

CHAPTER ONE

5th December

BYRON BAY

Welcome to Byron Bay, place of hot bright days when the nor'-easter beats on your eyeballs and salt and sand form a crust on your skin. Place of tiny unfurling tree fern fronds and moist rainforest smells and exotic weeds and exotic visitors. There's the promise of magic in every mushroom head and enlightenment every weekend.

Welcome to Byron, place of broken dreams, wild schemes, phoenixes rising and ashes falling, taking a right hander at the pass, drumming in the park and bluebottles coming in on the afternoon tide. Designer clothes and designer dreadlocks and on every street corner you can buy a tattoo, ancient Celtic wisdom hennaed to your skin for the duration of a holiday. For something more permanent, pierce your nose, eyebrow, tongue, lip, labia, cock, clit, bellybutton or even ear lobe. Crowded with pregnant bellies, tofu burgers, lentil patties, carrot juices, strong espresso and handmade gourmet biscuits to suit every taste.

Welcome to Byron Bay, so beautiful it will make you weep. Or buy photographs of dolphins in turquoise

water, or pay good money to tandem hang glide or paddle a sea kayak or take up drumming or African dancing. So beautiful it will make you want to cast your old life away, give up jobs, lovers, houses, responsibilities and sit instead on the beach front contemplating the stretch of Pacific ocean in front of you. Welcome to where wealth meets poverty, ocean meets land, mountains meet clouds, backpackers meet each other.

Hanging out at the far eastern edge of the continent, Byron has its own longitude, its own time zone. First place to get the sun each day according to common wisdom, if not geophysical reality. First place where new ideas are born, first in the race to enlightenment, first, first, me, me, me. In the background Mount Warning crooks a stern finger, but much of the time he's surrounded by cloud anyway and no one notices the reminder that being first isn't everything.

In the back hills of Byron the mist comes down over the rainforest and you can sometimes hear howling in the night. No one knows if the sound comes from the trolls, the pygmies, the rebirthers, the feral cats, the faeries, goblins, witches, shamans, priestesses, farmers or B&B operators who live hidden in the folded valleys.

Jutting out proudly east, the beam from the erect lighthouse penetrates the dark belly of the night, not seeing how far away the ocean stretches, or how insignificant a thrust of light it makes into the darkness.

In the mornings the wind changes and the hanggliders appear from their roosts, riding the updrafts around the lighthouse, circling in ecstatic worship of the tall white building on the easternmost tip of an old, cracked continent.

ZAC

Zac, my man. Zac the way cool dude, Zac the photographer, Zac the hip hop and happening, the paparazzo Zac. The backpack, no luggage, here one night gone the next Zac. Zac of the slick suit and the stretch white T-shirt, Zac with pecs and abs and gluteus maximus, Zac with eyes that glow like a lion's. Zac knows where it's at, has his finger on the pulse. Women purr at Zac. He handles a 600mm telephoto lens with phallic grace, sexy as hell but nothing crude you could put your finger on. He had a three-day growth when it was the go, a goatee when it was called for, but prefers clean-shaven, it goes with his boyish face even though he's near 35 and feeling it, but not on the outside yet, thank fuck.

Zac's been getting these headaches for five years now. The worst of it is not the degree of pain but the relentlessness of it. He's been to doctors, chiropractors, osteopaths, cranial adjusters and physiotherapists and nothing shows up, and nothing takes the pain away.

There's usually a woman in Zac's bed. He's a classic serial monogamist, ready to move on after a year. He gets busier than normal with work, becomes less and less available. If she doesn't take the hint and get out while the going's good, his shooting eye alights on someone new.

Kate is different to the others and she's lasted longer. Although she's small, she can out-drink, out-fuck, out-argue and out-arm-wrestle him and she stands up to him without an instant's hesitation. In their first hard argument she did three back flips and kicked a hole in the wall. His wall.

For anyone else he would have just changed the locks, but in Kate there was a seesaw of muscle and softness, power and vulnerability, being airborne and falling, that kept him fascinated. She threw herself from the trapeze each night as if the air were a lover's arms and gravity a bad memory and the audiences went wild. But after a miscalculation on the swing broke her wrist and grounded her, their arguments became more frequent and less comprehensible to Zac.

It wasn't until the moment his rib cracked that he got it at last. The moment of the first breath of his second life. The moment when the pain in his head disappeared and his heart broke open like a lobster shell and the soft flesh inside hurt exquisitely, like being bathed for the first time. Like being born.

Holding this pulpy mass inside him like a gift, he took it up the hill to her and stood in the doorway, waiting to tell her where he'd been and how he'd come back and how the old Zac had gone and the new, terribly tender one didn't know how to speak, but only knew he had to find her.

How can it be right then, when the door finally opens that the silhouette on the other side is not Kate, but Madeline, who stares, then steps out past him without a word and walks away? How can it be right that Kate comes across the candlelit room and looks strangely at him, not moving her body to let him come inside? Her eyes look right through him and out into the night sky as if he hardly exists. He reaches to touch her, but she moves her body out of reach, turns away and says, 'It's too late, Zac.' The finality in her voice chills him. She shuts the door.

EMERGENCY

Alone on the step, Zac takes a deep breath, coughs and comes back to earth, feeling the physical pain in his chest. He remembers the sensation of being pierced and it hurts to breathe. He doesn't know if Black Dragon has broken a bone or if his raw heart has expanded to fill his whole chest. The door is shut and something tells him that there are no clever words this time that will entice Kate to open it.

