

AS YOU WISH

CHELSEA SEDOTI



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Published by Sourcebooks Fire, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
Fax: (630) 961-2168
www.sourcebooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sedoti, Chelsea, author.

Title: As you wish / Chelsea Sedoti.

Description: Naperville, IL : Sourcebooks Fire, [2018] | Summary: In Madison, a small town in the Mojave Desert, everyone gets one wish that will come true on his or her eighteenth birthday, and Eldon takes his very seriously.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017008282 | (13 : alk. paper)

Subjects: | CYAC: Wishes--Fiction. | Magic--Fiction. | Friendship--Fiction. | Family life--Nevada--Fiction. | Nevada--Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S3385 As 2018 | DDC [Fic]--dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017008282>

Printed and bound in [Country of Origin—confirm when printer is selected].

XX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**FOR MY MOM, WHO GAVE ME
ENOUGH OPPORTUNITIES THAT
I NEVER NEEDED WISHES.**

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO MADISON

The trick is to be boring.

No one likes being bored, yeah? If a place is boring, you're not gonna stick around. You're not gonna ask any questions.

That's the way we like it.

It doesn't take much effort, because Madison looks totally ordinary. Just another dusty, desert town on Nevada State Route 375, the fastest way to get from nowhere to nothing. The kind of place you wanna leave as quick as you can.

The thing is, Madison isn't ordinary.

The couple in the car doesn't realize that. They're freaking clueless, and part of my job is keeping them that way. The other part is pumping gas.

After I get the nozzle into the tank and press the right buttons, I wander to the driver's side window and check them out.

The woman in the passenger seat won't be a problem. She has a blank look on her face. I see that expression all the time. Road

trip daze. There's too much sameness in the desert, and after a while, it overwhelms you.

The driver, well, he's another story. He's studying a map, an actual paper map. Who even uses those anymore? Especially out here, in the middle of the Mojave, where there's only one road to get you wherever you're going. He's gazing at the map as if it's going to tell him the meaning of life and he already knows he won't like what he hears.

The guy rubbed me the wrong way from the start. When they first pulled up to the gas pump, he called me *son*. It's one of my pet peeves. I don't go around calling random dudes *dad*.

"Full service gas stations are rare these days," the guy says now, barely glancing up from the map.

Maybe he's trying to be nice, make casual conversation. If so, he failed. He's got this superior tone, like Madison is some backwoods town and I offered to cook up roadkill for dinner.

"We're old-fashioned around here," I reply with a smile. And it's a goddamn charming smile. I know it is. That's why I was hired in the first place.

The guy isn't charmed though. He keeps studying his map while I grin at nothing, feeling like the biggest jackass in the world.

I'd be straight with him if I could. Be like, "Dude, I know you'd rather pump your own gas, and believe me, I'd be happy to let you. But this is my *job*, so let's get through this without being dicks to each other." That's not how this works though.

Nope, Rule #1 of working at the gas station is *avoid honesty at all costs*. That's also Rule #2 and Rule #3.

So I pump the couple's gas, smile a lot, and try to make pleasant conversation. Hope my blond hair and blue eyes and straight teeth convince them I'm some harmless all-American kid, someone they can *trust*. The goal is to keep their attention on me so they don't look around and suspect that Madison is more than just a quiet, desert town.

For the record, my job sucks.

"This heat is a nightmare," the guy mutters.

I almost laugh. It's still spring, still hovering around ninety-five degrees. This guy doesn't have a clue about heat.

"You must not be from around here," I say, keeping my tone light, pleasant.

"No, thank God."

Original suspicion confirmed: this dude is a prick.

I clench my jaw. Then I glance at the gas pump behind me, as if that's gonna speed up the progress. The tank is probably only half-full. I bet the guy in the car would call it half-empty.

"Where you headed?" I ask.

He still doesn't look up from the map. His words are clipped. "My wife wants to see a UFO."

The woman turns from the window and frowns at her husband. I feel bad for her. I'm guessing he isn't exactly a joy to live with.

