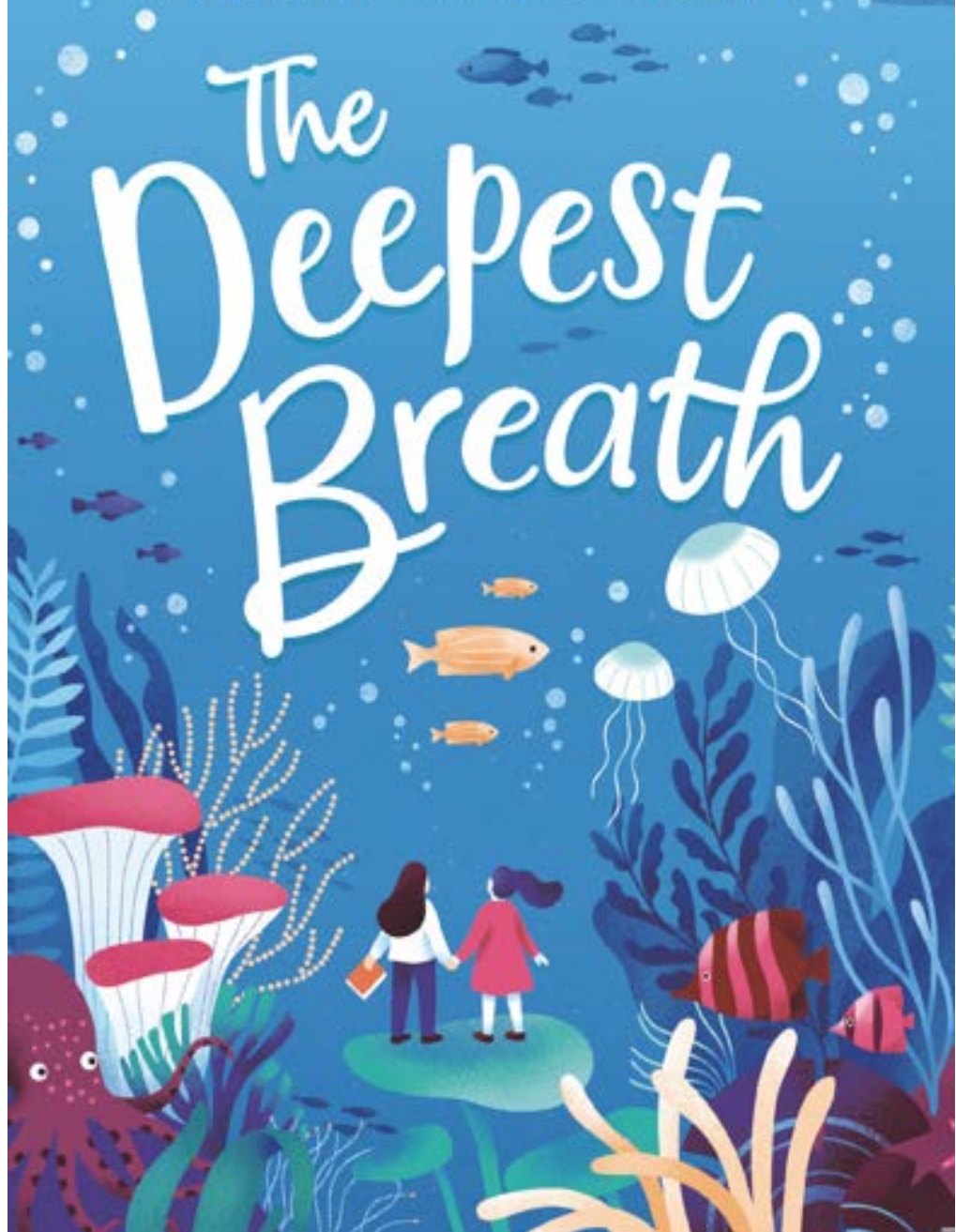


MEG GREHAN

SHORTLISTED FOR THE
WATERSTONES CHILDREN'S BOOK PRIZE

The Deepest Breath



the
Deepest
Breath
MEG GREHAN



Little
Island

THE DEEPEST BREATH

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*For Dylan
For always making everything
A little less scary*



I know a lot of things
About a lot of things
But the thing I know the most about
Is me
Stevie

I know that I am eleven years and two months old
And that my hair is brown
And my eyes are green
And I'm allergic to peanuts

I know I have a mum
Whose room is right next to mine
And that sometimes we tap and scratch on the wall at night
Morse code is good for scaring nightmares away
I know that

I know I have a dad
And I know that he lives far away
And I know that's not my fault
And I know that that's
OK

