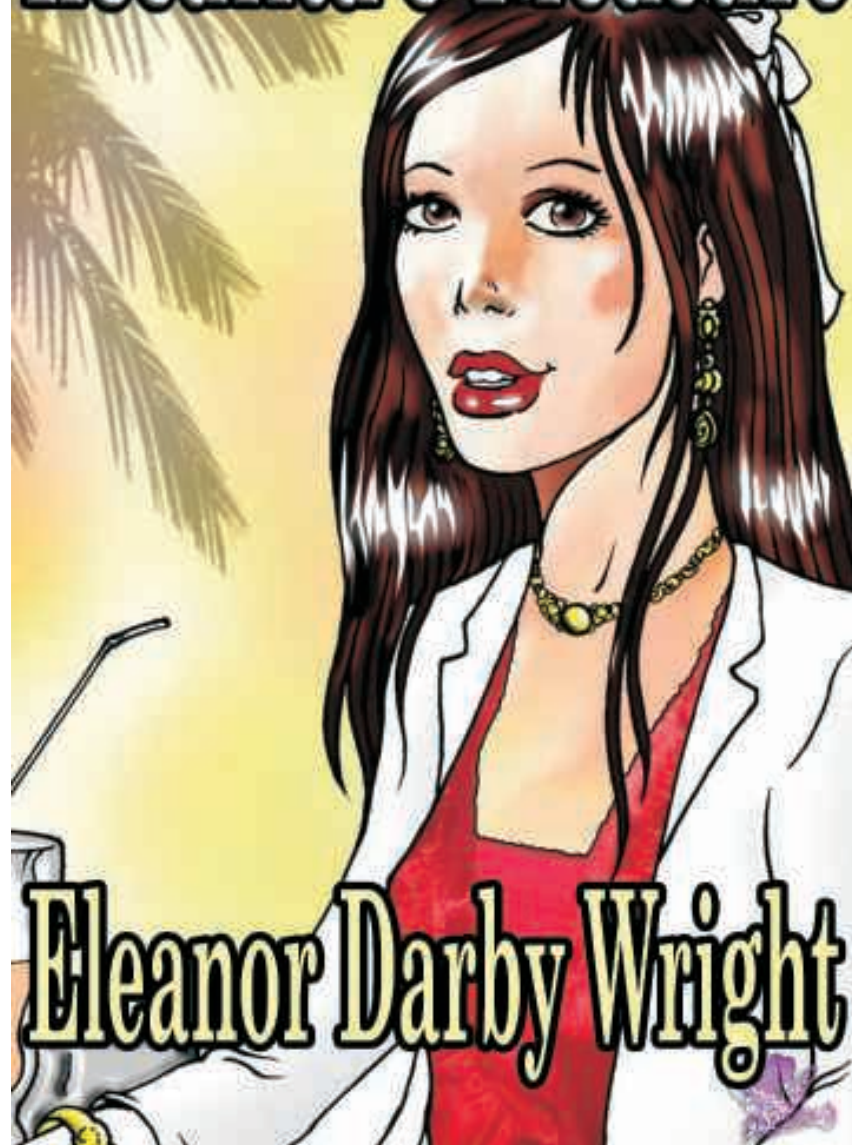


Rosalita's Pleasure



Eleanor Darby Wright



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ROSALITA'S PLEASURE

by Eleanor Darby Wright

The archivist of the Travellers' Club was breathing hard as he walked to his car. With surprise, he saw Tom Scully, sitting on a bench, looking out across the river and the city, his expression that of a man who had something very thought-provoking on his mind.

"Shaking it off?" the archivist of the Club asked the popular member, his own mind reeling under what he had just heard Rayfield, um, Patricia Knowles, telling him. They'd all drunk too much, as usual, in the Club. It was good to see someone 'normal', the archivist thought. It would be neat to have a 'normal' conversation.

"That story of Bunny's, David," said Tom, accepting the offer of a lift. He'd pick up his car in the morning. "Have you ever heard a story like that before, of men becoming women?"

The archivist was cautious after what he'd just heard and seen. "I have," he murmured.

Tom looked at me as the archivist drove carefully, even though he'd had nothing but coffee as he'd listened to, to, Rayfield's riveting story.

"I should have known," said Tom, staring forward out of the car window. "You've got all kinds of stories in the archives, haven't you? Rayfield had something to add, didn't he?"

If you only knew, thought David MacKenna, the Travellers' Club archivist, thoughts racing through his head, his body wanting to curl up in agitation as he still hadn't really processed yet what he would do with Rayfield's story of Anisoyya.

"I never told you the story of Rosalita, did I?" asked Scully, ignoring the silence from the man beside him.

"She was a man who became a woman?" asked David MacKenna, staring ahead as he sensed the man beside him nod his head. "How did you find that out?"

"I married her," Tom said shortly. "It's a story I'll tell you some time, but not for your archive."

"How about at your place?" asked David MacKenna. "I'll need a drink or two, I'm sure, to hear such a story but there's nothing at my place."

Waiting for Laurie, I watched, from a table at a street-side cafe in Barcelona, throngs of tourists and citizens stream by. I felt really great, studying the flow of humanity, the girls so pretty with their tans and long, shiny, black hair, in white or yellow dresses. I wanted to make love to them all!

