

THEIR FRIENDSHIP WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING

THE LAST BEAR

'UNFORGETTABLE'
Michael Morpurgo



HANNAH GOLD

ILLUSTRATED BY LEVI PINFOLD

THE LAST
BEAR





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HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2021
HarperCollins Children's Books is a division of HarperCollinsPublishers Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollinsPublishers
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

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Cover illustrations copyright © Levi Pinfold 2021
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SIGNED EDITION ISBN 978-0-00-847232-0
HB ISBN 978-0-00-841128-2

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author and illustrator of the work respectively.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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*To my parents, the planet
and polar bears everywhere*



LONGYEARBYEN,
SVALBARD
266 mi

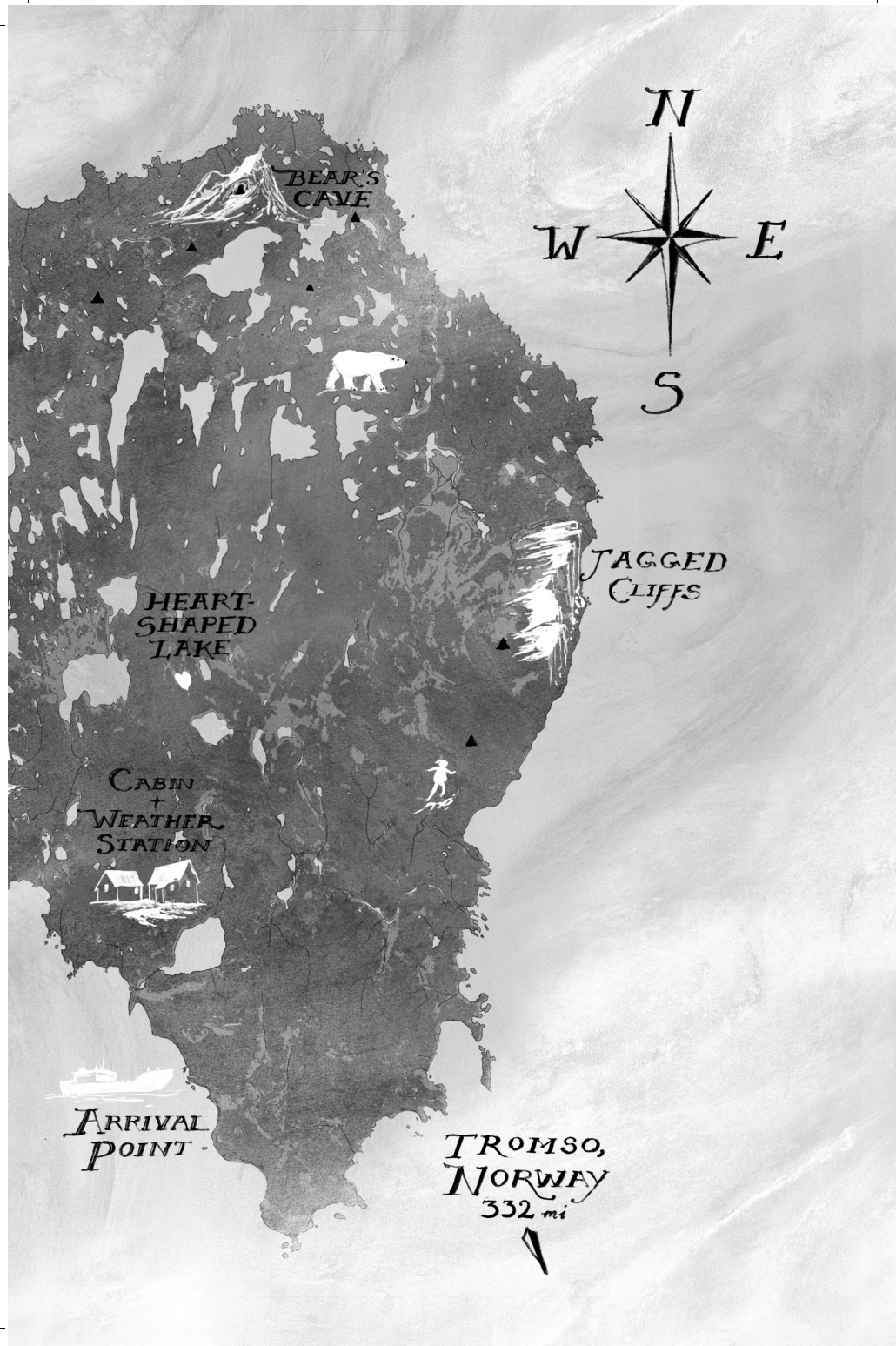
WALRUS
BAY

GIANT
BOULDERS



BEAR
ISLAND





BEAR'S
CAVE



HEART-
SHAPED
LAKE

JAGGED
CLIFFS

CABIN
+
WEATHER
STATION



ARRIVAL
POINT

TROMSO,
NORWAY
332 mi





CHAPTER ONE

The Letter

APRIL WOOD CAME face to face with the polar bear exactly three weeks after she had arrived on Bear Island. But before that, she had to get to Bear Island in the first place, and that journey began approximately four months earlier.