“You’re going to Rachel,” I say. “Keep on this road, and you won’t miss it.”

The guy still doesn’t put away his map.

Unless these two decide to do a little off-roading in their compact sedan, they aren’t going to get lost. The map is about as pointless as a parka out here. I’m not exaggerating.

The woman looks past her husband and smiles at me. “I read about a restaurant in Rachel. Where all the UFO hunters go?”

“Yep. The Little A’Le’Inn.”

“Cute,” the man says dryly.

The woman ignores him. “They say you can see strange things there at night.”

“This is a strange part of the country,” I tell her, and it’s not a lie.

“What about you? Have you seen anything?” She leans over her husband, over the map, to see me better.

“I could tell you...” I say. “But don’t be surprised if guys in black SUVs pull you over for a little debriefing.”

“Really?” she asks, her eyes shining.

I wink at her. She smiles again. Maybe blushes a little, even though she’s old enough to be my mom.

Most of the traffic through Madison comes from people like this. They stop here on the way to Area 51. Apparently, they’re under the impression the government has UFOs parked off the highway or something. Sometimes, I see the same people on their

return trip, all sad because they found out Rachel is just a big tourist trap.

Newsflash: there's nothing to see at Area 51. Unless you're looking for cheap alien merchandise and a bunch of conspiracy theorists. I've lived in Madison my whole life, and guess how many times I've seen a mystery object in the sky? Zero. We've got plenty of secrets around here, but they don't have anything to do with extraterrestrials.

"I have a friend who got into Area 51 once," I tell the woman.

Her husband sighs. The woman leans even farther over him. She's practically in his lap. "What happened?"

I look around for a second, as if I'm worried someone might overhear us, then duck down to the level of the window and lower my voice. "He came back with all these stories. I won't even repeat them. There are *things* out there in the desert though. Things no one wants us to know about."

The woman's eyes widen. She loves it. "You can't tell us *anything*?"

"Look," I say, furtively glancing around again. "My friend ended up leaving town in the middle of the night. Left a note saying he was moving to Vegas, had an aunt living there or something. We haven't seen him since. I'm not saying anything bad happened to him. But none of us ever heard him mention an aunt before."

Because there isn't an aunt in Vegas. There isn't a friend either. I can tell from the guy's sour expression he knows my story's

bullshit. The woman probably does too, but she's having fun playing along. She settles back in her seat, satisfied. Her husband finally folds the map.

I look at the gas pump again, wish it would hurry, wish the couple hadn't pulled in needing a full tank. Wish Moses Casey, my boss, would stop being so stingy and update the equipment so it isn't so freaking slow.

Seconds tick by. A gust of wind rattles the gas pump, blows sand into my eyes. The man taps his fingers on the steering wheel and gazes out the window, examining the sun-bleached buildings that line Madison's main street.

I wonder if anyone else in Madison is hiring. This gas station routine is getting real old.

"Tell me, son," the guy says suddenly. "Where do you pray around here?"

I hesitate. What's this dude talking about?

"Pray?"

"Yes, pray. Worship. Whatever. Where are your churches?"

"Are you missionaries?" I mean it as a joke, but it doesn't come out that way. It sounds like I'm stalling, which I am.

"I've just never seen a town without a church," says the guy.

My mouth feels full of dust. I swallow hard. I have absolutely no good answer to his question. But I pull myself together, flash a smile, act like I'm totally chill. The more confident you act, the less likely anyone is to suspect you're lying through your teeth.

“Maybe you should get your eyes checked. You drove right by one.”

“No, we didn’t.”

“I think I know this town better than you.”

The man frowns. He stares at me. I stare back. A lifetime passes. I fight the urge to wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

Then I hear the sweetest sound in the world: the click of the gas pump. The tank is full. I quickly complete the transaction, saying all the right things, telling the couple I hope they have a good trip, hope they spot a UFO.

“Just stay out of Area 51,” I say, winking at the woman again. She laughs.

I watch their car retreat from Madison, flying past Joshua trees and kicking up dust. And the whole time I’m thinking, *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

What if they come back through town? What if they look for the church?