He walks back to the car and drives away from Kate, back towards town. When he passes the harsh light and activity of Byron Hospital just before the town centre, he hesitates, brakes, and turns in, pulling up by Emergency's brightly lit entrance. He levers himself out, wincing. He hasn't quite reached the door when an ambulance swings in off the road and pulls up nearby, its siren dying in a throaty wail.

The rear doors burst open and the activity focuses on a very still young woman being lifted down. As they struggle with the trolley, her head rolls and it seems she's looking at him through half-closed eyes, eyes even darker than Kate's. She's so young! Zac wants to take her hand, reassure her in the midst of the pushing and shoving. The trolley jerks, her head rolls away and they race past, clattering.

Zac follows. There are seven other people crammed into the tiny waiting area of Byron's Emergency section and when a nurse finally appears she looks harassed. He'll need an X-ray, she tells him. It's a busy night. There'll be a long wait before anyone can see him.

'What's wrong with her?' Zac asks, gesturing to the doors where the trolley disappeared.

‘Overdose,’ the nurse says. ‘Can I have your Medicare card?’

Zac reaches into his pocket but finds only the fat wad of cash that he tucked there that morning. He can’t even remember where, on this night, his belongings are. He stands for a moment, considering. ‘I’ll come back in the morning,’ he says, turns and walks out.

He starts Black Dragon’s car. It’s impossible to sit still, impossible to wait on a plastic chair under a fluorescent light for a doctor to see him, and yet he doesn’t know where to go.

He pulls out, drives through the quiet streets of town and turns south, away from the populous bay of Byron, that gentle, harbouring place. He thinks he will return to Black Dragon’s house, but as her street looms up he passes it and continues driving along the road that runs by the long stretch of Tallow Beach, Byron’s rough and exposed southerly twin. He drives beyond houses and lights and leaves the town limits in a daze.

In a flash of headlights at a turn-off he sees a faded sign that seems to say Broken Heart Beach. Zac follows the road down to the deserted headland. He parks the car carelessly, steps into a deep puddle as he gets out, swears, stumbles and finds his way by feel, hitting his feet at every step on the infuriatingly spaced wooden boards on the beach path.

The dark is split by the high flash of the lighthouse beam every fifteen seconds in its relentless rotation. The roar of the surf growls up suddenly as he crests the dune, and the smells of salt and wind and emptiness slap his face. He takes a deep breath, then clutches his injured side and groans, an animal sound that startles a pair of bandicoots nearby and sends

them scurrying into pouncing range of a long-waiting feral cat.

Zac holds himself with both arms, and jump the last few feet where the end of the path has been washed away by spring storms. It hurts, he sobs – the pain rises up like a wild thing, it has him by the throat. He starts towards the line of breaking waves.

His run is more of a stagger, a weaving progress across the sand to the water. He doesn't notice the trail of sparks on the wet sand behind him, phosphorescence kicked up and glowing briefly. He falls to his knees a couple of times, then the last stumble takes him into the water.

A wave breaks and splashes him. A moment of waiting. Will he surrender to the insistent tug of the sea's dark fingers? Or turn around and wade back to the beach?

The next wave breaks and flickers green-blue light. He thinks of Kate, staring past him. What world has he returned to, that this could happen?

WOOLWORTHS

The Woolworths car park in Byron Bay has a sad, seedy air about it at night. The red light on the nightclub in the western corner reflects gloomily on the walls and windows of the surrounding shops. Voices carry a long way in the emptiness. By day you struggle to get a park, in summer it's crammed from nine in the morning. But at night in every season it's lonely and cold.

Dominique had the bad luck to overdose the first time she tried smack. Her boyfriend was persuasive and the others appeared to be having a good time. But

when she passed out they panicked and disappeared, leaving her on the ground with only Sean bending over her. They weren't friends anyway, just a loose affiliation of small-time drug takers that Sean was hanging out with while they stopped off in Byron Bay.

Dom remembers everything that happens, from a vantage point outside her body. She watches the ambulance arrive, the way they get the needle into her vein, the way Sean stands irresolutely at a distance before backing away, turning around and walking off quickly into the darkness.

In fact it's slightly sad, watching her own long, slender limbs lying still, her perfect brown skin marked only by the tiny prick of the needle, her face almost regal, though jostling from side to side as they load her into the ambulance, hurtle the short distance to the hospital and rush her inside, passing a man who is like a bird with a broken wing, brought to ground.

Someone is beside her through all of this, they are watching together. She knows it must be noisy in the scene she watches, but in this place, all is calm.

Her companion asks 'Are you ready to go?' and the voice is like a bird calling in the depths of a forest, so you can hear not only the bird, but in the echo of its call you can hear each tree, each fern, the way the water moves in the creek. Dominique can hear depth in the sound, all of the layers one upon the other, insects, chirping new shoots unfolding, trees expanding, water evaporating and falling as rain.

She looks down and now she can see the man again, wading out into the ocean. The waves seem full of danger and she wants to stop him. They watch as he falls to his knees and by the time the wave washes over

him, she knows without turning her head that her companion is no longer standing beside her.

And then she is in the hard gravity of flesh, retching, someone's hand on her forehead. The noise assaulting her ears is a hideous cacophony of shrill electronic bleeps from the medical equipment. When had she started crying? She tries to push the hand away and sobs and swears at them. When will she ever hear a sound like that forest again?