Up until that point, there had been a normality

to April's everyday life, although she was the first to admit it was a rather odd kind of normality. Her father worked as a scientist in a nearby university, where he spent his days researching weather patterns. Like the weather, he came and left the house at the most unpredictable of times – sometimes he'd get home at eleven p.m., or he would leave just when she got home from school. He worked random weekends but would then have three days off in the week. Even then he would shut himself in his study and bury his face in dusty, old books with writing so tiny it made your eyes hurt just to read them. When April brought him a pot of tea or his dinner, he would shake his head, take off his glasses and look at her curiously as if he had completely forgotten he had a daughter. 'Oh,' he would say. 'Thank you . . . April.' Then he would put his head back down, chew the top of his pen and she would gently close the study door behind her.

April was only four when her mother died and whenever she thought of her, it was like thinking of a

lovely summer holiday she'd once been on. Her father hadn't remarried and it showed in the house. It was tall and thin and looked ever so slightly unhappy around the edges, and inside it always felt cold. There was a thin layer of dust coating everything, and a horrible feeling of something missing – a feeling that April never quite knew how to put into words.

And so she spent most of her time in the back garden, where, in the wild, unkempt bramble bush, a family of urban foxes lived. She was fascinated by one in particular, who she called Braveheart, because he seemed bolder than the others and because once he'd *almost* allowed her to feed him some strawberries from her hand. Time spent in the garden whizzed by and was only interrupted by school. April didn't like school, or the girls at the school didn't like her. She didn't know whether it was because she smelled of fox or the fact she was the smallest girl in her class or even that she cut her own hair with a pair of garden scissors. Either way, April didn't mind too much

because she preferred animals to humans anyway. They were just kinder.

Then the letter arrived.

April was eating a bowl of cornflakes cross-legged on the floor whilst on the other side of the living room, her father dangled a piece of toast dripping with marmalade over today's newspaper. It was the end of November, and April raced to the door when the post landed with a thud on to the mat. Maybe it would be a Christmas card from Granny Apples? She not only liked to send her cards early but was also her favourite grandmother because she smelled of warm, sugary pastry and lived next to the sea.

There were no Christmas cards, but there was a big fat envelope marked *OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT BUSINESS* and it was postmarked Norway.

She placed it by her father's toast and he absent-mindedly picked it up to take a bite. When he realised what it was, a funny look passed over his face, as if someone had cast a magic spell into his eyes.



‘What is it?’ she asked him.

‘We’re going to the Arctic Circle,’ he said, reading the letter and blinking fast. ‘I got the job. I didn’t think I would, to be honest – I thought they would choose someone local. But apparently my research paper on the scientific study of the earth’s atmosphere swayed them. It’s a weather station on a small island about a day’s boat journey away from the coast of Norway.’

April hopped up and down before answering. ‘What kind of island? How many people live there?’

‘Ah.’ He looked down sheepishly. ‘It’s not that kind of island. In fact . . . there won’t be anyone there but us.’

‘Just us two?’ Something fizzy rushed through her. ‘On an island all alone?’

He leaned forward in his chair. ‘Think of the adventures we will have. We’ll be like Scott of the Antarctic. The island is nothing like here – it’s got inland lakes, mountains, streams. Imagine it, April. It’s the last great unknown. There’ll be no cars, trains,

planes. No roads even! It's pure, untouched wilderness.'

He didn't need to say anything more because her heart was already racing ahead. Not only would they be in the Arctic Circle, but they would also have all this time together. Just them. They would be able to do so many things – like building snowmen, sledging down mountains and—

'Of course, my work there will be very important,' Dad added with his most serious face and her insides crumpled the tiniest bit.

'What will you be doing?'

'The Norwegian government wants a more accurate representation of how global warming is affecting the Arctic region, so I'll be monitoring the data over a six-month period.'

April knew a lot about melting ice caps and, along with fox hunting, it was one of the things that made her feel both angry and useless at the same time.

'And my school?' she asked.

'April,' he said, leaning forward. 'Six months in the

Arctic will teach you more than six years at school ever will.'

She took a second look at him. His eyes were bright and there were two pink spots of colour on his cheeks. The feeling fizzed through her again.

'When do we go?'

Of course, not everyone was as excited. Granny Apples phoned at least three times a day to tell them how reckless they were being. What about the freezing cold temperatures, the waves as tall as skyscrapers, the killer walruses with sharp tusks she'd seen on one of those David Attenborough documentaries or the dangers of an island where there was no hospital, local GP or even anybody else at all who could help them should they get into danger?

It just wasn't right for a girl of eleven, she said. Especially such a sensitive girl as April, who, thanks to her father, was feral enough already. How could he possibly think going away to a deserted island – and

not even a sunny one at that – was in her best interests?

But Dad was stubborn when he wanted to be and just pretended not to hear.

‘For goodness’ sake, Edmund,’ she bellowed at him in frustration. ‘It’s called Bear Island. What if she gets eaten?’

Although he tried to reassure her that there were no bears on Bear Island, Granny Apples refused to listen.

‘If you see a polar bear, April,’ she said, ‘remember to RUN.’

So it was that on 1 April, they started the first leg of their journey. They were to fly to Oslo, then change planes and head to a small town called Tromsø – and from there take a boat to Bear Island. As the plane took off and turned its nose north, April pressed her face to the window and looked down on her disappearing home.

This was it.

They were heading to the Arctic Circle.