I know *exactly* what’ll happen if they look for the church. They won’t find it. Because it doesn’t exist. They’ll wonder why I’d lie about something like that. They’ll ask questions.

I should have told them the town is too small for a church, that we run services out of someone’s home or something. I mean, pretty much anything would’ve been better than claiming we have an invisible church on Main Street. *You can’t miss it. It’s over there between Santa’s workshop and the unicorn corral.*

The guy caught me off guard, with his *son* and his map. I've worked at the gas station since I was fifteen, and I've answered all sorts of strange questions, stuff like, *How do you keep cool around here?* (Air-conditioning.) And, *Is the alien jerky really made of aliens?* (No.) And, *Is this one of those small towns where everyone's married to their sister?* (Why would someone even ask that?) But no one's ever asked about churches.

Who drives around the desert looking for churches anyway?

I tuck the two-dollar tip into my pocket and lean against the gas pump, casual, though I feel pretty edgy. I watch the road, wait for the next car, though I doubt there'll be one. Not two in one shift.

Where do you pray? Of all the things to ask.

I briefly wonder what would've happened if I told the truth. If I'd laughed and said, "This is Madison. What the hell do we need churches for?"

Because no matter how it appears, Madison *isn't* like other towns. Not at all.

I'm not talking about aliens or anything ridiculous like that. No, the unusual thing about Madison, what we work hard to make sure no outsiders find out, is that everyone here gets to make a wish.

Mine is in twenty-six days.

CHAPTER 2

COUNTDOWN: 25 DAYS

I should be freaking ecstatic. That's how it's supposed to go, at least. The closer it gets to your wish day, the more hyped you're supposed to get. Everyone goes on and on about what an honor it is, how lucky we are to live in a place where wishes come true.

And everyone wants to know what you're gonna wish for. Like, the whole town gets on your case about it. They're all, *Make it good. You only have one shot.* As if somehow, that detail may have slipped your mind.

Which is why I'm on the fence about going to the hot springs. It's Saturday, so half the school will be there. And instead of having a few beers and chilling, I'll have to deal with everyone being up my ass asking what I'm going to wish for.

The weird thing is, a year ago, I would have thrived on the attention.

In the end, I decide to go to the hot springs anyway. Of

course I do. How else are you gonna pass time in Madison on a Saturday night?

I'm about to open the front door when my mom calls my name from the kitchen.

"What?" I shout back, hand still on the knob, ready to bolt.

"Come here, please."

I sigh.

Ma's at the kitchen table, cutting coupons. It's become her favorite hobby, though far as I can tell, it has yet to save us money.

I lean against the doorframe, trying to make it clear I'm not committing to a lengthy conversation. Maybe she'll get the hint, see I'm on my way out.

"Sit down for a minute," she says.

Or maybe not.

Something about couponing gets Ma all amped up to lecture me. I'm definitely not in the mood. But if I blow her off, she'll launch into the I-gave-birth-to-you crap, and I'm even less in the mood for that. I slide into the chair across from her.

"Eldon," she says, "I think we should talk about your wish."

"Right now?"

Thing is, we *have* talked about it. We've talked about it on every birthday I've ever had. After I turned seventeen, we talked about it once a week. Though I guess it's more accurate to say *she's* talked about it.

“Yes, right now,” she says, pointedly looking at the wall calendar. “The clock is ticking, kiddo.”

Gee, thanks. As if somehow I’ve missed that my birthday is coming up.

“I know, Ma,” I say, trying my hardest to be patient.

“If you know, why haven’t you decided on a wish? You need to think about the future, Eldon.”

“I *have* thought about it.”

She puts down her scissors and looks at me. “And?”

“And I’m still thinking.”

The frown lines on her face deepen. She pulls a cigarette from the pack sitting next to her and lights it, not caring about the bits of ash raining down on her coupons. Not caring that she’s probably giving me lung cancer.