I should have known I was tempting fate. My admiration of pretty Spanish girls would soon be twisted into something unbelievable. Oh, I was so innocent, sitting there, amused by my desires, not knowing that, within two weeks, I'd be married. And not only married to someone pretty, with long, shiny hair and wearing a pretty, white dress but married to someone just like me. Yes, just like me, a man like me. It doesn't pay to tempt fate as I was doing on that warm summer evening in Barcelona.

Ostensibly, I had a job. For three years, I was funded to study the Spanish lynx, an endangered species, almost exterminated in its home range in the Pyrenees Mountains. I had visions of being the next Jane Goodall. I could already hear the plaudits as my vol-



ume took its place alongside her work in every library in the world, my fame and fortune assured!

I'd already written the book in my mind. Research was actually superfluous to the marvellous prose and ringing phrases I'd constructed to reverse the tide of man's encroachment on the natural wilderness that large predators need. So, it was with a feeling of kindness to all mankind that I sat on that Barcelona street, sipping my Cognac, enjoying the early evening sun.

I noticed the young girl, two tables from me, right away. She could have been the archetype of all the young Spanish girls I'd seen up to that point.

I was really awaiting Laurie Kissinger. But the dark-haired girl took all my attention from the first time I saw her. She seemed barely more than sixteen. Later, I learned she was nearly nineteen when she married me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Her beautiful, dark brown eyes were lively and animated as she watched the early evening crush of people much as I was doing. She wore a white suit and dark-red blouse. Her lips were as dark and as red as her blouse while golden hoops gleamed at her ears. She had gold everywhere, in fact, at her ears, neck, wrist, pinned to her shapely jacket, and on her fingers, though her ring finger itself, I noticed, was bare.

She felt my eyes on her and gave me a quick, coquettish pout over her raised shoulder. She was a child really, I thought, checking to see if she was pretty enough to attract the attention of a full grown, foreign male, me. She shifted in her wicker chair, ever so slightly, to watch me as she talked only to her black-shawled chaperone.

I'd have loved to talk to her. She was very pretty, her glossy, dark brown hair held back behind a white ribbon. She had thin, delicately arched eyebrows. Thick, dark eyelashes surrounded her flashing eyes. Her nose was short and thin, her chin rounded and firm without being protruding. All together, with her smooth, dark skin, she was beautiful, the sort of girl who, when she matured into high fashion and more makeup, would make any man's heart beat faster and his groin begin to ache.

The dark-haired girl was the typical, rich daughter of a prominent Spanish or Catalan family, allowed out only with her chaperone. So I didn't think of pursuing

my more than mild interest in the beautiful girl even though she seemed to be giving me a signal that she, also, was interested.

Laurie finally joined me at the streetside cafe, but not until I'd finished half a bottle of Cognac. I wasn't smashed, as the English call being drunk, but I knew I'd sway if I stood. I didn't want the dark-haired beauty at the next table to look at me in disgust.

It was hard to focus my eyes properly. I sat and smiled benignly at Laurie. I was happy, knowing that few taunts would upset me that evening. It was probably the best way to deal with Laurie Kissinger, to be smashed.

"You're drunk!" she snapped, sitting opposite me, her tone indicating her anger at my not rising to greet her. Laurie has short, mousy-colored hair. She wasn't that bad-looking, considering she never wore makeup. She was stocky and mannish, in white shirt and blue jeans. I could see her bra straps through the shirt which brought the idle thought, did she really need one?

The attractive girl beyond her smiled at something her chaperone said, showing white, level, gleaming teeth. My insides did a little flip. Why did I have to deal with crotchety Laurie tonight instead of the charming, shapely girl just beyond her?

I poured Laurie a Cognac in the second clean glass served so long ago and tried to concentrate on what Laurie was saying about my research and its importance to our principals.

Laurie was a tough woman, I thought, unlike the hothouse flower next to us, as I imagined the brown-haired girl. She gave me a sweet smile as Laurie slapped the table to get my attention.

Laurie had lived rough and wild in Africa. She'd defended one project so ferociously she'd ended up being charged with killing a poacher. It had all been hushed up in the end, save for the gossip. Now here she was, on the wrong side of thirty. I thought of her as 'old', exiled to soft, European studies, where a hotel and beach were never more than a hundred kilos from any research station. How she must hate wet-nursing field researcher Thomas L. Scully through his first project, I thought smugly, secure in my guaranteed research grant.

The white-suited girl rose to leave, the chaperone-crone right at her elbow. The girl was quite tall in her black, shiny, high heels - she had really nice, slender, shapely, feminine legs - but most of all she had a very nice figure, curved in all the right places. She laughed at something the waiter said, her smile dazzling. She flicked her long, dark hair back over her shoulders, her earrings gleaming, giving me a quick look and a rueful grin, as if she realized too what we 'might-have-been' under other circumstances.

The old crone was annoyed by her look and smile. She grimaced at me and spoke very sharply to the girl. She seized her arm, directing her away from me, out of the crowded cafe.

