Praise for *Best of All Worlds*:

'A masterpiece – as soon as you finish, you'll want to talk to someone about it' David Levithan

'Master of atmosphere' *The Bookseller*

'Kenneth Oppel's most thrilling novel to date is challenging, provocative and unforgettable' LoveReading

'Captivating, rich, vivid, and evocative. I loved it' Josh Silver, author of *HappyHead* and *Dead Happy*

'Fast-paced, thought-provoking, twisty – the most unexpected book plot of the year and I am here for it!' Melissa Welliver, author of *My Love Life and the Apocalypse*

'Completely gripping and immersive, *Best of All Worlds* is a viscerally powerful and irresistible read. An absolute must read!' Louisa Reid, author of *Handle with Care*

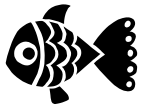
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'Oppel (*Ghostlight*) centres a persistent and intelligent protagonist in this unassuming but riveting novel. Compact yet brimming with tense atmosphere, it's a sharp examination of society and isolation' *Publishers Weekly* starred review

BEST OF ALL WORLDS

KENNETH OPPEL



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FOR MY FAMILY

We made a grave marker, even though there was no body to bury.

We'd waited a long time before doing it. Despite what I'd seen, what I'd told everyone, it was hard for some people to stop hoping. They said, *Maybe you were mistaken; maybe it was just an illusion.* They said, *Maybe he's still alive, figuring out how to get back to us.*

But eventually, after a couple months, everyone agreed there was no point putting it off. When we finally placed the marker, I wasn't sure anyone had changed their mind about anything, but you could tell people felt it was necessary. It was an acknowledgment that things had changed.

Everyone said goodbye in their own way. There was crying, halting farewells, prayers. Any words I had stayed in my head. They'd told me over and over that it wasn't my fault, and I'd nodded and said, *Yeah, I know*, but I didn't believe it. I'd been there when it happened. I kept imagining how I might've done things differently that day. Bolder action, more persuasive words. Anything to stop him from dying.

And as I stood there at the grave, I thought of other people who were lost to me. My mother. Sam. My mind tumbled backward down the endless road of if-onlys. You could waste a lot of time wishing things had been otherwise. Maybe that had been part of the problem from the outset. Striving for things that were impossible.

But down that terrible potholed road I hurtled. All the way back to those very first days, when we arrived over three years ago.

1

I snatched up my phone as soon as I woke, suddenly knowing how to get inside the castle. We'd been wasting our time trying to cross the moat, hopping on alligators' backs or crawling underwater with breathing tubes. We'd been bitten, pierced with arrows, and doused with boiling oil. Throcknor actually drowned because his plate armor (he was so proud of it) was incredibly heavy, and we had to use up a resurrection spell to bring him back.

What we needed to do was slog back to the village, break the Grygax out of its cage, feed it a goat so it liked us, and then I would straddle its mangy back and get it to *fly* me over the castle wall. Once inside, I'd open the gate, drop the bridge for the others, and we'd storm the keep. This would work.

I needed to run this by the other players. Really it was Serena's opinion I wanted. Our D&D camp was opposed to dungeoneer groups having "leaders" because that was too hierarchical. But Serena was a natural leader, and was very good at getting the other players to make decisions that were usually her decisions.

Right away Serena and I had seen eye to eye. Less debating, more playing. We also agreed that the camp's athletic activities were cruel and unusual punishment. The counselors made us play capture the flag, do things with Hula-Hoops, and sometimes even run laps. Serena and I would fall behind and talk. She liked e-gaming but, just like me, she loved the old-school RPGs best: just you and the graph paper and your imagined character, burning with purpose.

I was glad she didn't go to my school and know how deeply uncool I was. All she knew about me when we first met was that I usually played a seventh-level thief with an invisibility cloak.

I was pretty sure Serena would be all over my Grygax idea, but when I tried to open our dungeoneer group chat, my phone said there was no connection.

"Oh, come on . . ."

