a very important business man and, by most standards, extremely wealthy. Business was his first love, his family coming in a poor second. So obsessed was he with business that, unlike many other wealthy men, he did

not buy a big country estate, preferring instead to live in a mansion in the city, where he could be near his business. However, while he had shown little outward affection for his family, he actually cared deeply, and they had wanted for nothing. David and Paul, were spoiled terribly. Brought up by a series of nannies and educated by a series of governesses, they had had little contact with other children. While their educational development was above average, their social development was poor. Used as they were to ordering servants about, their petulant response to not getting their own way showed that they were more childish than they should be for their age. Their mother had become increasingly concerned, though her husband was rarely there to support her. Unfortunately, like most children their age, they were totally unresponsive to the wishes of their loving and caring, but weak, mother. The more she gave in to them, the worse they got. What they needed was some good, old-fashioned discipline. In their favor, they were devoted to each other. After all, each was the only playmate the other had ever known.

It was only with the untimely death of a close colleague that Mr. Richie realized how important family was. He too had been a workaholic who neglected his family. He too had spoiled and uncontrollable children. He determined that he would change his life and participate more in the upbringing of his children. To that end he brought them with him to Freiburg, in southern Germany, where he was involved in negotiations for a very important contract. This contract with the German government, would, if obtained, mean the launch of his business into the multinational league. Millions of dollars were at stake. If he won this, he could sell his company for a fortune and retire to some country paradise where he could be with his family and watch his children grow. Maybe have some children? A little daughter would be nice. When he discussed this with his wife, she was overjoyed.

To win the contract, he must be available for weeks, so commuting from England to Germany was not possible. Besides the many business meetings, there was the unofficial agenda, the rounds of parties and other social events. The ability to entertain ministers in the style to which they were accustomed was paramount. He had rented a small, remote schloss in the Black Forest for the summer. To him, it was a base from which to launch his campaign with almost military precision. To the boys, this was the holiday of a lifetime. The small castle was not only luxurious and fully staffed, but the whole air of the place was like something straight from the Brothers Grimm, with its towers and spires, stony battlements and drafty banquet halls. It even had a moat and a dungeon. To young boys, it was an explorer's paradise. Within a matter of days, they had explored every nook and cranny of the castle and its immediate surroundings. Next, they turned their attentions to the forest.

The forest itself gave off at once an air of brooding depth and fairy-like surrealism, as if aware of all that happened within its borders. The Black Forest was the land of legends and faeries. This was the playground to which the boys had been brought and they threw themselves into the exploration of their new neighborhood with an energy and enthusiasm sustainable only by children. Nothing in their life up to this point had prepared them for this and they were both awestruck and fascinated.

“Are you sure you know where we are going?” asked Paul as they ran down another path taking them deeper into the forest.

“Of course I do. Trust me,” replied David with the confidence of the young and unwary. He was less confident three hours later when they turned onto yet another trail which he didn’t recognize. The whole tone of the forest had changed. Where before it was fairy-like, now it was dark and shadowy, almost malevolent. It seemed as if it were alive, as if it were watching them, and waiting, waiting.

Paul was starting to whine. “I’m tired. I’m hungry. David, are we lost? I want to go home. David...David...” David tried his best to reassure his kid brother, but he was starting to feel desperate and irritated and, if the truth be known, just a little scared himself. Despite his best efforts, his brother could sense that something was not quite right. “Don’t worry, Pauly, we should hit the main road soon, then we’ll be back at the castle in just a few minutes.” The use of Paul’s child name was meant to reassure. The reassurance sounded as hollow to him as it did to Paul.

Onward they trudged, ever deeper into the forest, feeling ever more concerned. David was most unhappy at the thought of spending a night under the trees. Did Germany still have wild wolves or bears? What about Rabies? Rabies had been eradicated from Great Britain decades ago, but the news programs on television still had reports from the continent of horrible, painful deaths. He tried to remember his European geography lessons. Until now he had never shown the slightest interest in the subject. He was more interested in motorbikes. David looked at his watch. It was after six and sunset was not that far away. Suddenly, through the trees, he saw a flash of light. As hope built up, he increased his pace. “Come on Pauly,” he yelled, “I think there’s a house or something through here, perhaps we can use the phone.”

