

There was a moment when she first woke, a moment free of any sense of the day ahead; a moment before she opened her eyes and when all she could feel was the warmth of the early sunshine falling on her face through the open curtains, and the soft heaviness of her body relaxed after sleep. A moment of innocence before reality interfered.

Isabel got up, pulling on the cotton wrap that lay crumpled on the rose velvet chair. The chair had belonged to her grandmother and later to her mother – it was part of her history. She stared at it, seeing herself at five in the pink organza fairy dress her grandmother had made for Christmas, climbing onto the chair and claiming it as her fairy throne. Perhaps having the chair in her own bedroom nearly fifty years later wasn't a particularly good idea. She might swap it for the one in the spare room, maybe get it reupholstered.

Doug stirred, rolling onto his side. 'Up already?'

'Things to do.'

'Mmm. Want me to help?' he asked, closing his eyes again and pulling the bedclothes around him.

'No, it's fine – I'm better on my own.'

He nodded, eyes still shut, reaching out his hand to her. 'Merry Christmas, darl.'

Isabel took the outstretched hand and bent to kiss his stubbly cheek. 'Merry Christmas.' He was almost asleep again.

Alone in the kitchen she switched on the kettle and opened the fridge. The turkey, trussed, stuffed and covered with a damp cloth, sat pale and bulky on a middle shelf. She glared at it, took out the milk and closed the fridge. It was only half past six, plenty of time yet. She took her coffee out onto the deck, gazing across the jumbled rooftops to the grey-green smudges of Rottnest and Garden islands. A couple of yachts, their sails gleaming red and white, raced towards the open sea. Down in the town the bells were ringing for early mass.

A perfect morning, a perfect Australian Christmas Day 1996. But the weight of the day wrapped itself around her, and she was ashamed of her own ingratitude. She had a husband, children and grandchildren who loved her, a beautiful home, enough money. What sort of person was she to feel so overwhelmed with gloom and resentment on Christmas morning? It would be the same as last year, and the year before and the year before that, as many years as she and Doug had been married – this would be the thirty-fourth. Had she really cooked that many Christmas dinners, served thirty-four turkeys in the sweltering sunshine, ignited thirty-four rich dark puddings and carried them to the table swathed in brandy flames? Children had been born and grown to adulthood, and now they came with their partners and their own children. And through it all she had been there cooking the Christmas dinner, performing the same rituals, while her mother and stepfather grew older and sicker and finally died, and while Doug's parents grew younger and more energetic, like an advertisement for superannuation funds. And here she was, doing it again. In the lounge the tree sparkled with tiny white lights, towering above the mound of presents. The weeks of work, shopping, wrapping, cooking and planning would be as nothing by the end of the day. And she would still be here, with this leaden exhaustion, this resentment, this longing to be free of the responsibility, free of the burden of their expectations.

She remembered the delicious promise of that waking moment and wanted it back. She wanted to stretch it, examine it, turn it over, see what she could make of that crystal clear sense of lightness and freedom. It followed

her as she dried herself after a shower and wandered back into the cool bedroom. How tempting it would be to stretch out on the bed, close her eyes and let Christmas pass her by. The taste of stillness and solitude haunted her all morning, even as she spread the cloth on the table and counted the cutlery. There would be one less this year. No Eunice, no extra space needed for her wheelchair, no one reminiscing about crisp European winters, roasted chestnuts and snow-clad city streets bright with decorated trees and horse-drawn sleighs. Isabel sighed, put away the extra set of cutlery and spread the place settings a little wider. Her mother had died in November; there would be more room at the table this year.

Deb and Mac came first. She heard them from the bedroom, their voices preceding them up the steps as they argued above the children's excited squeals. The house was filled with noise and movement. Danny and Ruth thundered along the passage to the bedroom, pausing breathless in the doorway.

'C'mon, Gran, it's Christmas,' said Danny from behind a Spider-Man mask, a red and black cape swinging from his shoulders. 'Look what Father Christmas brought me.'

'I got a fairy dress,' said Ruth, trailing behind in ruffles of pink net.