I wondered if Nia had switched off the router after we'd arrived last night. She and Dad had left their laptops in the city, and she'd been talking about how wonderful it would be if we didn't have *any* Wi-Fi because it was so important to "decompress." We would do this, she said, by swimming and canoeing and reading and talking together the whole weekend. Which was absurd, especially when I had a castle to plunder. Why did Dad's new wife even get a say about the internet?

I slipped out of bed to go check the router. I glanced at the top bunk where Sam usually slept. He'd stayed behind in the city for a soccer match. Cottage weekends were never as much fun without him. I really hadn't wanted to come. It was the second heat dome of the summer, and yesterday it had been ninety degrees. The cottage didn't have AC. When we'd walked in last night, it was like a sauna. We'd opened all the windows and set the fans going.

Nia was against us getting AC because we'd just be making the climate emergency worse. We'd have to learn to live with the extreme weather that all us greedy humans had created. She'd eaten a banana, taken a cool shower, and gone to bed with a fan blasting right on her. I'd done the same (without eating a banana) and it actually worked really well. I had to hand it to Nia—she ran a great apocalypse.

When I went out into the hall, it was so much cooler than last night, but it smelled weird. The cottage was often musty when you first opened it up, but this morning it had a faint chemical smell, like new carpet. I hadn't noticed any new carpet.

Dad and Nia's door was still closed. I was usually the first one up on weekends,

especially lately. Nia had been having trouble sleeping because her stomach was so big with the baby. She usually slept in. Dad, too.

The router was way at the back of the weird little closet beside the bathroom. Its lights were flickering, which was good, but one was red, which was bad. I unplugged it, counted to ten, then plugged it back in.

In the family room, I dropped into my favorite green chair and checked my music while waiting for the router to reboot. Smiling, I scrolled through the new songs Sam had dumped onto my phone yesterday. He was my music guru. He didn't know just the latest music but also cool bands I'd never heard of, going as far back as the '80s. He knew all the side projects and solo efforts, the best producers and session drummers. We'd listen to songs together and he'd peel back the layers and identify every single instrument in the mix. Yesterday, when assessing my playlist, he'd shaken his head sadly and said, "Little bro, you badly need some new sounds." I now had an album called *Brotherhood* and another called *Is This It* and a bunch of assorted songs to help get me through the weekend.

A goat bleated, and it took me a few seconds to realize this was not a normal cottage sound. For the first time that morning, I looked out the window, and the lake was . . . gone. Instead of a lawn sloping gently to the dock, there was a red barn and a fenced pasture. Inside the pasture was a shelter with an open front, and beside it stood a brown-and-white goat.

I stood. To the right of the pasture were rows of green plants. Farther off was a cornfield. My brain was already telling me a story, reasonably explaining how this must have been done overnight: building the barn, planting the crops, draining an entire lake. Or maybe it had dried up overnight from the heat dome. Wasn't stuff like that happening all over the world now? I stopped myself. No. It wasn't just a change. It was *completely* different.

I usually avoided going into Dad's bedroom now that it was also Nia's bedroom, but this was important. The two of them were still asleep. Dad had on one of his weird nose strips that Nia made him wear because he snored.

"Dad. Dad!"

He lifted his head from the pillow. "What's wrong?"

"Outside is all different. The cottage—it's moved."

His head dropped back onto the pillow. "Xavier."

"I'm not joking. We're on a farm. There's a *goat*."

Helpfully, the sound of bleating came through their curtained window.

"That's definitely a goat," Nia said, stirring.

"Just come look!"

Nia raised herself onto her elbows and affectionately rubbed her humped belly. With a grunt, Dad levered himself into sitting and followed me down the hall in his boxers and a McGill T-shirt.

"Must've gotten loose," Dad said, yawning. "Didn't the people down the road get a . . ."

At the window he stopped talking. There were now two goats in the pasture. From Dad's lips slid a word that sounded like "faaaaawk." He walked to the kitchen, whose windows looked out front. Our car wasn't in the driveway. There was no driveway at all, no road connecting us to the other houses built around the lake. Instead there were more fields of crops, a small orchard, and a big blue sky over all of it.

Nia was laughing in the family room, and I felt hopeful. It was all a joke, and now they'd explain it to me. When Dad and I joined her by the big windows, the view was unchanged.