They had to sway back past where Laurie and I were sitting. The girl was flushing and looking down, not daring to look at me any more. I clearly heard the old woman berating her, the crone's voice deep and hoarse. Her accent was strange. She spoke Spanish but her accent wasn't Catalan or the Madrid dialect I'd learned in school.

"You must never encourage that kind of man, Rosalita!" the old woman fumed as they passed us. Rosalita, what a lovely name, I thought, enjoying the flowing, feminine way she walked. I felt an ache in my loins and couldn't prevent a sigh escaping my lips.

"Ah, Dorothea," protested the girl in a sweet, girlish voice, giving me the quickest of glances. I swear I smelled gardenia as she passed, more intoxicating than any liquor I'd drunk. I thought of her touching the perfume to her breasts to entice a man like me.

She murmured something to the old woman who compressed her wrinkled lips even more. But Rosalita laughed, easily and pleasantly, musically accented, I thought. She said loudly, aimed at me I'm sure, "I was only practising, you know. When you're as old as I am, you have to."

She moved away, slipping her arm through the older woman's, leaning to her with more familiarity than most Spanish girls gave their chaperones.

I turned and watched her swaying figure, her legs beautiful in dark stockings, disappear into the interior of a waiting, parked Citroen sedan. I sighed and turned back reluctantly to a scornful Laurie Kissinger.

"You haven't heard a word I said," she snapped angrily at me, picking up her purse, ready to leave. "Men! You only have one thing on your minds!"

"Please, Laurie," I begged, smiling. "It's my last night in civilization for a long time. I'll never see that girl again. Not even for a brief encounter! Besides, I've a girl back home!"

No, I won't make a living as a fortune teller, will I? Rosalita was very soon to become the most important person in my life.

Deep in the mountains, the narrow track clinging to the side of a huge cliff, no wall or railing to prevent a vehicle from sliding right off the mountain, I wished I'd never set foot on this fool's escapade. Frightened, I could barely nod or smile as two men with shotguns advanced on me, waving at me to stop.

I barely understood the dialect they spoke. There were words of Catalan, Spanish, Basque and French in what they said. They held my precious paper from Lieutenant Suarez upside down as I tried to tell them, in my Spanish accent, where I was going.

They stood on the running boards, relaxed and chatting, while I drove around incredibly sharp hairpins to where they directed me. We came into a partly wooded valley with neat, green fields and tall buildings, black and brown in color. The lowest levels of the houses were clearly animal shelters.

Children ran to the road to watch the strange vehicle go by. I was suddenly struck by the thought, seeing only animal-drawn carts, that there might not be a gas station in the entire valley.

At a crossroad, the shotguns gestured to the left fork. One guy said something like "Yarg" while his companion pointed the other way and said, "Cantina". They both got off and left me. In the rear-view mirror, I could see them heading back the way we'd come.

I stared for a while. Whichever way I took could be a disaster. I supposed, though, that 'Cantina' meant food, drink, and, hopefully, a place to stay.

Entering the village of Acarintenas was like a stranger entering town for the first time in a western movie. Everyone stopped and stared at me and my van. Even a friendly wave brought no response from

silent, old men, watching me from the depths of shaded porticos.

I stopped in front of the cantina, got out and stretched, all the time being watched. I tried my Spanish and Catalan on one group whose frowning expressions never changed. I asked the name of the village and where I could get gasoline. They all remained dumb, either because they couldn't, or wouldn't, understand me.

Just when I was thoroughly exasperated, I heard the sound of another car. Turning, I saw a large, black, Citroen sedan bearing down on my van. It was speeding right down the road from the direction I'd just come.

At the very last moment, the driver must have seen my car. He tried to swerve. The crowd at the tables scattered silently as the Citroen did a 360 degree turn and came to a stop under the awning of the cantina, tables and chairs scattering and breaking.

The right passenger door of the sedan was flung open. A big man lunged out of the car, striding fiercely over the broken remains of the drinking tables. A torrent of words, thick and guttural, poured down on me as the big man pushed me in the chest, hurling me right back against the van.

"Steady on," I said in Spanish and Catalan but that didn't stop the verbal torrent or the physical attack. I was picked up and hurled against the van. I was vaguely aware of others getting out of the car.

"Stop! Mazzon! Stop!" a clear, feminine voice said from the other side of the car. Silent onlookers frantically cleared debris away.

The speaker was young, dark-haired and as beautiful in a simple, white dress as she had been in the outdoor cafe in Barcelona. Her pink lips parted to show off her beautiful, white teeth as she smiled. "Mazzon does understand you," she said, her soft cheek dimpling. "I wasn't paying enough attention, I'm afraid. Your van startled me."

The big man glowered at me, launching into another diatribe, his finger stabbing at me. It was amazing how much it hurt. I wanted to call out right away to Rosalita that we'd met, that we knew each other. But an old, familiar voice cut in.

"Rosalita!" the old chaperone in black moved to take hold of the girl's tanned arm. "Do not speak to strange men!"

"Ah, Senora Dorothea," I said quickly as the woman pulled a reluctant Rosalita away from the car. They both looked at me in surprise at my use of the crone's name.