The view they found when they reached the clearing, was, to say the least, unexpected. “I don’t believe it!” said David. Paul just looked, speechless, from the shelter of the trees at the edge of the clearing. In the middle was a little cottage, but not just *any* little cottage. It appeared to be made entirely of sweets and candy, cake and bread. The walls were of multicolored sugar candy, the roof of plaited loaves of apparently fresh bread, the door and window shutters of some kind of biscuit, the sills of cake. This was a fairy tale indeed. They watched, both amazed, and wary. The place was obviously inhabited; there was a thin plume of smoke coming from the chimney. But there was no sign of movement.

After ten minutes, David plucked up his courage. “Come on, Pauly,” he said, eventually. “It’s getting late, lets just knock on the door and ask for help.” Paul made no attempt to move. He just stared, and stared. In exasperation, David grabbed his arm and yanked him, protesting, towards the cottage. “Please, stop,” cried Paul. “David, I’m scared. Let’s go somewhere else.” “Don’t be stupid,” replied David. “There is nowhere else and it’s getting late. Besides, what’s to be scared of?” “The witch.” “What witch?” “The witch who lives here. It must be a witch’s house.” “There’s no such thing as witches,” laughed David, “This is reality, not some story from your books of fairy tales You’re getting too old for them anyway.” But still...he felt some lingering doubts as he surveyed the scene before him. It couldn’t be possible; could it?

They stopped at the cottage and carefully looked around, through the windows and knocked on the door. No reply. “If there’s no such thing as witches, then how come the cottage is edible? Just like the witches house in Hansel and Gretel?” asked Paul,

reaching up and breaking off a piece. "Don't do that," snapped David. "It must be some publicity gimmick. Probably for the tourists."

"Well, I'm a tourist, and I'm hungry," replied Paul around a mouthful of windowsill, using the unerring logic that only children have. David looked around for a few more minutes before agreeing. "Well, you do have a point," he laughed, "and it is pretty good cake." Both boys were silent as they stuffed their faces. It had, after all, been several hours since they had last eaten.

David looked up at the sky, apprehensively. It was already dark. His watch now showed it to be after nine o'clock. They would never find their way back to the schloss now. He tried the door to the cottage. It was open. Slowly, he entered, calling out all the while. There was no answer. "Well, we'd better stay the night here."

Paul was not convinced. "Look, at least we'll have a roof over our head and we won't be a temptation for any wild animals that may be prowling out there." That persuaded Paul. He almost ran through the door, the look on his face a picture of childhood terror.

David laughed. "Just teasing," he said. "I hope," he finished, though this last part was under his breath.

David was able to search the small cottage very quickly. He soon confirmed that it was, in fact, empty. The more he saw, however, the greater the feeling of unreality he felt. All of the furniture was Olde Worlde, just what you would expect in a cottage from a fairy tale. There was no electricity. Lighting was by candle, heating and cooking by the fire in the grate and the attached range. The fact that a fire was still slowly burning, though low down in its embers, confirmed that someone lived in the cottage. A phone was out of the question. There wasn't even running water, but there was a pump in the kitchen. Needless to say, toilet and bathroom facilities were also lacking. The privy out back. Despite the fact that they were intruding, David felt justified by the fact that they really had no choice. Tucking the totally weary Paul into the one single bed, he spread some blankets on the hard floor and prepared himself for a much deserved sleep.

"If the owner returns," he reasoned, "I'll just have to explain and offer to pay for any inconvenience." Sleep came quickly to the exhausted boys.

"Well, well, who's been sleeping in my bed?" The voice awoke David with a start. Incongruously, his first thought was, "That's not the right fairy story." Then, "What am I thinking of?"

Looking up, he saw the owner of the voice. She was a little old lady, dressed in a long, flowing dress with a shawl over hair, head and shoulders. Almost inevitably, she was just what you would expect in a fairy story.

As David started to stammer out an explanation, she continued, "You're late you know. I expected you two days ago, and I spent most of yesterday looking for you in the forest." She looked, first at David, then at the now alert Paul, myopically. "You're not even dressed correctly. This modern clothing is so unbecoming to children. Now come."

Turning, she started down the rickety stairs, muttering to herself, "Girls in trousers, whatever next? Boys in skirts?" "Come on, Pauly, let's get ready to leave," said David to his younger brother, before following in the obviously short-sighted old crone's footsteps.