“Just remember, kiddo, we’re not in a good place.” She gestures around the room with the cigarette. Scarred linoleum countertops, stacks of unpaid medical bills, appliances that haven’t been updated since the house was built thirty years ago. As if I need a reminder about our financial situation. As if I don’t live here too, don’t see how much we lack.

“I know how it is,” she goes on. “You kids want to wish for something frivolous. But you’re not a little boy anymore. You have to do what’s right, Eldon.”

What about you? I want to ask. *What about what you wished for?* Instead, I say, “Yeah, Ma. I get it.”

She takes a long drag on her cigarette. “Fine. Go then. I know you want to.”

I don’t need to be told twice. When I leave the table, she has her scissors in hand again, cutting out a coupon for dog food.

We don’t even own a dog.



I step into the warm, windy night, ready to make my escape to the hot springs. But I hesitate in the middle of the yard. The light is on in our detached garage, and after a moment, I drift over to it.

Sure enough, my dad is inside. He’s standing at his wood-working bench, hand-planing a two-by-four. It’s a good day for him. He doesn’t need his crutches.

He glances over at me and smiles. “You look like you just had a conversation with your mother.”

“Guess what the topic was?”

“I’d put my money on wishing.”

“Ding, ding, ding.”

I fall onto the couch and turn on the TV, a tiny set with bad reception that my dad picked up at the pawn shop last month. Ma flipped when he brought it home. Asked which of us should go hungry thanks to his impulse purchase. I’m surprised she let him keep it.

My gaze flicks back and forth between the TV and my dad. Watching him work always makes me less tense—or maybe it’s

being in the garage. I mean, it isn't exactly paradise out here. The garage is so cluttered that it couldn't fit a car even if Dad didn't use it as a workspace. It's dusty and turns into an incinerator during the summer, and I'm pretty sure black widow spiders have taken up residence in the corners. Still, I love the garage for the same reason my dad does: it's a place to drop the charade.

"I'm getting pretty sick of everyone asking about my wish," I say.

"It's a big moment for you," Dad replies without looking up from his workbench.

"For me or for Ma?"

He hesitates. He won't say anything bad about her, I know. He sets down his planer and walks over to the couch, sits next to me. "Listen, buddy, your mom only wants what's best for you."

Bullshit. It's not me she's thinking about. My mom has two children, and one of them has always come first. Spoiler: it's not me.

There's no point bringing that up with my dad though. Instead, I say, "Whatever I wish for should be *my* decision."

"You're right. It absolutely should be." I guess I look surprised, because he says, "What? You thought I was going to tell you that you have to wish for money?"

"Well...yeah."

"Eldon, wish for whatever you want."

I feel such a surge of love for my dad that if my wish was right

now, I'd wish for his happiness, forever. It's nice to know someone thinks of you as a person, not an opportunity.

I pause, trying to phrase my response in a way that doesn't sting. "If I wish for money, that still doesn't guarantee—"

"I know, buddy," my dad says. "I know."

Even though I hadn't finished my thought, I'm hit with a tidal wave of sadness. You'd think I'd be used to this agony by now, but it always catches me off guard. Anyone who says grief fades over time is a fucking liar. It never goes away. It just gets better at hiding. You never know when it's going to spring out of the shadows and sucker punch you in the gut.

Grief is a real asshole.

The mood in the garage has shifted. My little sister's presence—her *lack* of presence—fills the small space. I glance at my dad. My heart isn't the only one being run through a meat grinder. I wish I'd kept my mouth shut.

We sit in silence, both pretending to watch TV. Some news show out of Vegas is playing. Madison isn't big enough to have its own station. It isn't big enough to have news to report.

"If you could go back," I ask finally, trying to rewind the conversation to a safe topic again, "would you wish for something different?"

"Of course I would," my dad says without hesitation.

I look at him. Wait for more. He gets up and limps to the mini fridge, grabs two beers. He hands me one and takes a long swig of his own before continuing.

“When you’re eighteen, all you think of is the moment. I wished to be the best football player in the school, and it didn’t occur to me that I’d graduate in five months, and what then?”