"I am not truly a stranger," I said, smiling past Mazzon's huge, scowling bulk. "Did I not have the pleasure of seeing both of you beautiful ladies in Barcelona six weeks ago? I must admit I was too shy to ask for an introduction."

The big man shoved me again, back along the side of the van. I think I saw a blush of recognition on Rosalita's face. Perhaps her gasp was only a reaction to the force Mazzon was using on me.

"What are you doing in Acarintenas?" Mazzon demanded, his mustached lip curling in an ugly-looking sneer. "Who let you into the valley? Turn this crate around and get out of here!"

Mazzon touched the holster at his belt. My blood ran cold at the sight of his huge pistol. "If you want to stay alive five more minutes," he threatened. I'd no doubt that he'd use the gun on me. I gulped. I'd have left immediately but fate stepped in again.

"Mazzon!" The girl's beautiful lips trembled as did her shiny hair, long and dark to her shoulders. She was very angry as she raised one hand, her fingernails as pink and shiny as her mouth, and gestured to the big man to let go of me.

"The first stranger I've ever seen in Acaterinas and you treat him so badly," she said in a barely controlled voice. "It was my fault the car spun. I'll reimburse Senor Jendez for the damage I did. But it's no wonder no-one ever comes here when you treat them like this!"

The grip on my shirt relaxed but only slightly. My teeth still chattered in fright as I admired the girl through it all. She was just as slim, shapely and feminine as I remembered from Barcelona. I hadn't seen a girl in six weeks. Crones like Dorothea didn't count. Rosalita was a mirage. Oh, I could really go for a girl like her, I knew, if I got the chance.

Mazzon said something in dialect. I thought I heard the Catalan word for grandfather.

"Speak Spanish," retorted the girl, shrugging off the old woman's attempts to get her back in the car. "Rules are made to be broken, Dorothea. There's probably an excellent reason why this man is in Acarintenas."

Rosalita gave me a gorgeous, dimpled smile. I felt suddenly warmed, as if the sun had come out on a cloudy day.

"I'm an American, Tom Scully," I blurted out, wrestling free of the big man's grasp, "a researcher for Wildlife International." I tried to tell her about the endangered Spanish lynx.

"Oh, you must talk with Grandfather!" Rosalita exclaimed, flicking her long, dark hair from her beautifully madeup face. "He used to love hunting wild animals, or he did. Oh, that's probably the opposite of what you do, isn't it?"

"Well," I said, smiling at my only ally in the entire village. The people who'd come back into the cantina were looking at me in the same unfriendly way. "I have to speak to Don Paquino first if I can. I have to get his permission to be here and do my research."

The girl laughed, a low, throaty chuckle while Dorothea squirmed, looking most upset with her charge. "But that's who my grandfather is, Senor Scully," Rosalita said, tossing her beautiful mane of black, glossy, wavy hair in a most female gesture. "Don Paquino de Camayargues y Ronanpa is my grandfather! Mazzon is his chief bailiff."

Such a lovely girl, I thought. And such a wonderful coincidence to meet her again! My luck had changed with women, the way Rosalita was smiling demurely at me. I couldn't have guessed that my luck with real women was the same as it always was.

I'd never before eaten a meal entirely off silver plates. I'd rarely eaten pheasant, either, or tasted the meaty soup which the white-haired, wheelchair-bound Don Paquino assured me was made entirely from the meat and blood of tiny songbirds, which he referred to as 'chamarans'.

I'd no idea why I was being so singularly honored by Rosalita's grandfather but the idea clearly pleased her more than anyone else. From the moment we arrived at the palace - I can think of no other word to describe the buildings that made up the Camayargues dwelling - Rosalita had hung onto my arm to the great disapproval of Senora Dorothea. Dorothea had only relented when Don Paquino had shaken his head to her. Yes, Rosalita was allowed to girlishly flirt with me as much as she liked.

I was surprised to learn Rosalita was eighteen. She seemed so much younger. The Don had smiled at my disbelief when she mentioned that the car was her eighteenth birthday present.

"We're very isolated in a valley like this," the Don explained in very elegant Spanish. "Rosalita hasn't found, shall we say, other female company since the death of her mother."

"Ah," I'd said. "That accounts for you sending her to Barcelona, to meet people of her own age."

"In part," the Don had agreed. He'd looked at Rosalita, sitting so primly next to her chaperone on a flowered sofa. Her silk stockinged legs were crossed, showing off her shapely thighs and calves. Her high heels, did she wear anything else, I wondered, were white and open-toed, showing her painted toenails.

The Don watched me studying Rosalita's legs. I almost froze in terror at the frightening look he gave me. But as soon as he'd realized what I'd seen, he relaxed and forced his face into what seemed to be unfamiliar joviality.

"You know what used to happen with strangers in these mountains, Senor Scully?" he asked, smiling at me. I'd sensed the others in the room tense at his attempt at lightness.

"I expect they were killed," I said, a lump of fear in my throat making my voice very hoarse.

"Sometimes," Don Paquino chuckled throatily, his dark eyes not laughing. He studied Rosalita, who'd blushed and looked down at the soft hands in her lap, her fingernails a shiny pink like her toenails.

"No," Don Paquino went on abruptly. "Strangers were bathed and fed royally. In due time, all the fairest girls in the village would be brought to the stranger. You understand the custom, Senor Scully?"