"Now where did I put the dratted thing?" continued the old woman, obviously looking for something. "Ah, yes, there it is." With that she picked up what appeared to be a twig, about a foot long. "Come in, come in, times a wasting, we must get on."

"I think there's some mistake," David spoke. "I don't think we are who you think we are. You see..."

"Yes yes," she continued, ignoring him completely. David and Paul, now totally bemused, stood silent, watching. "Now, to begin, we'd better get you properly garbed. Now where was I? Oh, yes."

The old woman pointed the twig at David, muttering in some arcane language that the boys didn't recognize. As she finished, a beam of blinding white light burst from the stick and enveloped David. When it cleared, he looked, and felt, different. Paul, seeing his brother, howled with laughter. David was now a golden, curly-haired, cherubic-looking boy of about twelve, dressed in lederhosen, those leather shorts with the bibbed front, so beloved of Bavarians. As David looked down, he squeaked in alarm. What had happened to him? His voice was higher, his body lower. Looking in a fragment of mirror nailed to the wall, he saw that he looked just like the picture of Hansel in Paul's book of folk tales. He tried to talk, to protest, but he was speechless. All that came out of his mouth was a high-pitched squeak.

"That's more like it," said the crone, "now for your sister."

Paul stopped laughing instantly and David stopped squeaking. "Now hang on," began Paul, backing towards the door of the cottage. But even as he spoke, the witch was aiming her wand, which, like before, emitted a beam of blinding white light, this time enveloping the younger sibling. Again, when it cleared, Paul looked and felt different. He too was now younger and smaller, but there was something else. Looking at his ruddy-cheeked older brother, he saw an expression of wide-eyed amazement in his face. Paul too, looked in the fragment of mirror and saw to his horror, how he now



looked. Where David looked just like Hansel, from Paul's book, Paul now looked like Gretel. The blond-haired girl looking back at him was about eight years old, her long hair tresses arranged in two thick braids held together with large yellow bows. She was dressed in nothing less than a yellow Dirndl, a full peasant dress straight from the pictures in Paul's story book, with a tightly laced bodice and flowing white lacy petticoats peeking out underneath, contrasting the white hose and black ballet-type pumps. Now it was Paul's turn to squeak, speechlessly and David's turn to howl with laughter at the metamorphosis of his brother.

"Now that," said the old woman, distracting them, "is how Hansel and Gretel should look." David responded first. "But we're not Hansel and Gretel," he yelled, "we're just a couple of tourists. Two boys who got lost in the forest." "What?" she replied, looking for her spectacles which she pushed onto her nose before examining them closely. "Two boys you say? But you called her Pauline." She indicated the now feminized younger brother. "I said Pauly, not Pauline." "Humph, sounded like Pauline to me." "Then you must be as deaf as you are short-sighted," replied the irate younger brother. "Don't take that tone with me, young lady. Besides, it's too late now. The power of my wand is limited and needs time to recharge. The story must go on, so you will have to do. Now come!" With that, she started to wave her wand one last time.

"Wait, wait!" cried David, realizing that the twig in her hand was more than just a simple stick. "What do you mean, 'the story must go on'?" The hag stopped her waving, startled. "What? You mean you don't know?" "Would I have asked if I did?" replied the exasperated little boy. She pushed the glasses back up her nose and stared at them intently. "Well, well," she mused, at last. "It would seem that you are telling the truth. How unfortunate." The converted brothers stood, looking at her in expectant silence.

"Very well, " she continued. "You have accidentally crossed into the Land of Faerie. Here are magicks and deep mysteries. And stories. Yes, the stories. This is a land which occupies the same physical space as your own, but a different, parallel, dimension. Occasionally, if conditions are right, it is possible to cross from one to the other." "Then send us back, please." "No, it's too late. The story must go on." "What story?" "The tale that you have entered, of course. You know them as fairy tales. But all stories are based on truth. The story is all. It cycles, on and on, for ever. Now, enough chatter. Let it begin!" With that, she waved her wand one final time and the two boys found themselves falling into a whirlpool of darkness.

Hansel and his younger sister, Gretel, looked in wonder at the cottage made of candy and cake. They had been stuffing their hungry little faces with bits of it ever since they had discovered it, some ten minutes previously. They had been in the forest a long time. Their poor woodcutter father had abandoned them because he could no longer afford to feed them. They had laid a trail to follow back, but in vain. The bread crumbs that Hansel had dropped had been eaten by the birds. Now they were lost.

