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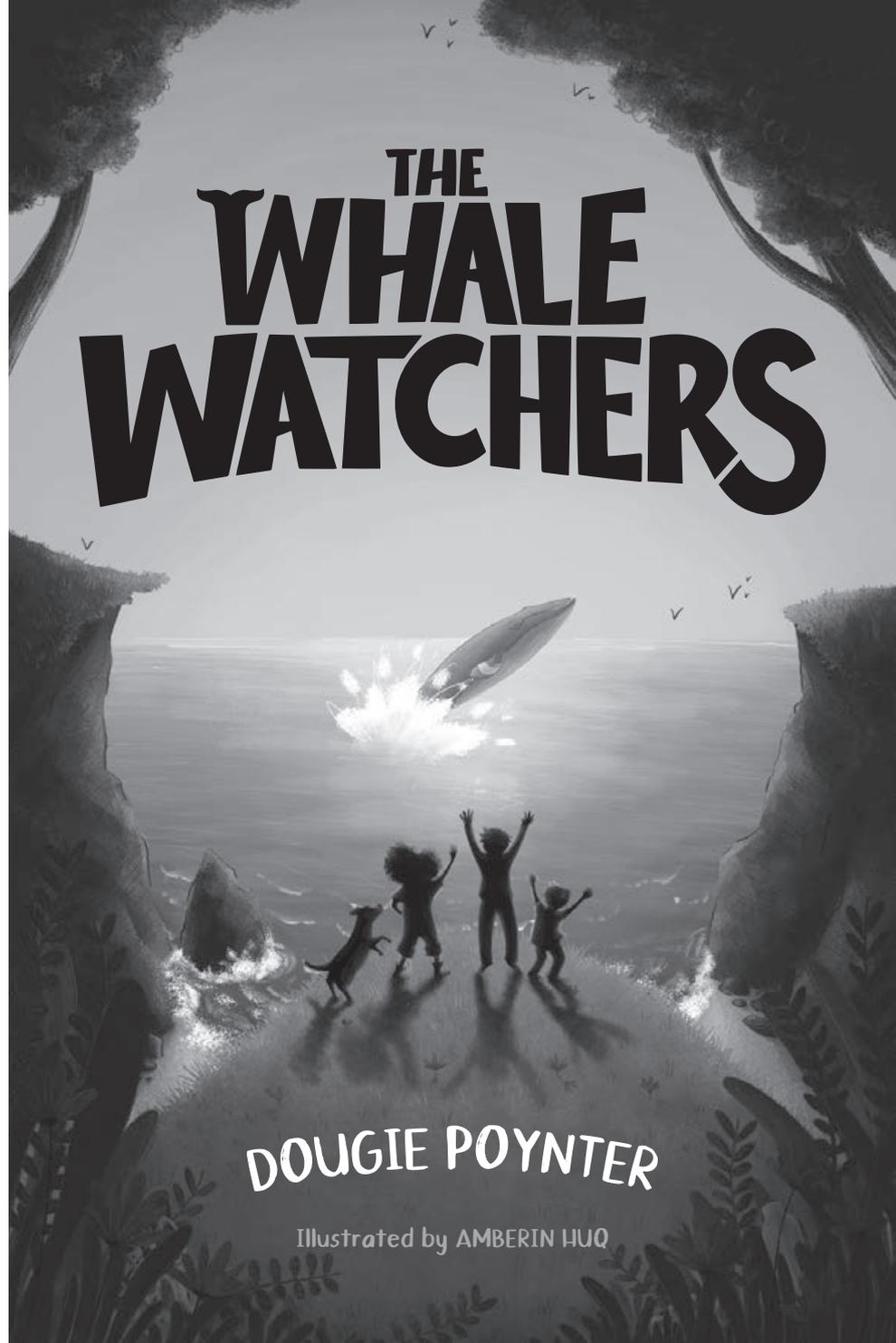
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THE WHALE WATCHERS

DOUGIE POYNTER

Illustrated by AMBERIN HUQ



Rescue Operation

The children and the dog were helped aboard by a **bewildered** Mum and her two colleagues, and the little boat was secured to the big one.