"I-I think so," I said nervously. I didn't dare to look at the pretty girl on the sofa. She'd be flushing for sure. "Inbreeding?" I'd asked.

"Exactly so," said the Don with a brusque nod. "You must stay for dinner tonight, *senor*. We'll find you a place in the house. See to it." The last was addressed to Mazzon who'd hovered silently in the background. "Oh, tell my cook to prepare the *chamarans*," the Don had said to Mazzon's departing back. "We have a special guest to honor tonight." His smile made shivers of terror go through me.

I'd dressed for dinner in a tuxedo and black bow tie, provided by a silent servant. I matched the Don at the strange, flamboyant supper. *Senora Dorothea* wore a black, as might have been expected. It was *Rosalita* who outshone us all.

She wore a blue, sequinned evening dress, low cut to reveal her exquisitely formed breasts, her cleavage emphasized by the form-hugging dress. Her shapely figure couldn't have been shown off more advantageously. Her waist was tiny, her hips wide and rounded, her skirts ending just above skimpy, cross-strapped high heels, silver and blue. Silver straps held up her dress, leaving her shoulders and back bare, though she did have a wrap when she joined us in the ornate dining room.

Rosalita hadn't looked at me when she entered, which was good because my tongue was hanging out, I'm sure. She'd put her dark hair up, long ringlets falling down behind her like a pony tail. Silver and black combs, Spanish fashion, kept her hair in place, off her lovely face. She'd taken a lot of time, I thought, over her makeup, for she wore silver and pink eyeshadow, her eyelashes thicker and darker.

Her eyebrows were even thinner and more feminine than I'd noticed before and more arched. Her skin was soft, lightly powdered I guessed. I had a whiff of some enchanting, musky perfume when she stood away from kissing her grandfather in greeting. She left a light touch of dark lipstick on his forehead. *Rosalita* took his buttonhole handkerchief and laughingly wiped him clean. She moved with such a sway in her hips, with such entrancing, feminine movements of her hands and head, that I wanted to take her in my arms, too.

Rosalita finally did spare me a glance, instantly flushing beneath her makeup. I sensed her excitement at being 'dressed up'. I smiled and complimented her on her dress, her silver, dangling earrings, her necklace, worth a fortune, I was sure, and her heavy charm bracelet. I escorted her to her place at table, opposite me, and held her chair. She swished to her seat and thanked me prettily, her color still high, her eyes demurely cast down while I got a good look at her beautiful cleavage.

The servants were a large part of the intimidating atmosphere. They stood stiffly, silently, by the black, oaken serving table, silver trays glittering, watching for the chance to dart forward and be useful. Don Paquino spoke to them in the dialect I thought of as 'Ronan', switching easily to Spanish as he directed the conversation. I didn't dare to talk directly to Rosalita who stared at me so adoringly and longingly with her beautiful eyes.

"You met my granddaughter in Barcelona?" Don Paquino asked suddenly, eyes half-hooded, almost reptilian, as he watched my face for how I answered. "She was so beautiful that you followed her here?"

"Oh no," I began, startled at his return to that subject. "That is, I saw and admired your granddaughter's beauty but I had no opportunity to present myself as she was well chaperoned. It was my last night in Barcelona. Francesco Borzan is why I came to this Valley. He's mentioned in the preliminary reports I'm following on the Spanish lynx."

Don Paquino nodded abruptly. I stopped while he considered. I glanced at Rosalita. She smiled, clearly pleased with my saying I'd admired her right away.

"How does my granddaughter appear in Barcelona?" the Don asked, studying my face as I tried to think of the appropriate answer. "How would she be in America? The girls are much prettier there and in cities like Barcelona, I hear."

"Oh, grandfather!" said Rosalita, her earrings swaying as she pouted femininely at him, at which he scowled quite menacingly.

I didn't have to stretch the truth at all. "I think you've been misinformed there, Don Paquino," I said fervently. "Your granddaughter is the loveliest girl wherever she is, I'm sure. I found her very attractive in

Barcelona. I don't remember anyone else I met there. And the thought of American girls," I didn't think of Bonnie once as I said it, "pales into insignificance with such beauty before us right now."

Rosalita flushed and raised her hands to her face, her cheek dimpled. I was a little embarrassed at the fervor of my words. I should have chosen them more carefully, as events showed, but the Don was not discomposed by what I said.

Don Paquino visibly relaxed. He even teased Rosalita a little about her opinions of Barcelona. "Rosalita didn't think much of the boys there," said Don Paquino with a heavy wink at me. "Not forward enough for her."

Rosalita protested again, her hair bobbing about her neck. She had such soft skin. I wished I could touch it, caress it.

Normally, I'd have been enthralled to listen to an older man relating the valley's history but Rosalita sat opposite me, her breasts pert and prominent in her dress. Her wrap had been eased behind her. She looked so fresh and delectable, I wanted only to cross the table and touch her soft femaleness.

"That is Don Felipe," said Don Paquino, indicating an old, brown portrait, its varnished surface dissolving into cracks. "He was the first of the de Camayargues." He looked grimly at Rosalita. "I shall be the last."