The door to the cottage opened. They looked up, startled and frightened, to see a kindly-looking old lady peer from the door. "Who are you, little ones?" she asked, querulously.

Hansel, the older of the pair, answered politely, apologizing for their rudeness in eating her home, and explaining how they had managed to lose themselves deep in the



forest. The old lady showed naught but kindness and concern. "Come in, you poor poor dears," she gushed, opening the door wide.

Soon, the children found themselves settled in front of a welcoming fire, drinking a rich broth, hot and nourishing. The heat of the fire and the richness of the food conspired with the length of the day to make them sleepy and yawning. The kindly old lady led them to a bed and soon had them snuggling down beneath warm blankets.

The children awoke to find things were amiss. Hansel was in a wooden cage. The kindly woman was peering at him, only now she did not look quite so kind. She soon explained to them the reality of their situation. She was, in fact, a witch and used her cottage to lure children to their doom. Hansel was to be fed until he was fat, with rich and nourishing food. Then he would be invited to dinner, with himself as the main course. Little Gretel found herself cleaning and skivvying around the cottage. If she tried to escape, then Hansel would be killed instantly. She had no choice!

Each day, the witch asked Hansel to poke his finger through the cage. She would then feel it to gauge how fat he was becoming. He was a clever lad though, and rather than hold his finger out, he held out instead a chicken bone given to him by Gretel. The shortsighted old crone couldn't tell the difference.

After a week, she was becoming impatient at his lack of progress and determined to eat him anyway, fat or not. "You, girl," she snapped, "light the fire in the oven, we'll sup well tonight." Now Gretel too, was bright and knew that if she lit the fire, then her brother would die and, most probably, she would soon follow. "I cannot," she replied, "I don't know how." "You stupid creature," the witch snarled, "Get out of the way, I'll do it myself." As she spoke, she opened the door of the ancient range oven, and leaned in to put spark to the kindling inside. Quick as a flash, Gretel, seizing her moment, applied her boot to the old hag's rear, pushing her into the now lit oven, quickly slamming the door locked behind the startled and screaming crone. "Quick," she called to her brother, opening the cage, "we must be gone from this evil place." So saying, her plump brother jumped from the cage and the two children ran, laughing with relief, back into the forest.

As they ran into the forest, their minds started to clear. The further from the strange cottage that they got, the more normal they felt, in mind at least. "Whew," exclaimed Paul, slowing down, winded. "What was all that about?" "I don't know," replied David, panting also. "Some kind of hypnosis?" "Well, I feel bloody ridiculous in this damned dress. It comes off, first chance we get."

"Don't do that," said David.

"What?"

"Think, Paul. We're still lost in the forest. Who knows how cold it will get? You can't go shedding clothes until you've got something to change into. Besides, you can hardly go parading through the woods in your petticoats. What would the squirrels think?" Even Paul had to laugh at the absurdity of the image this conjured up.

"God knows how much weight I've put on," complained David, out of breath. "I've never felt so bloated. It must be pounds." "More like stones, oh fat one," Paul teased back.

It was some hours later when they stumbled, first onto the road, then into the search party. The leader of the party was confused, to say the least. He had been searching for two boys, aged fifteen and twelve, not a younger boy and girl. However, the children insisted that they were the two missing Richie children, so he was happy to pass them on to those in higher authority. After all, they had been searching for over a week and were getting rather pessimistic about their chances of finding the children alive.

It goes without saying that their parents were overjoyed to find their children safe and sound. So relieved were they that they didn't even comment on the absurdity of their offspring's' mode of dress. At least, not at first. Although their children were in some way changed, it was obvious who they were. The one seemed much fatter in the face; the other, despite his girlish look, appeared to be somehow younger. All was irrelevant in light of their safety. Finally, however, their hugs and greetings were exhausted and Mother took command of the situation. "Come along, Paul," she said, "Let's get you into some proper clothes. You look like something from one of your old fairy story books." She smiled at the darling image of her youngest, in his pretty frock and braids. She had always wanted a daughter, but nature had decreed otherwise.

