

Rose Sinclair checked her appearance in the mirror, one eye on the time. Ten past seven. Despite the expense of last night's hotel in Almería, she looked tired and her hair, damp still from the shampoo, was frizzy at the edges.

She was expected downstairs at half past to 'meet and greet' the other residents but hadn't come halfway around the world to look a mess at the start. She unscrewed the lid of her postbox-red nail polish and, as if on cue, heard people arriving in the reception room below.

She could dispense with the nail polish, of course, but Silvia, the woman in charge, had given her a hurry-up speech when showing her to her room. She'd been friendly enough but there was steel behind the smile and Rose didn't like being told what to do. Besides, twenty minutes on her appearance now would be time well spent. She applied the polish in long, deft strokes, pleased by the intensity of the colour and just how aptly it was named.

Silvia Verdasco regarded the new intake of artists with the jaundiced eye of long experience and a headache brought on by tension. She had just smoothed over a row in the

kitchen about a burnt pan. Luz and Beatriz at their usual demarcation dispute.

As soon as her welcome speech was finished, the rules of the residency and the local geography explained, she'd leave everyone to it and get away. Luz had suggested she print the information out, which was superfluous because they sent every artist a comprehensive summary weeks before they arrived. Not that many of them seemed to bother reading it. In any event she still had to welcome them.

The January group were nearly all foreigners and capable of stupidity beyond measure and she had found it best to spell things out from the start, before they lost themselves in their work or other endeavours.

To the good there was a pleasant murmur of conversation going on without her and an almost palpable desire to make friends. To the bad it was twenty minutes to eight and Rose, the Australian artist, still hadn't come down.

Damn the eternal problems with the guests. They would, she knew, fall into three main groups: princesses with their eternal self-importance; the needy ones who ran her ragged; the independent types who just got on with it. She had categorised Rose the moment she met her and her lateness now reinforced that impression. A princess who consulted no one's convenience but her own.

If she postponed dinner it would annoy Luz all over again. Her only other choice was to go upstairs and haul the wretched woman out, and as she was considering doing just that she heard her footsteps on the stairs.

Rose was dressed in a low-cut top, jeans that clung like a second skin and high, strappy stilettos. Her lips and

finger-nails were a dark shining red and she smiled from the doorway as if she were the star attraction. Silvia's headache intensified. It was going to be a long month.

Everyone turned to greet her and Rose took them in appraisingly. Two men and three women. Beyond them a fire burned in the grate, the table was set and the aroma from the kitchen made her mouth water and her spirits rise.

Silvia was near the fire and looked peeved, which pleased Rose inordinately. Payback for the lecture when she arrived. Not that she still cared. She was more interested in matching faces to the names on the list she had been sent before leaving home.

In every residency of six, there were usually two men and four women. One of the men was either married or gay, the other hopeless. This time, from her quick assessment, things could be looking up. But she had to turn her attention away from the man at the back of the room to the one stepping forward to greet her.

'Mike Bailey. Pleased to meet you.'

Rose shook his hand to find it faintly moist, and downgraded her smile. Mike was the English writer, a thin man in his early thirties, who looked anxious and was hopelessness personified. No amount of information gleaned online could warn you about sweaty palms. He was dressed in jeans and a shapeless jumper that spoke of thrift shops and making do, and was she just imagining that whiff of poverty?

'Marion Harris. Delighted.' Marion's accent was pure

New York. This was the oil painter, a stout woman dressed in a brown and yellow floral print and a sky-blue knitted cardigan. Even online she hadn't seemed worth taking much notice of, although her résumé was impressive.

'Jane Goodman.' The other Australian. A photographer from Maroubra, of all places. Maroubra was just past Coogee, at the other end of her favourite walk, but a world away from Bondi in terms of prestige and property values.

Jane, too, had a notable list of work to her name. With her short, mousy blonde hair and plain glasses she was far from glamorous, but a blue silk scarf set off the colour of her eyes.

'Annette Porter.'

Annette was the installation artist, an attractive woman with streaked red hair, again from New York.

Rose nodded her greeting, the full smile reinstated. Striking or not, she sensed no competition here.

Annette's left hand, wrapped around her wine glass, displayed an eye-catching set of rings that looked both worn and welded on. Her dress was an expensive pearl grey shift.

The last man stepped forward and here, finally, was the promising male. '*Me llamo* Alfredo Riera. *Encantado, Rosa.*'

Alfredo was the Spanish sculptor. Older than the men she usually went for, and heavier. His hair was dark and tied back and he wore a crimson shirt of heavy cotton that matched the shade of her nail polish. It felt like a sign.

She liked a man who took care of his appearance. She liked the way he said her name, rolling the r's in that exotic Spanish way.

'*Encantado,*' she repeated, looking up into his eyes. Easy

enough to guess the word, or should it be *encantada*, coming from a woman? The man next to her on the plane on the way over had gone on about the masculine and feminine of the language, but she had closed her eyes and shut him out. Not that it mattered because, whatever she said, Alfredo was looking at her as if she had given him a present.

Silvia tapped a spoon briskly against a glass and everyone fell silent.

It was a shame, Rose thought, to turn away from that appreciative gaze to focus on Silvia's tedious welcome address. Rose only half-listened to what she had to say. She wasn't much interested in rules.

Alfredo, standing at the back of the room and tall enough to see over everyone, was impressed with his surroundings. The room, with its tiled floor and leaping fire, was spacious and welcoming. A long dining table with a centrepiece of yellow daisies was set for six and the smell from the kitchen made his stomach rumble in anticipation.