Surprisingly, Dorothea tearfully reached across the table to stroke his hand.

Rosalita's chin rose at the gloom coming from her grandfather. "Please, grandfather," she said distinctly. She flushed as if embarrassed, even a little puzzled, as she looked at me. "I'll marry the man of your choosing as a loyal granddaughter should. You could marry me to anyone, to Mazzon if you like."

I could see Mazzon over by the doorway. I was astounded to see the look on his face at Rosalita's words. Why should he be so disgusted at such a suggestion? Surely, marrying the Don's granddaughter would make his fortune.

"I shall have babies to carry on your name," said Rosalita, her pretty face beautiful in her earnestness. "If you'd married me to one of your men, I'd be carrying your future seed now."

Don Paquino stared at the young girl so angrily, that, for a moment, I thought he'd rise up out of his wheelchair and strike her. What was going on here, I thought wildly, scared of the emotions being raised, the hatred clearly evident in Don Paquino, Dorothea and Mazzon for what Rosalita had said.

Rosalita looked at me with tears in her darkly outlined eyes, and bewilderment, too. She clearly didn't know why her grandfather was so angry with her.

"Don't be so silly," Dorothea snapped at Rosalita. "If, if you were to marry, your-your children would have your husband's name and belong to another family. That's what your grandfather means."

"I'd insist, before I was married, that my children bear my grandfather's name as they'd have his blood through me," said Rosalita, her chin lifted in determination. I heard the silky rasp of her dress and stockings, as she shifted and re-crossed her legs.

"Pilar," she pouted as the two older people seemed even more sunken in their gloom, "the cook's daughter, is married and has a baby. She's a year younger than me." Her hair and earrings bounced again as she shifted her gaze to me. "Grandfather is arranging my maid Isabella's marriage, too, to that Basque boy, one of the new bailiffs. He says it's time for her to marry but she's two years younger than me!"

"Rosalita!" snapped Senora Dorothea, aghast, her eyes darting from me to her and back. "Do not speak so discourteously to your grandfather in front of our guest!"

Dark lashes were lowered onto soft cheeks. "I'm sorry, grandfather," Rosalita said in a lower, husky voice. Her lipsticked mouth began to tremble. There were more silk rustlings as she squirmed. "I know you love me. I love you, too. I only want to do for our family what I must do. I will do what you wish when you wish me to do it. I hope it will be soon."

Her voice trailed off. I sat there, wondering what I'd wandered into. Did the Don's cryptic remarks about inbreeding, did his acceptance of me as a guest, did this talk of marriage, all add up to something concerning me? This was going too fast. I mean, I liked the girl all right. I wanted to make out with her. But father her children? Hoo boy! I suddenly began to think of Bonnie back in New York.

Surprisingly, the older people's expressions didn't soften as they studied the sexually attractive, shapely, young girl. I doubted then that they really loved her. Surely they must say something conciliatory to her after the all-encompassing offer she'd made. She'd marry anyone, even one of the servants, to please her grandfather. I wanted to hug and comfort her, she looked so tearful at the lack of reaction from her loved ones.

Mazzon suddenly came forward, stone-faced, with cigars and brandy for the men, chocolates and sherry for the ladies. Rosalita's glass was strongly watered before she drank. Dorothea suddenly asked me about Connecticut. All I could think of was my last night with Bonnie in New York. We'd made love, both of us slightly drunk.

Don Paquino suddenly complained of feeling tired. Mazzon came out of the woodwork again to push the wheelchair gently out of the dining room.

Don Paquino stopped in the doorway. "Oh, Senor Scully," he said firmly, not looking tired in the least. "You'll stay here at Camayargues for the duration of your research. Mazzon will arrange everything tomorrow with the hunters. We'll find some lynx for you. Now, goodnight and sleep well."

I'd no chance to thank him or to object to staying in a palace while doing so-called field research. I stood while he was wheeled out. The two women stood with me. Dorothea nodded to Rosalita. She nervously came around the table and slipped her arm through mine. Her fragrance was so delightful. I felt foolishly light-headed as she leaned close to me. I felt her soft hand in mine, strange feelings, almost like electricity, running through me.

"Let me show you my family," Rosalita said, flushing but smiling too, as she led me to the picture gallery, next to the dining hall, where more portraits were hung. Dorothea stood apart from us as we sauntered down the gallery, me delighted with such a beautiful girl clinging to my arm. I hoped she felt the same as I did.

There was a portrait of a young Rosalita, little changed. Her hair was piled up in a tiara in the picture, making her appear both severe and beautiful. Her long white dress had a tight bodice to show off the

womanly curves I so much admired. She was right. She should be married by now. Any man who looked at her, except for Mazzon for some unknown reason, would want her as I did. I just wished Dorothea would go away for a while but I knew she wouldn't, couldn't, go away. She was doing her job as a beautiful girl's chaperone.

"These must be your parents," I said, indicating modern paintings of a woman, older, eyes laughing like Rosalita's, and a dark-haired man, jaw firm, yet small and rounded, like hers.