"Why're you laughing?" Dad asked her.

"I just can't take it seriously." She stood there in her mauve maternity yoga gear, shaking her head as she took in the view. "Everything I can think of is insane. Unless I'm still asleep."

"We're not asleep," Dad assured her.

"Maybe it's just video screens," I said. "Pushed up against all the windows?"

Dad looked at me, bewildered. "Why would anyone do that?"

"I don't know! Why would anyone move our lake?"

"You can't just move a lake," said Nia.

"Can't just move a house either," Dad said.

"You can," I told him. "There's this video where people moved a three-story house on a flatbed trailer."

"Not with people sleeping inside. It'd be a huge job—and noisy, especially in the middle of the night. Ripping a cottage off its foundations?" Something occurred to him and he returned to the kitchen and turned on the tap. Water gushed out. "And we wouldn't have plumbing. Or electricity." He flipped a switch and the lights came on. He looked out where the driveway used to be. "How would you get a flatbed trailer in here without a road? I'm not even seeing tire tracks."

"Does it smell weird to you?" I asked.

"I'm getting my phone," Nia said impatiently, marching to the bedroom.

"How do we even have electricity?" I asked Dad, pointing out the window. It wasn't just the road that was gone; there wasn't a power pole in sight.

When Nia returned, she was holding her phone as well as Dad's, and shaking her head. "No service."

Outside in the pasture, both goats were still bleating.

"Where the hell are we?" said Nia angrily, like Dad or I was responsible.

I opened the map app on my phone. Instead of the familiar outlines of the township, it was just a blank grid. That wasn't so unusual when you didn't have data. What *was* unusual was that there was no blue GPS dot.

"We're not anywhere," I said, showing the phone to Dad.

I'd grown up with blue dots: *You are here. Behold, the blue dot travels with you wherever you go. You will never be lost or alone.* My chest felt smaller suddenly. I forced in a breath.

Nia checked on her own phone. "This is unbelievable."

She reached for the latch on the sliding door, but my father caught her hand.

"Wait."

I felt it now, too: a first jab of fear. Whatever was out there—a farm or a bunch of video screens—was unquestionably weird.

"Let's just take a moment." Dad sat down on the beige sofa that Nia had bought last summer. She'd said the old red one was threadbare and smelled bad, and she was right, but I'd still resented her changing the furniture.

My father stared out the window. Last year my class had visited St. Claire Farm and there'd been old machinery rusting all over the place, busted fences and snarled wire. This barn looked like it had just been painted a cheery red. One side of it was covered with a flowering vine. It looked like a picture book illustration.

"I'm not sure charging out there is the best idea," Dad said.

"It doesn't look dangerous," I ventured.

I was freaked out, too, but I wanted to find out what was going on, and where we were.

"You just want to stay in here?" Nia asked him.

"Someone might come," he said vaguely. "And explain."

I said, "Like knock on our door and say it's all been a big mistake and they'll give us back our lake next week?"

Dad chuckled. "Something like that."

I pictured a rumpled man in a suit, holding a briefcase. *Mr. Oak? I'm frightfully sorry*, he'd say in an English accent. (He would definitely have an English accent.) *This is all a terrible misunderstanding. Complete cock-up at HQ.* It made me smile. I needed a smile right now.

"Why wait?" Nia said. "There might be someone outside who can help us."

Dad stood. "Okay. Let me get my jeans on." Whatever was going to happen next, he figured it would be better with pants. I went to my room and pulled on yesterday's clothes. Then I texted Sam.

i think we've been kidnapped??

When I hit send, it said *Not delivered*.

we're on a farm somewhere

(Not delivered.)

our whole cottage has been moved to a farm

(Not delivered.)

Back in the family room, Dad was dressed and holding the just-in-case crowbar. I'd known he kept it under the bed, but I'd never seen him actually hold it. My father was not a crowbar kind of guy, although Mom always said he was very persuasive in a boardroom.

"We ready?" Dad said, reaching for the latch.

The serious way he said it made me wonder, *Am I sure?* I was a little scared, but more than that, I was shot through with the feeling that once that door opened and we passed through it, things would never be the same.

"Ready," I said.