Isabel got up and hugged Danny. 'I barely recognised you, you look so scary,' she said, and she picked Ruth up and set off with them to the lounge. 'Do you know, Ruth, I had a pink fairy dress like that the Christmas I was five.'

'I'm four,' said Ruth thoughtfully, her tinsel tiara lurching at an angle.

'Well, you must have been a very good girl for Santa to give you a fairy dress when you're only four.'

The others all seemed to arrive together, Luke with his girlfriend Cassie, Kate and Jason explaining that they would have been earlier but they had to phone Jason's mum in Noosa, and Doug's parents struggling under a load of parcels.

Christmas Day drew Isabel into its net, trapping past and present, blurring their boundaries until her limbs felt leaden and her face ached with the effort of smiling. They sat around the table surrounded by the debris of Christmas dinner, the dirty plates, the drying pudding, the torn crackers and paper hats. Luke raised his glass to her. 'Fantastic dinner, Mum!'

The others followed, her family, eleven faces she knew so well and loved so much, flushed with food and wine, their smiles weary with pleasure and contentment, paper hats at rakish angles, the little ones sliding wearily off their chairs.

'To Mum - thanks for making it all happen, this year, last year, next year,' Luke said and they echoed his toast.

Isabel smiled into the stillness as they drank. 'Thank you, I'm glad you enjoyed it...but... well, maybe not next year.'

Confusion and disbelief hung in the silence.

'I mean, maybe it would be nice to do something different,' she said, nervous suddenly at speaking such heresy. She looked down to the far end of the table where Doug was cutting a piece of cheese.

'Different?' said Luke, his glass still raised.

'Well, we might want to go away somewhere, your father and I, perhaps . . .' Her voice faded as Doug looked up from the cheese in amazement. 'Well, me,' she went on. 'Maybe I might...'

'Your mother's got post-Christmas stress disorder a little early this year,' Doug said, putting the cheese on his plate and picking up his glass. 'We'll be here! Here's to next year and the year after that and...'

'Next year,' they said, raising their glasses again, relief visible in every smile.

And Isabel raised her glass and drank, but in that moment she knew that next year she would not be there. Speaking it had made it inevitable. Those few words had changed everything and there was no going back.

'I keep meaning to ask you what all that stuff was on Christmas Day,' Doug said, swinging the car into his parents' driveway. It was New Year's Eve and they were on their way to another ritual meal.

'What stuff?'

'About not being here next year, going away.'

'I need a change,' she said. 'We could go away perhaps, do something different.'

He switched off the engine and opened the car door. 'We've always done it,' he said stubbornly. 'It's a family tradition, like tonight with Mum and Dad.'

'Yes,' she said, stepping out of the car. 'But that doesn't mean we have to keep on doing it. It doesn't mean we can never take time out.'

He clicked the remote control irritably and the car doors locked with a snap. 'It's important,' he said. 'To all of them, the kids, the parents, everyone.'

'You mean it's important to you.'

'Yes, if you like - me too.'

'And what about me?'

'You never complained before.'

'No.'

'Well, there you are then. You need a rest, Iz.' He put his arm around her

shoulders. 'Why don't we go down south for a few days? You could phone that nice place with the spa.'

Isabel turned to see his profile in the fading light and wondered, not for the first time in thirty-four years, how it was possible to feel so totally misunderstood by someone you had lived with and loved for decades.

The councillor for the North Ward paused. He had been on his feet repeating himself for ten minutes. Isabel stared at him hard, willing him to wind up, but he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, picked up another sheaf of correspondence and took a deep breath to begin again. She peered at him over the top of her half-glasses.

'Yes, thank you, Councillor Williams. As you've said, it's a complicated issue with serious budgetary implications. I suggest we refer it to the finance committee for consideration and ask for a report at the March meeting. Those in favour? Against? Thank you, that's carried then.'

Shocked by the speed with which his plans for a day centre had been dispatched to the finance committee, Councillor Williams grunted irritably and resumed his seat. The relief was palpable; councillors began to pile their papers together.

'Well, that brings us to the end of the agenda, Councillors. The next meeting is on Monday the twenty-fourth of March. I declare the meeting closed at ten minutes past ten.'