Nothing, I know. Even if graduation hadn’t ended his football career, his injury would have.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love coaching. I love watching you play. But I wish I knew then what I do now.”

“I get the feeling most wishes are worthless,” I say.

“Not your mother’s.”

I’m not even going to go there with him.

“Anyway,” my dad says abruptly, moving back to his workbench. “You’ve got a month left to decide. You’ll figure it out.”

“I’m glad one of us is confident about that.”

My dad turns over the two-by-four and starts planing the other side. I watch the news. Lake Mead is drying up, a new casino is being built, another pedestrian got hit by a car. Vegas news is the same every day. They could probably run the same exact show, and no one would notice.

“What are you making?” I ask after a while.

He gestures to an ancient sink sitting on the ground in the corner. “Finally getting that installed out here. I’m prepping wood for the base.”

The sink came from the junkyard. It’s scratched and chipped and has corroded copper pipes still attached to it. Who knows if

it'll even hold water. My dad has never been able to resist bringing home random junk and turning it into a project.

I'm about to ask why he needs a sink in the garage when the door swings open and Ma steps into our safe space.

"Harmon—" she begins but stops when she sees me.

She looks disappointed, which gives me an instant guilt attack. I'd bet money she's wondering why I was so anxious to get away from her and why that doesn't apply to my dad. Dad's just easier to be around, but something tells me that wouldn't exactly lift Ma's spirits.

She redirects her gaze to my dad. "Harmon, I got a call from the bar."

My dad sighs and looks annoyed. I don't blame him. There's only one reason a bar would be calling our house. My uncle Jasper needs to be escorted home. Again.

"The bar in Alamo," Ma continues.

My dad's eyebrows shoot up. "Alamo? What in God's name is he doing there?"

I'm surprised Alamo even *has* a bar. It's a town half an hour south of us, smaller than Madison and nearly as depressing.

"I have no idea why Jasper does anything he does," my mom says. "Can you get him?"

"Luella..." my dad begins but trails off. We all know he's going to do it. He'll do anything Ma asks.

"If they kick him out, he might wander into the desert and—"

“OK, honey. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

My mom nods and leaves. She doesn’t bother saying thank you.

“Well,” my dad says to me. “Looks like my night just got busier.”

“You should leave him there,” I say. “He’s never gonna learn if you keep enabling him.”

“Enabling him?” My dad looks amused.

“Mr. Wakefield taught us about it last year. It was part of that whole antidrug kick he was on.”

“Ah, I see. Well, Eldon, you’re probably right. But it’s your mom’s choice, not mine.”

Everything in our house is her choice.

My dad puts away his tools, pats his pocket for his keys. “Want me to leave this on for you?” he asks, gesturing at the TV.

I consider staying and watching the rest of the news. I consider going to the party at the hot springs. “Actually, I’ll go with you.”

“I’m sure you have better things to do on a Saturday night. I remember what it’s like to be young, you know.”

He’s right. Rescuing my alcoholic uncle isn’t my idea of a thrilling time. But I hate the thought of my dad driving alone from one crap town to another. I hate that he has no control over his own life and never will. I hate that I can’t change anything for him, that the best I can offer is riding shotgun while he’s my mom’s errand boy.

“Nah,” I say. “There’s not much going on tonight.”

“I won’t turn down your company then.”

A few minutes later, we pass Madison's town limit. The desert around us is so dark it's like driving through a void. A jackrabbit darts in front of the minivan, and my dad swerves, barely missing it.

I glance at the clock, then turn on the radio and dial to an AM station in time to hear, *"Live from the loneliest corner of the Mojave, you're listening to Basin and Range Radio, where we keep an eye on the night sky. This is your host, Robert Nash."*

My dad laughs. "I don't know why you listen to this."

I shrug. It's not like I buy into Robert Nash's bullshit, but he's been a staple in my life since I was a kid. Ebba and I used to listen to his show together, late at night, when our parents thought we were sleeping. She'd sneak into my room, and we'd huddle under the covers, following Robert Nash's attempts to unveil conspiracies. Ebba believed in aliens. She believed in everything.

