

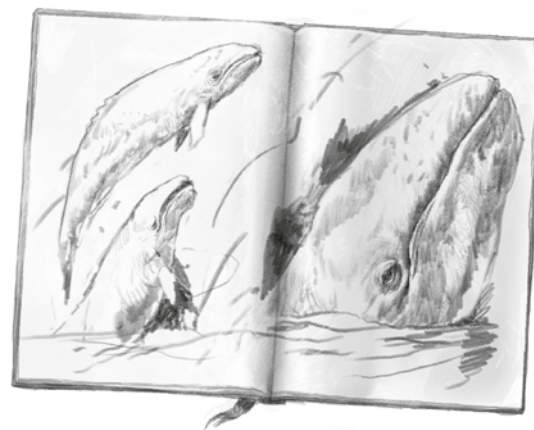
Books by Hannah Gold

THE LAST BEAR

THE LOST WHALE

THE LOST WHALE

HANNAH GOLD



Illustrated by Levi Pinfold



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in the United Kingdom by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2022
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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SIGNED EDITION ISBN 978-0-00-854328-0
HARDBACK ISBN 978-0-00-841294-4

Hannah Gold and Levi Pinfold assert the moral right to be identified as the author and
illustrator of the work respectively.

Typeset in Aldus LT Std 12pt/21pt

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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

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To Chris, my ocean and my world



CHAPTER ONE

Arrival

THE FIRST THING Rio Turner noticed when he stepped into the arrivals hall of Los Angeles International Airport was the noise. Airports were never destined to be quiet places and this gigantic, sprawling monster was like a football stadium in full roar.

The second thing he noticed was his grandmother.

Even though it had been five years since he'd last seen her, Rio noticed her straight away. She towered over everyone in a shiny turquoise jumpsuit, wore thick black-rimmed glasses and had a shock of white, wiry hair.

Gazing around, it took a few moments for her to register him. 'Rio?' she asked. 'It is you, isn't it?' She paused in front of him. 'I barely recognised you. You're so ...'

Her voice tailed off and Rio wondered what she'd been about to say. Either way, he wasn't going to ask. Instead, he crossed his arms protectively against his chest.

'You made it then.' She hurried on, her eyes full of something he didn't recognise. 'I am *so* glad you're here.'

Then she enveloped him in a hug. Not the kind of hug he was used to – deep, warm and snuggly. It was all hard angles and sharp elbows and smelled of peppermints. Rio counted to three before he could bear it no longer. Then he yanked himself away.



‘Rio?’ she asked falteringly, two bright spots of colour on her cheeks. ‘It’s been a long time, and I know all this must seem impossibly strange to you right now, but I want you to feel at home while you’re staying with me. I am your grandmother after all.’

Rio, who had been staring at the floor during the latter part of her speech, looked up in surprise. She had signed Christmas and birthday cards from Grandma, but he couldn’t think of anyone who looked less like a grandmother than her. Not compared to his other grandma anyway, who wore thick, rubber-soled slippers and loved to call him ‘ducky’ even though the last time he’d checked he hadn’t yet grown a beak and feathers. No, this person didn’t feel like a grandmother at all, and he secretly resolved to call her by her first name, Fran, instead.

When he didn’t answer, she rubbed her hands together despite the fact it wasn’t cold. ‘Well, I guess we’d better make a move.’

Refusing her offer to carry his case – he was perfectly

capable of that himself – Rio followed her towards the exit where, in the parking zone, she halted by a 4x4 covered in a thick coating of dust.

He climbed into the passenger seat, pulled his seatbelt across and chewed his lip, trying to ignore the sudden, desperate urge for a wee.

As if sensing his discomfort, Fran turned to face him and seemed about to say something. But again, whatever it was died on her lips. Instead, she just cleared her throat. ‘I’m . . . sorry about your mother.’

Rio felt the sudden hot sting of tears and rubbed his eyes furiously, hoping she hadn’t seen. To avoid any further conversation, he pointedly stared out of the window and, after a brief pause, she switched on the engine with a rough twist of the key, and they were off.

California was the place where Rio’s mother had been born and grew up. She’d left when she was barely twenty, first on a music scholarship to New York and then, upon graduation, as a violinist in the London Philharmonic

Orchestra. In all that time, she'd only been back once, taking Rio with her when he was just a tiny baby.

So long ago, he couldn't remember any of it.

But technically, by virtue of his mother's birth, he was half American. Although it was a very small half because he'd lived in London all eleven-and-a-quarter years of his life and spoke with a decidedly English accent. And so this exotic, faraway world of endless sunshine, tall, fluttering palm trees and golden beaches had always felt like a dream. And in truth, Rio had been looking forward to coming back nearly all his life.

Just not like this.

Opening the car window, he took a deep gulp of the Californian air. Unfortunately, this wasn't the cleverest thing to do on a motorway. Rio coughed and spluttered and felt the smog on his lungs.

This was California? Everything was so *big* here. The cars, the road signs, the buildings – even the sky, looping above their heads in a vast indigo silence. As if the car had been picked up and thrown into a world full

of giants. London was a city, but it didn't feel anything like *this*.

Mum had always said that California was different. That it was peaceful. That its temperament would suit Rio. That . . .

He closed the window with a snap. Then, ignoring his grandmother's attempts at conversation, he shut his eyes and tried to pretend he was still in a universe where his mother hadn't sent him away to the other side of the world to stay with someone he barely even knew.