But Silvia's address was in English and he felt a pang of resentment. Why, in his own country, should he be the one at a loss with language? From time to time she caught his eye and changed to rapid-fire Spanish and he felt himself relaxing slightly. She finished off by introducing Luz the cook and Beatriz the housekeeper and directing everyone to their places at the table.

Annette sat beside him and smiled politely. '*Hola, Alfredo. Estoy encantado de conocerte.*'

He had the impression she had memorised the phrase

from a travel guide and, beyond that, there would be little conversation. She was a beautiful woman who wouldn't be out of place at the most formal dinner table, except perhaps for those defiant streaks of red in her hair. Were they red? When he looked closely he could see shades of flame and scarlet and purple.

'*Igualmente*, Annette,' he said briefly, not wanting to spook her with a torrent of Spanish.

They were saved from further conversation by the arrival of plates of food. Enough to feed everyone twice over, and among the salads and the meat dishes he was happy to encounter two of his favourites: solomillo and tortilla de patatas.

Of the women at the table, it was Rose, sitting opposite, who drew his gaze. Her face was that of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, whom he had studied at college. He admired her animation, so different from the statue she brought to mind. Soft flesh against cold marble. Sleek blonde hair, smooth as a waterfall, except for a wispi-ness at the temples. Creamy skin. She was small but perfectly proportioned and every now and then she'd look at him and smile.

Mike offered him wine and when that small task had been acknowledged and the bottle passed on, Alfredo studied the paintings on the walls. These, no doubt, were the work of former residents, who seemed, for the most part, professional and talented. He experienced a pang of self-doubt. His application to the residency board outlining his project for the month ahead had been pure fabrication.

His daughter, Paola, had helped him with it, typing it

up and throwing in a few well-chosen words along the way. Paola was good at things like that. Far better than he was at the practical things of life, and her range of interests and talents always surprised him. It seemed to him that after her mother's death she had taken to cramming in as much as possible to each day.

He had left her surrounded by the costumes she had made for an amateur theatre production, a small hill of feathers, as she filled in a form for an archaeology dig in Mallorca at the beginning of March.

He had no idea what to work on for the month of the residency, and the stone purchased at the quarry on his way hadn't helped. He'd bought it anyway, because he couldn't spend a month without materials. He'd chosen a large block with the idea that large was better than small in suggesting a shape within.

He amused himself with the thought of turning the stone on its side and carving out a scene from the welcome dinner, much like *The Last Supper*. He could name it The First Supper. What would he run with? Boredom? The undercurrents between people? One good thing about not speaking English was being left free to study gestures and expressions and tone of voice. He was surprised at how revealing such things were.

He heard the front door close, followed by cars driving away. So the staff served the meal and left them to it. Silvia hadn't said so, but perhaps in English she had. Marion, at the foot of the table, was doing most of the talking and from the number of times New York was mentioned he knew what about. Every now and then, Jane or Annette or Rose

broke in with a change of topic or, he assumed, a new city to talk about, because both Madrid and Sydney were mentioned. Marion used that time to shovel her food in. Did she even taste it?

Alfredo understood that Annette was interested in climbing Cabrera Vieja, the table-shaped hill that rose abruptly out of the valley floor behind the residence. She pronounced it well and pointed to the window behind him. He couldn't understand what Marion said, but guessed she was adding herself into the climbing party and, for a moment, the two Americans seemed united.

He had seen the mountain on the drive in and had wanted to climb it too. The shape was that of a young mountain flattened at the top by some gigantic steamroller. The view would be extraordinary.

Mike added a sentence or two to the discussion of the hill, as if desperate to make himself heard, then Marion took up the conversation again. Jane caught Alfredo's eye and smiled ruefully and he understood she was fed up with it all.

Mike, he noticed, had finished his coffee but looked ready to fall asleep. He had only pecked at his food. Rose had given up on the conversation and was staring into her wine glass. He saw how tired she was, how her animation was spent, as if an unseen hand had switched her off.

Alfredo scraped his chair noisily on the tiled floor and rested his head on his hand in the universal sign for sleep. If he was blunt about doing so, then the language barrier he'd been on the wrong side of all evening seemed reason enough.

*‘Buenas noches.’*

Jane stood up instantly. ‘Goodnight, Alfredo. You’re right. It’s been a long day.’

Rose moved beside him and took his hand and smiled. Not the full-blown smile of earlier, but a softer version. ‘Goodnight, Alfredo.’

‘Rosa.’ He registered the warmth of her hand and the colour of her eyes: the deep green of a sunlit ocean. Eyes to get lost in.

In his room he looked out over the valley towards Cabrera Vieja, and saw it as a solid wedge of black in the darkness. Then he turned his thoughts to what he’d say to his daughter, Paola. This was his first time away from home since Isabella’s death four years ago, which felt both like a lifetime and a minute. Four years to come to terms with the loss of his wife and for Paola, her mother. They had clung together in those early days out of fear and love and desperation. It was only lately he had come to see that Paola was tougher than he had given her credit for, and that when it mattered her determination was both steely and strong. One morning recently, looking in on her, seeing her hand-sewing with small, considered stitches, he’d had the disconcerting feeling that he had been the needy one and for far too long. He was stopping that now.

*Survived first dinner, most of it in English which will help me learn it finally. There is a nearby hill I’d like to climb that looks like a child’s sandcastle. Goodnight, querida, and good luck with the costumes and the play. More soon. Papá.*

Her reply came within minutes.

*Goodnight Papá. I'm so pleased it's looking good. The costumes went down well at the dress rehearsal. I've been asked to work on another play. P*

He stared out into the dark valley and his thoughts drifted to Rose's hand, which he had held less than twenty minutes ago. How warm and firm it was. How intimate her smile.