As his wife and youngest son left to go into the bedroom, Mr. Richie sighed and turned to his oldest son. "You too, David," he laughed, "time to get out of your fancy dress costume and into something more appropriate for your age." Suddenly, there was a high-pitched scream from the bedroom. It was his wife. He immediately responded, running to the bedroom door.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, entering the room. His wife was hysterical. Speechlessly, she pointed at her now naked son. Paul was sobbing uncontrollably, his small hands covering his exposed groin.

"What is the matter, Pauly?" asked David, who had followed his father in. Paul didn't reply, just sobbed louder. "Look at our baby!" cried Mrs. Richie, grabbing Paul's hands. What they saw left them all without words, for what lay between Paul's legs was not what one would expect to see on a twelve-year-old lad, but on an eight-year-old girl.

"Who is this? Where is my son?" Mr Richie could not accept the evidence of his own eyes. Mrs. Richie knew, with a mother's instinct, that this girl was her son, fruit of her womb. Something had happened to him, and to David, in that deep, dark wood. But What? And how?

The story told by the two children was beyond belief, yet what reason had they to lie? And who were they? True, they looked like the Richie kids except for their age, and the younger child's obvious difference in gender. A full strip down search by a doctor had confirmed both, to the young girl's extreme anguish. Why did she insist that she was a boy? Mr. Richie denied all he was told, preferring to immerse himself in his business meetings, leaving, as is always the way in family crises concerning children, the mother to cope. She, of course, dealt with all in a mother's matter-of-fact way. First priority was to soothe and calm the children, now clad in modern clothing appropriate to their age and sex. Funnily, Pauly was calming down rather faster than the older boy. How were they to know that the witches spell was total, changing not only

Paul's body, but also his mind and emotions, from boy to girl? As those feminine feelings became more and more dominant, so Paul became more at peace with what he now was. Content not only in pretty dresses and petticoats, but finding strange comfort in cuddling his new doll. Mrs. Richie, though if asked she would deny it, was overjoyed to be able, at last, to pamper a pretty young daughter, and lavished both time and money in outfitting her 'little girl'. How fast she forgot that Pauline was once Paul. David also became content with his lot, though, as the changes to him were less far reaching, he was less quick to accept them.

Two weeks later, all four Richies sat in the office of the senior police officer placed in charge of the case, Inspector Müller. The family now accepted what had happened and were, except for the father, quite happy with the situation. Even he, affected by the magic, was less belligerent than he had been. Mrs. Richie had already decided that she had been granted a second chance to bring up her children and this time they were most definitely not going to turn into spoiled brats. And her husband would be much more of a father this time, whether he agreed or not. Business was one thing, but family was everything. Mr. Richie, affected by the spell, was also coming to the same conclusion. He was extremely wealthy and did not need to work as hard as he did. He needed to spend more time with his family and be a father to his children. He would make sure he did just that.

"Hrmph". Inspector Müller cleared his throat, ending the reveries of the two adult Richies and gaining the attention of the children. He opened a file on his desk, removing and sorting a sheaf of official documents. He quickly read through them, confirming the details in his mind. "We have now concluded our investigations," he announced. "Firstly the DNA tests prove that the two children are most definitely your offspring. There is less than a one in three hundred million chance of them belonging to someone else. They also confirm that David is male and Pauly is female". The Richies murmured but did not interrupt. "Secondly, we have searched the forest extensively and can find no sign of either the cottage or the little old lady described to us by the children."

This time, Mrs Richie did speak, objecting to this apparent slur on her children's integrity. Inspector Müller held up his hand to stop her.

"Please...", he interrupted, " I am not trying to cast a shadow on your children's honesty, merely pointing out that we can find no evidence to support their story. We also find that the staff at the castle when questioned, were not sure whether the two children playing there where two boys or a little boy and a little girl. They were also vague about the children's age. Given the nature of your work and the reason for your visit, Herr Richie, any scandal would have most unfortunate consequences for your business and my country. Given the circumstances, if I were you, I would draw this unhappy event to a quick and discreet close".

After further discussion, mainly between Mrs. Richie and the inspector, the Richies reluctantly agreed and left to make arrangements to take the children home. First on Mrs. Richie's agenda was clothes shopping for the children, especially Pauline. She had seen some darling little dresses in the children's departments in the big stores last time she had gone to Munich. She always checked the girl's section when she went shopping as she had always wanted a little girl. Now, she had one!