The chamber buzzed with noise and movement as people got to their feet and began to leave the chamber. The council's CEO, Sam Lewis, slipped his files into his briefcase. 'You're unusually brutal this evening, Madam Mayor,' he grinned. 'Mr Williams didn't know what hit him.'

'I feared we might be here till midnight,' Isabel said. 'Old Mr Martino was already asleep and I think I heard him snore. Another five minutes and at least half the chamber would have been snoring with him.'

'You don't have to convince me,' Sam replied. 'I'd lost track of what he was saying a couple of minutes after he started. Can I buy you a drink?'

She shook her head. 'Thanks, Sam, but not tonight. I'll be in on Wednesday morning if we need to discuss that issue about the heritage register.'

'Fine,' he said. 'But, Isabel, before you go, have you - well, have you thought again about running for a third term?'

'I have and I'm not. I've had enough, Sam. I need a break and it's time the council had a change, anyway.'

He shrugged, stopping at the door of his office. 'I still hope you'll change your mind.'

'No way,' she smiled. 'I've got other plans.'

It was after ten but she wasn't ready to go home. She needed time by herself. She considered a coffee on the cappuccino strip but dismissed it - she would be a sitting target for anyone with a council gripe. Almost without thinking she drove across the intersection, and headed towards the refuge. It was a rambling old fibro house with a metal roof and wide verandahs, half hidden behind a tall, thick brush hedge which was starting to encroach on the pavement. There would be complaints from the neighbours, so she'd have to remind Loretta to get it trimmed. They got enough complaints about the residents and their unwelcome visitors without having to cope with complaints about the hedge.

Isabel pulled into one of the four parking bays at the front, switched off the lights and wound down the window. The sound of the Bee Gees floated across the garden, and through a lighted window she could see a couple of women dancing to the music. The double wooden doors were open, protected, like the windows, by steel security doors, a safeguard against the angry, sometimes violent men who were prone to roll up in the middle of the night demanding access. Over the entrance was a small curved sign announcing 'Isabel Carter Refuge for Women'. Isabel gazed at it with affection. She had fought, first as a private citizen and later as a councillor, to get the city to fund a refuge and then to buy the house, and she was prouder of it than of anything she had done since.

She got out of the car and wandered over to the seat beneath the big peppermint tree, remembering the tears of pride in her mother's eyes as the then mayor cut the ribbon and declared the refuge open. 'Be proud, darling,' Eunice had said, gripping her daughter's hand. 'Your passion drove you to do a wonderful thing.' She had hung on grim-faced as Doug and Mac struggled to manoeuvre her wheelchair over the gravel, but her pride in her daughter's achievement was obvious.

A face peered out of the window into the darkness, then moved away. Seconds later the woman stepped out onto the porch and shone a torch beam towards the tree.

'It's okay, Loretta, it's only me loitering out here,' Isabel called.

'Thank goodness,' Loretta said, lowering the torch beam to the ground and walking towards her. 'Whatever are you sitting about out here for? We thought you were an aggrieved husband planning a break-in!'

Isabel leaned back. 'Sorry. I needed time to think. I've just finished a council meeting.'

'D'you want a cup of tea or something?'

'No thanks, I'm fine.'

Loretta switched off the torch and they sat together in companionable silence.

'I might go away for a bit,' Isabel said.

'A bit? What's that mean? How big a bit?'

'Several months . . .' She hesitated. 'A year, maybe.'

'That's a big bit. Doug got some flash posting somewhere?'

'No, no I'm going on my own. Time out...time to myself.'

'Well, I guess if anyone needs time out it's you.'

'I haven't told Doug yet.'

'I see . . .' There was a long pause.

'I'll tell you more later, when it's clearer. Don't mention it, will you? I haven't told anyone else yet.'

'Sure. If there's one thing you learn from working in a refuge, it's when to keep your mouth shut.' She put her hand on Isabel's arm. 'You're okay, though?'

'I'm okay, just need a break, time for me. You'll still be here?'

'You know me - they'll carry me out of here feet first but not for another couple of decades. If you're asking me if I'll be here to look after things, you know I will.'

Isabel swallowed hard on the lump in her throat.