"...talking with a Las Vegas man who's certain he's uncovered the extraterrestrial agenda. Who are these strange beings? Why did they contact him, not once, but on three separate occasions? And, most importantly, when will they be back? Tonight, on Basin and Range Radio, you'll get the answers..."

I push my sister out of my mind. I listen to Robert Nash interview a dude who insists aliens are speaking to him through the hum of his air-conditioning unit.

I try to pretend my dad and I are on a road trip, heading somewhere more exciting than Alamo. I try to pretend that Madison doesn't exist. That *wishing* doesn't exist.

I'm not good at pretending.

When it comes to wishing, maybe Ma is right. I should wish for money and be done with it, yeah? No more agonizing. No more worrying about making the wrong choice. No more feeling like I have one shot, and if I screw it up, my life will be over. Just ask for cash. Live comfortably. No regrets.

That's the problem, of course. At least, part of the problem. In Madison, regrets are as commonplace as wishes. And there's no such thing as do-overs.

CHAPTER 3

COUNTDOWN: 24 DAYS

Madison has a problem with wind. The problem is that it never stops.

You'd think the mountain ranges would block the wind, but instead, they trap it in our valley. The wind rattles windows; it pushes cars into lanes of oncoming traffic. Sometimes, on nights the gusts are especially strong, I swear coyotes howl back at it, as if the wind is a missing member of their pack.

Worst of all, the wind covers everything in dirt.

Once, in history class, we studied the Dust Bowl. Our teacher showed us these pictures of people stuffing wet blankets in the cracks under their doors, of sand piling up against the sides of their houses. And I was like, "Well, that's pretty much a regular day in Madison."

Even though Merrill's house is next door, I get a mouthful of dirt as I run across the yard. The sand is gritty against my teeth. My eyes sting.

Still, there's no need for a surgical mask.

“Overkill, Merrill,” I say when he opens the door.

His voice comes back muffled. “Dude. I’m very sensitive to allergens. You *know* this.”

Truthfully, the wind *is* unusually strong for May. Generally, it’s not until midsummer, when temperatures peak, that the wind gets super intense. Some days are so bad that the town shuts down, the way other places—*normal* places—have snow days. I try to comment on that while Merrill and I let ourselves into the ancient Ford Mustang sitting in his driveway, but a gust steals my words.

The original owner of the car was Merrill’s grandfather, who wished it into existence. He’d probably rise from the grave for vengeance if he knew how it’s been treated since he died. Though the Mustang technically belongs to Merrill’s dad now, we use it whenever we want, because Benny Delacruz is seldom in a condition to drive, even on days he has work—which are getting to be rare.

When we’re shut in the safety of the car, Merrill rips off his mask. “Fuck this town.”

“The mask is really overkill,” I say again.

“Fuck you too. Do you know how many pounds of dirt I’ve swallowed in my lifetime?”

“All I’m saying is maybe this is why girls don’t like you.”

“Who says girls don’t like me?” Merrill asks, adjusting his thick glasses, smoothing down his wild hair. “Besides, I don’t exactly see them lining up for you these days.”

"Yeah, well..." I can't think of how to finish. Because, you know, he's right.

Merrill glances at me. "Oh, come on." He rolls his eyes.

"What?"

"It was a joke."

"I know." But I can't keep the edge out of my voice.

He looks at me for a long moment. "What, you want us to cry together? Have an early-morning pity party?"

"Just drop it," I snap.

Another drawn-out, awkward silence. When Merrill speaks again, his voice is softer. "Are you seriously still bummed, Eldo?"

I can't believe he has to ask.

Well, Merrill, I consider saying, the girl I was totally in love with ditched me when I needed her most. Now I'm miserable and alone while she's hooking up with one of my football buddies. Why would I be bummed? Nope, I'm freaking awesome.

"No," I say. "Let's go. We're gonna be late."

"So? The first class is only an overview."

I can usually cope with Merrill's cavalier attitude toward what he calls *the establishment*. Or maybe over our lifetime of friendship, I've gotten used to it. But today's different. "Can you just drive? Please?"

