OUR ONE GREAT THING

KINDRED SPIRITS

BOOK ONE

WILL EVERETT

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ONE

The first thing you need to know: it's awesome here.

I mean, you've had that dream where you can fly, right? It's like that, only better. Not only can you jump from place to place, but you can rewind or fast-forward in time. Seriously, it's insane.

I remember when Sean and I saw the movie *Chronicle*. There's this scene where the kids realize they have superpowers. It's kind of like that here. And, wow, it rocks. I'm not saying you should rush over or anything. Take your time. Enjoy your mortal body.

Because here's the other thing: it doesn't last forever. When you wake up into your spirit consciousness, you have a mission, a job to do. And you only have so long before you are taken back into that realm of energy from which we all come. I can't tell you *how* long because I don't know yet myself.

But make no mistake: the laws of physics apply. You've only got so much energy to work with. It's like propellant in a rocket. Use it up too soon and the rocket comes crashing back down to earth. When that energy is gone, it's gone.

I'm Taylor, by the way, Sean's brother. I went the way most teenagers go when they die early—car crash, drunk driver. There was darkness, then light. And now I'm here.

And I've got a job to do. My bro needs me. So let's get busy.

Fly with me to the two-story house in the small Texas town of Mount Sentinel where the Heyerdahl family carries on without me. Imagine it's a dollhouse and we can raise the roof and see everyone in their rooms getting ready for another day.

Mom is in the kitchen pouring coffee. She's dressed in overalls, ready for another day at the plant nursery where she's been employed since Dad lost his job. Her phone pings with a good-morning text from Luke, her boss, who may have a tiny crush on her. She's no dummy, our mother. She knows he has more on his mind than root stimulator.

Dad is in bed, waking to another day with many hours that must be filled. Last year he lost his job as a petroleum engineer. Thomas Heyerdahl has a dangerous new hobby that no one in the family knows about—no one but me, and I'm a little concerned. Well, more than a little. But we'll come to that later.

My sister Madison wakes with a theatrical stretch of the arms, eager to greet the day. She reaches for her phone to catch up on the night's messages. She checks Insta, then TikTok, then the Facebook page for her church youth group. She sits up and brushes her long golden hair with a brush bigger than her hand.

And then there's Sean, my sixteen-year-old brother. See him shooting out of bed, realizing that he forgot to set an alarm and has only five minutes to get ready for work. He plucks a T-shirt from a pile of rumpled clothes that our mother

told him to fold and put away three days ago. He jumps into yesterday's jeans, shoving his phone in his back pocket. Blake, his supervisor, is in the driveway leaning on his horn.

Downstairs, Sean races through the kitchen looking for something to eat. Susanna looks up from her phone, noticing the things moms notice: how much taller he's getting, how his bangs are getting too long, and why don't kids tuck in their shirts anymore? She wants to say something, but the horn sounds again and Sean is a spinning blur. On his way out, cradling a banana, a container of yogurt and a few slices of baloney, he kisses her on the crown of her head. As much as he might be changing, he's still her boy.

He climbs into the van, ignoring a heavy sigh from potbellied Blake, who shakes his watch out of his sleeve. Sean's been working at Bluewater Pools for six months, cleaning pools on weekends. He rolls down his window before the chlorine and muriatic acid and cigarette smoke give him a headache. He can't help smiling, though. My brother has much to be excited about today.

He looks at Blake's clipboard and asks casually where they're going, but he already knows. He starts paging through the job orders: Emerson, Bledsoe, Hawkins, Sudbury, Tompkins . . . then Darya, a name that sends a tingling warmth through his entire body. Just five letters, D-a-r-y-a, but they are like a magical incantation ever since the marching band trip a week ago.

— We've got a busy day, Blake says, lighting a cigarette and rolling down his window. You ready to sweat?

— You know it.

Sean will work all day in the sun, pushing a vacuum and emptying skimmer baskets, while Blake, for the most part, sits in the shade doing stuff on his phone. But Sean doesn't mind.

Especially not today.

Here's another thing I should tell you.

We know things. We see and observe. But we don't judge. Facts are noted, nothing more.

And it's weird. If you had told me when I was alive that my brother liked another boy, I would have freaked out. I would have called it a phase, or worse. It would have grossed me out. I'm sorry, but I was that kind of guy.

When you leave your earthly body, you move into a realm where love is the only emotion left to you. It's hard to remember shame, disgust, or the other earthly emotions. All gone now. And maybe that's the best part about this whole post-physical existence. Everything is so much clearer and simpler when viewed through the lens of love.

Again, we don't judge. Social conventions fade away like mist on a windowpane, leaving only a shimmering clarity. There is no religion here, just energy. Just love.

What they say about love is true. It's all you need.

The boy's name is Aabdar Darya. Even in his home country of Afghanistan it's an unusual name. Aabdar in Arabic means bright, like glass. But he doesn't speak Arabic, as he's quick to point out. He's Afghan. Proudly so.

Let's lift the roof on that much larger dollhouse where Aabdar and his family live. It's on the other side of the tracks, you might say—the *better* side. Once upon a time, this was all ranch land. Now it's a golf course. The huge house where the Darya family resides is just off the seventeenth hole.

Aabdar is still asleep, because like any sixteen-year-old boy he only gets up when he absolutely has to, and it's a Saturday.

Unlike Sean, whose walls are festooned with band posters (mostly shoegaze bands like Slowdive and Ride but also some Radiohead and Blink-182), Aabdar's walls are bare. His father doesn't allow it. But Aabdar doesn't mind. He has learned to draw a curtain over the things he cares about—to keep himself to himself. He's not a dumb kid.

His father, Mohammad Darya, sits in the cramped office of his convenience store counting yesterday's credit card receipts. He has a full beard dyed an unnaturally dark black and a plump belly that in Afghanistan marked him as a man of affluence and power. He hopes to one day own six convenience stores like his cousin Hamdar in Virginia. But the way things are going, with taxes and the exorbitant wages he must pay his workers—none of which was properly explained to him when he brought his family here four years ago—this is not likely to happen anytime soon.

Back at the house, Aabdar's mother, Humaira, is washing her hands and feet and face and ears, blowing water out of her nostrils so that she's fit to offer the *fajr*, the first prayer of the day. She has an app on her phone to nudge her when it's time to pray and another app that points her in the direction of Mecca. She's a quiet, gentle woman whose beauty draws enough attention that her husband prefers to keep her at home. She's much younger than Mohammad—a child of the nineties. Soon she will meet Sean and laugh at all the music they have in common. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I don't want to make too much out of the cultural differences that separate the Darya family from my own. True, they are asylum seekers who fled their home country during the return of the Taliban. Their values are a bit more stringent than those of their adopted community. They are more devout, they care about what people think of them, they want to fit in while remaining true to what makes them different.

But that's not what this is about. This is about two boys, my brother Sean and his friend Aabdar. Let the rest fade into picturesque wallpaper. Their families mean everything to them, but they are at an age where their own wants and desires are starting to push everything else to the side.

And what they want is each other. If only they knew what to do about it.