'Thanks, Lori. I don't think I could go if you weren't here.'

'Lord bless us, of course you could, I'm not indispensable. Let me know the plan of action when you're ready.'

Isabel opened the car door and slid into the driving seat. 'I will, thanks again. Oh and, Loretta -'

'Yes, I know, the hedge needs cutting. The guy's coming the day after tomorrow. We'll be all neat and tidy by the weekend.'

For a while Isabel had struggled with the feeling that her overwhelming need to get away had to be directed to some serious and important purpose, but eventually she came to the conclusion that this was just what it should not be. For more years than she could remember, she had been occupied with serious and important purposes; with work, raising children, helping with the grandchildren, looking after her mother and stepfather, and fitting everything around Doug's job, fighting for the refuge, the council. What she wanted was an end to purpose, time to drift, time free of other people's needs and expectations.

She got out the old wooden box filled with her mother's postcards - Lisbon, Granada, Seville, Monaco, Nuremberg, Vienna, Berlin - and spread them on the table alongside the map of

Europe in her old school atlas. As a child she had marked the locations on the map as the postcards arrived, charting Eunice's travels with the dance company from one exotic location to another. More memories sprang out as Isabel studied the map: Bruges, where women sat making lace in the streets; a story about eating raw herring by the canals in Amsterdam; and dancing on the broken bridge at Avignon.

They were dream places far away from the stifling heat of her grandparents' home in the hills with the chook pen in the back yard, the Coolgardie safe, and the tiny sleepout that was her bedroom. When the mail came, Isabel and her grandmother sat together in the swing seat on the verandah to read it. She could feel it as if it were yesterday; the comfort of Grandma's warm body, the smell of face powder and rosewater, and the sound of seat posts creaking as they swayed. Each card was a promise that her mother might be back soon. Isabel studied them, hoarded them, first in a biscuit tin and later in the wooden box her grandfather had made especially for the purpose. By the time Eunice gave up dancing and came back to Australia with a new husband, Isabel was eleven years old and her collection of postcards filled the box.

Not only was her new father a stranger but her mother had become a stranger

too. No longer the glamorous, exotic dancer of the postcards, she was a tired, disappointed woman in her thirties with injuries to her legs and feet that would confine her to a wheelchair by the time she was forty-five. Isabel's father had been killed in action a few months before she was born in 1943. When the war was over, Eunice somehow managed to get herself to London for an audition and was soon touring Europe. She had left Isabel with her parents, promising to be back in a year or so. But she was still dancing in 1953 when she met Eric at a cocktail party in Monaco. He was an under-secretary at the British consulate with a promising career in the foreign office. They were married that year, and just a few weeks later their car was hit by a drunk driver as they rounded a steep bend on a narrow road between Nice and Grasse. Eric escaped unscathed but Eunice's feet and legs were crushed. For months she languished in hospital before she was well enough for Eric to be able to get her on a ship back to Australia. Slowly she learned to walk again, but she always needed a stick and as she grew older, arthritis locked her joints to rigidity. By the time Isabel was eleven, she was living in Perth with a mother she barely knew and a stepfather who adored her as if she had been his own daughter.

Isabel scanned the international listings of women who offered accommodation to other women travelling alone. It was a network she had joined years before but never used, although she had played host to women visiting Australia – a Turkish woman had stayed once, and one from Bratislava. Finally she worked out the cost of the trip and added twenty-five per cent for emergencies. Eunice's legacy would more than cover it. She wondered briefly if there was something distasteful about using the money so soon after her mother's death. People might think she had been waiting for Eunice to die so that she could get away. But she had spent too much of her life wondering what people might think. It had stopped her doing so many things, and driven her to do others. She looked at the important dates in her diary: the expiry of her mayoral term, Doug's birthday, Kate's birthday...but if she looked at all the dates there would be no right time to leave. She might just as well close her eyes and stick a pin in the calendar. Monday 12 May, the pin said. She wrote it in her diary and dialled the number of the travel agent.