I know that I have a funny name
Because the doctors said my mum was going to have a
 baby boy
But then I popped out
A slimy wriggly baby girl
And she liked the name too much by then
So Stevie it was
And Stevie I am

I know I like the colour purple
And things that sparkle
And science and books
And cats and stars and space

I know that I broke my pinkie finger once
And that now
It sticks out funny

I know I'm afraid of zombies and clowns
And not much else
I know I can be brave
But that sometimes it's hard

I know a lot
About me

There's only one thing
In the whole of me
That I don't know

It's something funny
It's in my chest
And sometimes my tummy
And always my head
It's a fizzy feeling
Warm and squishy
And it makes me blush
And it only happens
When I look at my friend
Chloe

And I don't know what it is
Exactly



At school I share a desk
With Chloe
And Andrew
And Robert
Us girls on one side
And the boys on the other

Robert likes football
And is really good at maths
Way better than me
And he's nice
Though we don't talk much
Mostly he talks to Andrew

Andrew has been my friend
Ever since we were babies
And even though we didn't choose to be friends
I'm glad we are
Though we don't talk at school too much
Because I read a lot
And he likes to listen to Robert
Talk about football
Way more than I thought anyone could

Chloe paints her nails
A new colour
Every week

On Mondays they are sleek and shiny and new
And on Fridays
They are all
Chipped
And bitten
And you have to look
Really close
To see what colour they were

But I always know what colour they were

I know last week they were pink
And the week before they were yellow
And the week before that they were orange
With tiny black bats on her pinky nails
For Halloween

Chloe bites her nails
And the last of her nail polish
(Green this week, with sparkles)
Falls like radioactive snow onto our desk

I wipe some off my book
And try to concentrate

We're learning about
Whales
Whales scare me a little
Because they're so big
That I must be
So small
But still
I try to concentrate
And I write down
The most interesting things
In my notebook

My notebook
Is gigantic
It has five hundred pages
And a yellow cover
And a ribbon
For keeping your place

I've only used 124 pages
So far

But I will use them all
I'll fill them up
And when every page
Is full of words

I'll know
Just about
Everything
There is
To know

After school my Auntie Judith picks me up
Because Mum is still at work
And it's way too cold to walk
Although honestly
I think I could handle it
Because I've read about explorers
Who've survived way worse
And it isn't even snowing

But mum says I'll catch my death
Which sounds
Dramatic
And scary

So I buckle myself into Auntie Judith's car
And I listen as she tells me about
'The absolute rubbish the boss came out with today'

At dinner I tell Mum about whales

'And then there's the bowhead whale
And no one really knows how long they live
But once
Scientists found one
With a weapon from 1879
Eighteen-seventy-nine!
Embedded in it
And that means
That it might've been
More than one hundred years old!
A hundred!
And once
They examined a bowhead whale's eyes
And the amino acid inside them
Means that one of them
Might've lived to 211
Two hundred and eleven!'

And she gasps
And I feel smart
And interesting
And good good good
Except for deep inside

Where I feel
A squirming kind of
Fear

I have a nightmare that night
The first in three years
And seven months

I dream about the sea
Deep down
Where it isn't really blue
But black
Like bruises or ink or midnight
Where you can't tell up from down
Or right or from left
Where there's nowhere to go

I wake and I'm still under water
And for a second
I hold my breath
Even though it hurts
Even though it feels like there's gallons and gallons and
gallons of water
Pressing down on my chest

Pinning me to my bed
I fling my arm out
Searching for the switch
To turn
My lamp
On to fill
The room
With light and then
When it's on
When the room
Is orange
And warm
I can breathe
And the water is gone

I sit up in bed for the rest of the night
And read a book
I run my fingers across every page
Under every line
Every word
I make myself focus
On the paper
On how
Dry it is
And that
Makes me feel
Safe

I don't like my room to be
Messy
But I think it likes to be
Just a little
Because it always is

I think it must do it
All by itself
Maybe while I'm asleep
Or at school
Or reading
Or whenever I look away
For just a minute

Because my clothes are always
On the floor
And I swear
I didn't put them there
On purpose

And because my teddies
Don't like to stay on my bed
In their neat line
When they have places to be
And important business to discuss

And because books never seem to make it
Back to their shelves at night
They have sleepovers under my bed

And holidays on my desk
And naps under my pillow

But I think
That's OK
Because maybe
When I sleep
They'll whisper to me
And maybe
When I wake up
Everything might make
Just a little
More sense

By the time the sun comes up
I've decided
I won't tell Mum about the nightmare
I've decided
I don't want to worry her

My mum worries a lot
About a lot of things
I don't think she knows that I know
But I see it
I see how she picks at her nail beds
And looks all around her
When a what-if pops into her head

And I
Definitely
Don't want to be a
What-if