

PROLOGUE

*5th December*

It's the night of the whales passing Byron Bay, a cold night on the eastern edge with no moon and hot, brilliant stars overhead.

It's a dinner party night in the house of Black Dragon. It's a house of colour, a fancy-dress house, a film-set house with green fake velvet Louis XIV lounges, red couches, carved archways and a long table made from polished palings.

Before the guests arrive Black Dragon carefully wraps a present in gold paper. She writes in the handmade card, seals the envelope, puts the card and present into a carved chest on the floor of her bedroom, and locks it. There is no one to see her hold still for a moment, her face bereft.

Zac arrives late because he's fought bitterly with Kate all the way down the hill, with the heater blowing their heavy words around, fogging the car windows. When they swerve into Black Dragon's driveway Kate says, 'I can't take this anymore. Go to dinner on your own.' She stays in the passenger seat when Zac gets out and slams the door. He turns down the driveway

into the pain of another headache, the throbbing pain that waits for him at every corner.

Outside, through the trees and down the dunes and into the ocean, humpback whales pass in the dark; a small pod returning late from giving birth in northern waters, slowing their pace for a female so old that they sometimes help her surface for air.

On Tallow Beach two women make their way along a winding bush track in the sand dunes. The woman in front carries a paper lantern on a stick and treads the path with knowing feet. The woman behind follows, full of wonder, and puts her hand out to feel the rough bark of the banksias. Hidden behind the banksias, an echidna waits for them to pass, and two bandicoots scuffle the leaves. Hidden further in the dark, a tawny cat that has never known human touch crouches with hungry eyes.

Kate shifts inside the car and rests her head on her plastered arm. When footsteps come crunching back up the gravel, she turns to the window. But it's not Zac. A soft voice says, 'Kate? Are you okay?'

Inside the house of colour, Zac pours wine for the guests and jokes to cover his despair at trying everything and finding nothing to take away the pain in his head. There are lights dancing in his peripheral vision so he can't see the sympathetic smiles of the women there who would like to take him in their arms and soothe the pain away.

Kate says, 'Could you take me back to the hotel?' Madeline gets in and starts the car, which shudders until she finds the right pressure on the clutch pedal. She spins the wheel, spits gravel towards the house and crunches onto the tarmac.

In town, Kooris huddle against the cold in the park at the beachfront and someone gets out a guitar. A drunk passes out in the gutter by the pub. In the Woolworths car park a teenager overdoses and her friends panic. Buskers drum on the arcade corner, to the smell of noodles and laksa and garlic and incense and tobacco and sandalwood oil and the invisible smell of ice-cream in thirty-six cold flavours. Up the road a homebirth goes hard. Fire dancers arc across the park and lorikeets sleep silent in the Norfolk Island pines by the surf.

As Kate and Madeline rise up the hill, the car in front of them hits a boobook owl, which spins off wildly in the wake of hot exhaust. They stop the car and Kate kneels by the heap of crumpled feathers, the anger running out of her as she looks down at the curled up claws, the beak clicking silently, the laboured breathing. She reaches out and picks the owl up awkwardly, and tucking it to her chest, holds it gently for the rest of the drive. When they arrive at the resort cabin she carries the owl inside, lights a candle, settles in a chair and nurses it. Madeline leans on the veranda railing by the front door and lights a clove cigarette.

On the beach, the two women place the lantern on the sand where it glows, a warm sentinel to mark the path home. In the dark they kick their toes where the water has been and phosphorescence shoots out. They walk the edge of the ocean, kicking up glowing footprints, stars above, stars below. One of them says, 'Tell me a story.'

Death is in the air tonight, the night of the whales passing. Death is hungry and wants to take someone: the overdosing teenager or the baby struggling towards birth or the owl or the drunk.

Or Zac, who swallows a mouthful of Black Dragon's fish curry and coughs and finds that the air is all gone from his lungs and no more is coming in. Death has a cold hand around his throat and people who know first aid start to panic; God what a way to die. The colours of the room swim in front of his eyes and the blows on his back are getting further away and there's a feeling of regret and then, far out to sea, the whales surface with a great *whoosh* of breath and Black Dragon comes from behind and grabs Zac hard around the middle. He feels a rib crack as death hits him on the side, angry to be so cheated, and air rushes in like joy as the whales dive deep. After the second breath the pain in his head is gone and the broken rib has pierced through something, into some joyful place he never knew existed, like air coming into his lungs for the first time. The word he finds in his mouth is 'Kate'.

Black Dragon loosens her grip when she feels his breath come in like a river. When she looks at his face, it's like seeing him for the first time.

In the quiet room the owl comes back from the metallic edge of death and turns its head to look at Kate with black and gold eyes before shaking out its wings and launching into startled flight. There is a bump as, still dazed, it flutters through the door, brushes past Madeline, clips the railing, and is gone into the wild bird night, with Kate's heart pinioned like a small soft creature in its claws. Madeline strains her eyes to follow its flight. When she turns around, Kate is weeping.

On the beach, that moment comes when words stop and eyes meet and the two women move together for

that first aching kiss they have both dared to long for, first tentative, then slowly becoming joy.

Zac leaves the dinner party in Black Dragon's car and comes up the hill feeling like a great, wounded bird on soft wings. He knocks on the cabin door and waits. All he can do is breathe her name, Kate, as if it is the only word resonating through his flesh. As if that one word will say everything, when she just opens the door.

Out at the furthest reach of the lighthouse beam, it is the old whale who gives herself up to death. After the last great exhale she sinks, leaving her pod mates as she drifts in long, slow spirals to the ocean floor. Death takes what is his and leaves. The homebirth baby is born at last, the ambulance arrives for the overdose, the drunk wakes up and begins to sing, the dinner party resumes, the bandicoots escape the cat's pounce by a whisker, the owl grips his claws hard into the bark of a camphor laurel, the two women entwine fingers and keep walking. The long deep song of the passing whales fills the bay.