Isabel knew that everyone thought she was a good organiser. She had a dogged quality, an intellectual and emotional stamina that enabled her to stick with things, to retain the grand vision as well as to struggle with the tedious detail. She wanted to go through all Eunice's papers before she left – it would be good to take some of the diaries with her – but first she would have to think about organising things at home for the time she was away, although organisation was the easy part. The rest would be much harder. How do you tell your husband and children that, much as you love them, you are leaving them for a while? That for the next twelve months they must carry the burden of servicing the complex web of relationships that sustains the family? How do you tell your closest friends that you are no longer content just to discuss this midlife angst, this restlessness, this longing for solitude, but plan to turn it into action?

Isabel woke at night with her heart thumping in her chest, sweating over plans that were thrilling by day and terrifying by night. She stared at herself in the bathroom mirror and wondered how she had arrived at this point. This plump woman with fine blonde hair twisted into a knot at the back of her head, the un-

mistakably pale Celtic looks - who was she? Eunice's daughter, Doug's wife, mother to Luke, Debra and Kate, mother-in-law to Mac and Jason, daughter-in-law to Jack and Freda, grandmother of Danny and Ruth, closest friend of Robin, Sally and Grace . . . But who was she really? Who would she be away from all those relationships, those roles, those responsibilities? Who was Isabel Carter?

'You can't be serious,' said Grace. 'You can't honestly mean you're going away for a year, leaving Doug, the kids, everything?'

Isabel knew it would be tough and that Grace would be the toughest, but she had decided to tell her friends first. She needed a test run, a chance to talk about it before she told Doug and the family. They were waiting for an explanation. Robin, with that thin, intense look, leaning forward, her hands curled around her coffee cup, as though listening to a submission by opposing counsel. Sally, leaning back to run her hands through her wild hair, her glasses perched on top of her head, and Grace, immaculate as ever, crossing her legs, folding her arms and turning slightly in her chair, her body language oozing disapproval.

Isabel paused as the waiter piled their dirty cups onto a tray and took the order for more coffee. She felt a great wave of embarrassment and vulnerability. These were her closest friends. They had supported each other through personal and professional crises, parents dying, and children leaving home, job changes, house moves, political activism, diets and really bad haircuts. Suddenly they seemed like strangers. She had hoped that they would see it as she did, that she wouldn't have to explain. She swallowed hard and began to shred a paper napkin with nervous fingers.

'Look, we're constantly talking about how we feel, about anger, frustration or needing solitude. We're always joking about menopause and midlife crises and... well, we joke but it's serious too, and sometimes I feel it might swallow me up, like I might wake up one morning and find that all those feelings are smothering me and I can't actually draw breath.'

She paused, hoping that one of them might pick up on her lead but they said nothing. 'I've been living the same life for decades, married to Doug, being a mother then a grandmother. I feel so desperate that one day I'll be dead and it will be all I've ever done. Sometimes I feel as though all the important things in my life have already happened.'

'But your life is changing all the time,' Grace said. 'You've said it yourself. Okay, you've lived here for thirty-odd years, and been married to Doug, but in that time you've had jobs, had children who've grown up and left home. Look at what you're doing now. You're the mayor, for heaven's sake! All sorts of things have happened to you.'

'But that's exactly what I mean,' Isabel said. 'It's happened to me, life has happened to me. I haven't directed it, I haven't made things happen. I've just responded to things, fate, nature, opportunity... whatever you want to call it. Doug, his job, the kids, their kids. I did what I had to, and it's precious to me, all of it, but now I want to do something different. Something just for me, something I've chosen.'

'The refuge didn't just happen, being the mayor didn't just happen,' Grace persisted. 'You chose those things, you had to campaign for them, and look what a fantastic job you're doing.'

'My second term is up at the end of April and I've already said I won't run again. Six years as mayor and five as a councillor is enough - for me and for the council. You're right in one way, Grace, but those things were an outer journey, this is different. I'm not sure if I can explain it but I think now I'm ready for the inner journey.'

The silence was long enough to make her uncomfortable.

'I'm not quite sure what you mean,' Sally ventured. 'Are you saying you're going away and not coming back?'

'No, no, not at all. I just mean that I want a break, an adventure, something totally different and totally on my own, away from here. I want a year of my life all to myself. I am so tired of running around doing what other people expect me to do, and what I feel I *ought* to be doing.'