After some hasty introductions and explanations, Finn described what they'd found – **the beached whale, the plastic round its head, the arrow-shaped scar** on its fin.

And though part of Mum was furious with Finn for taking such a risk, this was clearly no time for recriminations. "We'll talk about this later," said Mum, and at her nod, Aisha spun the boat around and they

set off for the little cove.

At the mention of the arrow-shaped scar, Mum's face had looked grim, but not surprised. Finn remembered how quiet and distracted she'd been the other night.

"You knew," he said, working it out, "you'd seen him already."

Mum nodded. "We didn't know it was Arrow, but we'd seen a young whale moving strangely in the water a few days ago. We tried to follow him, but we lost him. We've been looking for him ever since."

"Will the whale be OK?" asked Skye, flicking anxious looks between Finn and his mum. Now they'd got over the adrenaline of the boat ride, **a fear as thick as the fog** was settling around them.



“I’m afraid there’s no way of knowing yet,” said Mum. “But we’ll do everything we can for him, I promise.”

The knot in Finn’s stomach **tensed and twisted** as they rounded the bend on the other side of the cliffs and turned in towards the half-moon bay. A heavy silence fell over the boat as they saw the whale. It was now completely out of the water.



News travels fast in a small community and since they’d left, a little crowd of locals had gathered on the sand.

“Oh no,” said Skye, spotting her dad among them. “I’m for it, now ...”

But as the big boat’s engine was turned off and the children were rowed ashore in the dinghy, along with equipment from the rescue boat, it was clear that no one was

in trouble.

Skye’s dad hugged her to him fiercely. “Don’t scare me like that again!” he said, and he led the children away to where the locals were waiting with thermos flasks of hot drinks and packets of biscuits. But Skye and Finn couldn’t settle, and passing Rain’s lead to Jesse, they soon gravitated back to the water’s edge to watch as the team from the rescue boat got to work.

First, **ever so carefully**, they removed the plastic from Arrow’s mouth.

Next, using buckets from the rescue boat, they poured seawater over his skin, to keep him cool and wet, as whales like to be, taking care to avoid his blowhole.

Then came the tricky bit. An inflatable raft had to be fed beneath the whale’s

middle, then inflated, to help the whale to keep himself upright and support his **huge** weight. The raft was then attached to the rescue boat with a long rope.

The whole time, the team talked quietly to the whale in soft and soothing tones, trying to let him know that they were there to help, that they wouldn't hurt him.

Skye and Finn hovered anxiously nearby. "Will you tow him out on the raft?" Skye asked Mum as she walked towards them.

Mum shook her head. "He's too heavy," she explained. "There's nothing we can do until the tide comes back in. Once he's afloat again, we'll see what we can do. In the meantime, we just have to keep him comfortable, and **wait**, and hope he'll be strong enough to swim away when the time comes."



She gave Skye and Finn a smile and put a hand on each of their shoulders. "It won't be long now. Go and get a mug of cocoa and a biscuit – you've done all you can."

Finn and Skye nodded and reluctantly dropped back. As they walked away, Skye shook her head and said, "Wow, your mum is amazing." Her voice was full of awe, and for the first time, Finn realised it was true. "Yeah, I know," he said, and he felt his chest swell with pride.

They went over to where Jesse was sitting, snuggled into Rain's shaggy brown coat.

"Don't worry," Jesse was saying to Rain as he fed her biscuits, "everything will be all right, OK?"

Finn and Skye shared a smile as they sat either side of him, Finn's hand on

Jesse's head, Skye's fingers knotted into Rain's fur.



And like that they **waited**, and they **watched**, as slowly, surely the tide began to creep back up the beach.

It wasn't long before the whale was afloat once more.

The crowd **cheered** as at last they saw Arrow lift off the sand, but Mum turned to them and in a loud whisper asked them **to please be quiet**.

"This whale has been through a huge ordeal," she explained. "If he's too scared or too weak he may not be able to swim away ..."

So as the rescue boat gently towed the raft and the now floating whale out into deeper water, and as the raft was deflated

from around the whale and the boat
moved **slowly, quietly away** from
it, the crowd waited in hushed silence,
barely daring to breathe.