"Yes," said Rosalita, leaning against me, sighing. "I never knew my father." Her hair brushed my shoulder. She was so close to me I could see how expertly she was made up. I longed to take her properly in my arms as a man should a woman. "He was killed in some kind of vendetta in the valley. Grandfather was hurt, after, in some part of that. He did, though, wipe out the Yvara family who killed my father. They were the leaders of the Revolution in these hills. We're supposed to be safe here today."

She stroked my hand in hers, quite unselfconsciously, I think. She was staring at the picture of her mother, as she spoke of her grandfather. "It's what Grandfather means when he says he'll be the last of the family," Rosalita sighed, squeezing my hand, while chills ran through me. I saw Dorothea watching us, arms folded, and willed myself not to squeeze Rosalita back.

"The valley needs a strong man to control it or there'll be another round of fighting, over old feuds mostly," Rosalita went on wistfully. "I'm certain Grandfather has someone in mind to take over from him. That someone will marry me to inherit everything. You saw how it is. He won't tell me who he's negotiating with to marry me but it can't be that bad, can it? All the bailiffs are good men."

She looked up into my face anxiously, her eyes about level with my chin. I sensed Dorothea's disapproval as I took her other hand in mine and faced Rosalita.

"Whoever your grandfather has in mind for you to marry," I said softly, staring into her beautiful, yearning eyes, "will be a very lucky man." I sensed that she

wanted my kiss, her dark pink lips parting slightly, sensuously, as she stared at me.

"Thank you," Rosalita finally said, as my stiffness revealed I wouldn't defy Senora Dorothea, not in the Camayargues home.

I treasured Rosalita's beautiful, feminine fragrance as she rustled again by my side on our promenade, her smile very composed.

"Rosalita," reprimanded the thin-faced, grey-haired woman when she noticed what Rosalita was doing. I enjoyed the girl's little attempts to draw me out.

"Oh, Dorothea, he's an American. He doesn't mind like the valley men," Rosalita giggled mischievously, holding my hand more tightly, her nails digging into me. She was right. I didn't mind at all, not the touch of her hand, her sweet fragrance, the swish of her skirts against me, not even the occasional touch of her hair or shoulder against me. In fact, I encouraged her by moving closer so that she had to contact me now and then. It was very flattering to have the attention of such a lovely girl upon me alone.

"If it's not an awkward question," I asked as we sauntered into the next room, a library I gathered, "where is your mother?" Should I put my arm about her narrow waist, I wondered, but thought better of it. It would be too familiar a gesture.

"Dead," said Rosalita somberly. "She was in an accident four years ago, just after we came back to Camayargues."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said as Dorothea indicated we should sit in the large chairs in front of a log fireplace.

I escorted Rosalita to the sofa where she sat daintily, sweeping the skirts of her dress beneath her. I headed for a long chair but Rosalita chuckled, her dimples returning, and patted the seat beside her. I gave Dorothea a rueful glance, asking for permission. At her nod, I returned to the sofa to sit beside Rosalita who pulled a face at her frowning chaperone.

Rosalita lifted up her pretty silk skirts a little as she sat, to cross her legs with a silky, rasping sound. Her ankles were trim, shown off to advantage by her high heels. She wore fashionable, gold-flecked stockings, which I wouldn't have expected so far from 'civilization'.

"We went shopping-mad in Barcelona," said Rosalita with another dimpled smile just for me. "We got these shoes and stockings and lots of other things, like my garter belt and gold-trimmed panties which you can't see." She giggled. I could sense an explosion of indignation from Senora Dorothea. "I'm not supposed to say things like that, am I? I wouldn't dare with one of grandfather's bailiffs. They're all so serious! But it's all right with an American, isn't it, Dorothea? You like girls better than our men do!"

"Can we have some white wine, Dorothea? Then, we'll find you something suitable to read from in here, Mr Scully." She indicated the rows of fusty books on the shelf. "You won't have to have Dorothea approve your reading, will you? I have to have every book approved, you know." She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "They're frightened I might read about what men and women do together, even when they aren't married."

"Rosalita!" snapped the scandalized older woman, a note of panic in her voice.

Rosalita's dark eyes twinkled as she looked archly at me over her soft, rounded shoulder.

"My mother told me all about it long ago," she said in a stage whisper. "I know how babies are made." She blushed at her own audacity while Dorothea seemed stunned to silence.

I could only smile and wish I could take advantage of what was being offered to me so fervently.

"You must try our valley wines," a blushing Rosalita said, dropping her eyes onto her lap. "He must, mustn't he, Dorothea?"

"I suppose so," said the grey-haired woman grimly, standing and going to a bell pull. She didn't notice Rosalita quickly putting out her hand to me for a quick squeeze while her back was to us.

Within a minute, a white-jacketed servant entered the room and was instructed what to bring in the harsh, guttural dialect I was beginning to recognize. It was completely different from Catalan or the Spanish spoken in Madrid. I'd like to have asked about the Ronan language and 'Ronana' but the old lady forestalled me.

"You play backgammon, Senor Scully?" she asked, moving a painted table, positioning it between Rosalita and me.

"Just a little," I admitted.

"Rosalita is an excellent player," said the chaperone, with a tight smile. "Ah, the wines."

The servant had returned so silently I hadn't heard him at all. He bore several decanters and glasses on a silver tray.