She was close to tears, almost at the point of apologising for considering it, but she could not let it go. 'And I want to see the places where Mum was, get some sense of her life there. Grace, you've often talked about going off somewhere quiet, to the country, having time to do your patchwork, starting the organic herbs business. You even did a business plan. That's your dream.'

Grace turned to her impatiently. 'Honestly, Isabel, I think you've gone off your rocker. Of course I talk about it but I couldn't afford it. I need to work for at least another eight years. I don't have a husband anymore, and Ron and I weren't good savers. He didn't leave me a fortune, you know.'

'I think it's wonderful, Isabel,' Sally said. 'It's so exciting and romantic going to all those places where Eunice danced. I bet you've been planning it secretly for ages.'

Isabel smiled at her in relief. 'Well, I've always wanted to do it but somehow it didn't seem possible. But then Mum died and there was her money and I realised this was something I could do. Christmas finally decided me. That was when I actually started to plan it seriously. You know, I feel that I've been making it possible for other people to make their journeys - Doug, the kids - now it's my turn.'

Robin skimmed the froth off her coffee with a teaspoon. 'I think it's wonderful

too,' she said. 'I was reading another one of those books on menopause, and there's a chapter in there about tribal communities where the women go away for a year when they reach menopause. They spend time grieving for the loss of childbearing and then preparing for the new phase of their lives. It's a ritual.'

'I thought she wanted to get away from the rituals,' Grace sniffed. 'And don't tell me Isabel is grieving because she can't have more kids. We're all thankful we don't have to worry about that anymore.'

Sally reached out to put a conciliatory hand on Grace's arm. 'Hang on, Grace, what are you getting so upset about? Anyone would think that Isabel was asking *you* to go away for a year. I'd love to do something like that. Move right out of my own life for a while.'

Grace pulled her arm away in irritation. 'I see, Sally, so you're going to chuck everything in and disappear up a mountain for a year or so? Give up teaching art, get into rock painting and become a hermit? Go on some mystical retreat?'

'I don't really see it like that,' Sally said slowly. 'But I've often thought of taking time out – a sort of sabbatical, away from everything and everybody.' She turned to Isabel. 'It's more than a sabbatical or retreat, really, isn't it? An emotional and spiritual journey.'

Grace pushed her coffee cup aside. 'I think you're completely mad,' she said. 'Do you honestly think you're going to enjoy traipsing around Europe on your own for a year? What would you do? You've got a husband, a lovely home, you're respected here. You can't really mean you'd risk all that simply to go off on some inner journey. What about your kids, and the grandchildren? What about Doug, what does he think about it?'

There was a silence and Isabel stared at her coffee.

'Oh my god, you haven't told him yet, have you?'

She swallowed hard and shook her head. 'I wanted to talk to you three first. Sort of nut out the issues, to help me when I talk to him.'

'So how do you think he'll take it?' Robin asked gently.

'He'll be devastated, of course,' Grace cut in. 'He'll think she's leaving him.'

'Are you?' Robin asked.

Isabel shook her head. 'No, not leaving him in the sense that Grace means. I'm just stepping out of my life for a while. But I'm coming back. Of course I'm coming back.'

'What if he isn't there when you do come back?' Grace asked, leaning forward. 'What if he's gone off on his own journey? How would you feel about that?'

Isabel looked at her, pondering the question. 'Pretty devastated,

I suppose, but I would think that he had a right to do it. And I'd hope that he'd come back too.'

Grace laughed. 'You're mad! Robin, come on, you're the rational one – make her see sense.'

Robin paused, looking from Isabel to Grace. 'Actually, she sounds perfectly sensible to me,' she said quietly. 'It's a risk, but one she's prepared to take. It's exciting, really, an adventure. Like that movie *Shirley Valentine*, the bit where she talks to the wall and asks whether this is all there is, when she feels sort of betrayed by life.'

'Oh, Robin, really, *Shirley Valentine* was a great movie but that character was a downtrodden housewife. You're single, a brilliant lawyer with a beautiful home and plenty of money. You have what a lot of women would kill for – and so does Isabel – and you can hardly compare poor old Doug to that domineering, oafish husband in *Shirley Valentine*.' Grace shifted her chair further under the shade of the café awning. 'Isabel's hardly oppressed and downtrodden, she's always been free to do what she wanted.'

Robin had flushed with embarrassment at Grace's first onslaught but now she bounced back. 'Since when did you become the reverend mother, Grace?' she snapped. 'I can recall many conversations where you talked of feeling burnt out and wanting to be left alone. I think I can recall times when you talked about how nice it would be to get away and not have all the responsibilities of being a successful nineties woman.'

'But that's just talk,' Grace responded. 'It does us good to have a whinge from time to time, gets it off your chest. I've never said I wanted to go off on some inner

journey to transform myself.'

'Nor have I,' said Robin. 'But right now the idea is very tempting. I'm feeling really exhausted and ...well... scattered. I'm just longing for solitude and space for myself.'

Grace picked up her bag, searching for her sunglasses. 'I can't believe we're having this conversation.'

Sally leaned across, putting her hand on Isabel's arm. 'I think that if you can do it, if you can handle the family side of it, it would be the most wonderful thing. But in any case, Isabel, you don't need our approval.' She paused, grinning sideways at Grace. 'You don't even need Grace's approval.'

'Well, that's for sure!' Grace said. 'I'm off. I've promised to babysit for Tim and Angela. I'll see you all soon.' She looked across at Isabel. 'In the meantime I look forward to hearing that you're nominating for a third term. I'm ready for another session of doorknocking. Why don't you book a couple of weeks' getaway down south, that'll give you time to yourself. Bye now.' They watched her weave her way between the tables to the door, shoulders square, slim hips swinging with determination.

'Phew!' said Robin, refilling their water glasses. 'Whatever got into her this morning?'

Isabel leaned back in her chair, exhausted by the tension. 'I knew this was going to be difficult, but I didn't really expect such hostility. I seem to have upset her dreadfully. I'll give her a call later.'

Sally shook her head. 'Let it go, Isabel. She'll sort it out, it's not personal.'

'I know, but I didn't want to upset her, or any of you - sorry.'

Robin reached out to squeeze her hand. 'There's nothing to apologise for. I honestly think it's wonderful. You're very strong, Isabel. You must have thought about how difficult it will be with Doug, and probably the kids too.'

'Of course,' she said. 'I've thought about it endlessly but I keep coming back to the feeling that I am actually entitled to some time to myself after all these years.'

'I suspect they'll tell you that you can have time to yourself at home, that they'll give you space,' Sally said.

'Or, like Grace, they'll suggest you go away on your own for a couple of weeks,' Robin added.

'It's not enough,' Isabel said, hearing the note of desperation in her own voice. 'I need more.'

As they walked slowly from the coffee shop a gentle breeze swept in from the sea and whispered through the pines bordering the park that wound down to the beach. They paused in silence, looking down on the creamy white sand and the glittering blue expanse of the ocean, ruffled now to a slight swell of waves edged with crisp white foam.

'Sometimes I look at this and think I'm in paradise,' Isabel said. 'And then I look again and think it's a prison that I've chosen. Somewhere so fortunate and beautiful that to yearn for something else, for change, would be disloyal and ungrateful.'

'There's nothing ungrateful or disloyal about wanting time away, time to yourself,' Sally said. 'In fact, it can even be about renewing your relationship with the place and the people you're retreating from. But I don't think Doug and the family will see it that way. They'll feel threatened, so they'll almost certainly see it as

selfishness.'

'Is that how you see it?' Isabel asked.

'Not at all.'

'Me neither,' said Robin. 'Look, I'm single, but I'm longing to be free from all the claims on my time and energy, so with all your commitments you must feel all that multiplied by thousands. I envy you having the courage to do it.' She put on her sunglasses and searched for her car keys. 'When will you talk to Doug? This week?'

Isabel nodded. 'Yes, it's not fair to leave it any longer. I've booked for the middle of May. I'm dreading telling him.'

Sally took her arm as they strolled across the car park. 'We could meet next Saturday. Talk over how it went.'