"Oh, try this one first," said Rosalita anxiously, standing up with a feminine rustle, her cleavage almost in my face as she reached excitedly for a glass. She poured me a glass of yellow, sparkling wine and bent forward again to pass it to me. She smiled as my eyes admired the luscious female attributes in front of me. She seemed to know how much she was torturing me with visions of what I could look at but not touch. She was enjoying herself!

Oh, I'd marry her off if I were Don Paquino. Rosalita was more than ready for a man. In fact, she'd be in trouble soon if she wasn't hitched quickly to some guy, any guy. What a time she'd give a man, I thought, my groin aching as I wanted her, wanted her in the worst way.

The yellow wine was fairly sweet and chilled, the perfect wine for a young girl, I thought. I was no connoisseur but each of the wines I tasted was delicious. Rosalita encouraged me to try them all even as she trounced me thoroughly at backgammon.

"Mazzon will come for you in the morning," Dorothea said as I wobbled to my feet, the chaperone declaring that it was Rosalita's time to retire. No, she wouldn't allow the pouting girl ten more minutes to find a book for the American guest. Dorothea stood determinedly between us, pushing the girl towards the far door and bed, I expected.

Rosalita paused and thanked me for a delightful evening. Her blowing me a kiss scandalized her chaperone before Rosalita made a graceful exit.

It wasn't Mazzon waiting for me the next morning in the courtyard beside my battered old van. A

fresh-faced Rosalita, in trim, pencil-slim skirt and figure-hugging jacket, waited for me. Devoid of makeup, she looked like a young schoolgirl going on a field trip.

Naturally, Dorothea was beside her, in her usual black dress, her expression pained.

Rosalita's hair was braided and pinned up, gold button earrings at her ears, a dark, leather purse over her shoulder. "Grandfather says I'm your interpreter today," she said brightly, smiling at me, holding out one of her beautifully manicured hands. "Mazzon is out of the valley for a few days. Grandfather says he forgot though he doesn't usually forget anything ..."

"I'm glad to see you," I said, laughing across her excited flow of words. I took her hand and escorted her to the car. "You look beautiful today," I added. Rosalita had the grace to smile, look down and blush. "And you too, Dorothea. How nice to see you!"

Dorothea's glare made it clear she knew I was trying to butter her up for my own nefarious purposes. It was true. I was.

Rosalita insisted on sitting in the front beside me as I drove. It was a good thing she did. I'd never have found my way to the village of Acarintenas through the canyon and woods we had to pass, unmarked roads leading off everywhere. Rosalita was interested in how I drove. She was just learning to drive herself, she said.

Naturally, I offered my services as driving instructor while I was at the palace, which made her laugh. I loved hearing her musical laugh, so girlish, so in love with life.

"It isn't a palace," she said, the laugh still in her voice. "It's just an estancia!" Some estate house, I mused, as Rosalita said she'd let me put my life in her hands, if I wanted, and drive me all over the valley in the Mercedes. I wanted and could hardly wait. I wondered if Dorothea would be there. Of course, she would.

Rosalita was happy and sparkling, pointing out every sight as we drove through Yargues to the family's gas pumps. She talked to the youth there about filling me up whenever I wanted gasoline, flirting a little with him, making him look sheepishly at me. Dorothea's rebuke was almost routine and weary.

"Grandfather owns the tanks," said Rosalita with a smile on her full, curved lips. "You are our guest. So you mustn't pay Bernardo. I told him all about you."

"Oh, is that what you were doing?" I smiled at her. Rosalita laughed openly at me, pinching me. When I pretended to be hurt, she caressed the spot she'd pinched with a soft, cool hand, making me want so much more. Still it was worth getting pinched, I thought, as she sashayed back to the car, a real female sway in her walk.

We lunched beside a mountain stream. I told them about America. Rosalita wanted to know about my girl friends of course. I admitted to Bonnie but claimed it to be over which made Rosalita happy but didn't fool Dorothea for a minute. They wanted to know about fashions and movie stars. Rosalita had a crush on Clint Eastwood, when she was younger, she'd added haughtily, before breaking into a fit of giggles. She couldn't lie very well.

By mid-afternoon, we reached a tall structure, the typical Pyrenees herder's house. The lower level was for animals, the upper for people.

"The Borzans live here," said Dorothea, settling back in her seat, allowing Rosalita and me to go up to the house. I was most disappointed that someone was home as I had thoughts of dragging Rosalita into the woods and ravishing her there.

Senora Borzan, a middle-aged woman, large and muscular, her hair bound back in a blue and white, flowered scarf, welcomed us in. Rosalita looked so delicate and feminine beside her. The two women couldn't have been more unlike. Everything about Rosalita was what a man wanted in a woman while Senora Borzan could have broken me in half with one mighty arm.

She spoke no Spanish but, through Rosalita's interpretations, I learned that Francisco was up the mountain, above the trees. She led us out and pointed up the mountain to the head of the valley where we could see grass and scree slopes above the trees, snow above that.

Francisco would be sent for if the Don wanted him. It might take a week before he'd get to Yargues to contact the American. Yes, I should have left and gone up the mountain but Rosalita smiled at me.