Merrill shrugs and turns the key in the ignition. The car sputters to life after only two tries, which proves miracles *can* happen. Then we're on the road, dust raining on the windshield and seeping in through the cracks.

Merrill doesn't bring up Juniper again. I'm grateful.

* * *

There are three upcoming wishes on the calendar. Penelope Rowe, me, and Archie Kildare, in that order.

I find this out within seconds of stepping inside a meeting room at the community center. It's the same place I took driver's ed classes. The same place half the town attends weekly AA meetings. An ancient blackboard at the front of the room has *Congratulations, Wishers!!!* scrawled on it.

"When's your birthday?" Archie demands before I'm fully through the door.

He gets right up in my face. I don't like his proximity. Or his tone. Really, I just don't like Archie.

I level my gaze at him and wait for him to step aside. For a moment, I don't think he's going to, which would mean my social standing at Madison High School has slipped more than I realized. After a slight hesitation, Archie backs away. I'm relieved. I have about four inches on him, but he's built like a bodybuilder. He could destroy me.

"May twenty-seventh," I say.

"What about you?" he asks, turning to Merrill.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch. I already had my wish."

Archie nods, pleased. "I'm June first. She's May fifteenth."

"He's worried someone shares his wish day," says Penelope

from across the room. She's sitting in the front row. For some inexplicable reason, she's wearing her cheerleading uniform. It's Sunday.

"Why does it matter?" I ask.

"Bro, are you retarded?" asks Archie.

Penelope looks aghast. "Please don't use that word."

Merrill slides into a desk at the back of the room and kicks up his feet. "Archibald here probably believes the old multiple-wish superstition."

Archie crosses his arms. "It's not a superstition. And my name is Archie."

"What's the superstition?" I ask, sitting next to Merrill.

"It's *not* a superstition," Archie insists. "It's happened. If you have the same wish day as someone else, you'll only get part of your wish."

"It's a superstition," Merrill confides to me.

I shrug. "Never heard of it."

"That's because no one actually believes it." Merrill gives Archie a pointed look. "No one intelligent anyway."

Merrill is playing with fire, and he knows it. He lives for this. It's like a game—seeing how far he can push someone before they snap. Of course, I'm the one who'll have to listen to him whine when he's walking around with a black eye and his arm in a sling.

"Maybe we should wait for our instructor before we talk about this," Penelope suggests.

“It’s *happened*,” says Archie. “In the fifties or something. Three kids had the same birthday. And they made their wishes at the same time, and the wishes came only part true. OK? It’s *happened*.”

Merrill begins a slow clap. “Let’s hear it for the town historian.”

“Listen, faggot,” Archie says, advancing on Merrill’s desk.

At the front of the room, Penelope’s eyes widen in horror. “Please don’t use *that* word either.”

“Believe what you want,” Archie continues without sparing a glance at Penelope. “But I’m not gonna lose my wish because some asshole has my birthday.”

I can’t help but wonder what Archie would have done if someone *had* shared his wish day.

“No, *you* listen,” Merrill says. He swings his legs from the desk and leans forward. “If you believe getting a less powerful wish is the biggest problem with this whole setup, then you’re even more clueless than I thought. These wishes are poisonous, and we’re *allowing* ourselves to be poisoned. We’re like the Jonestown settlers drinking cyanide Kool-Aid. If you get less than you wish for, you should get down on your knees and thank God, because maybe you’ll die a little slower than the rest of us.”

I sigh deeply. It always comes to this. “Look, guys, it doesn’t matter. None of us share a birthday.”

“That’s not the point, Eldon,” Merrill says. His face is bright red. When Merrill starts one of his rants, he forgets to breathe.

“Forget it, man,” Archie says, eyeing Merrill like he’s a rabid animal. He moves to sit down.

“No. I won’t forget it. The powers that be want us to naively accept everything they tell us about wishing and I, for one—”

“Merrill Delacruz,” says a voice from the doorway. “I don’t have you on the wish schedule.”

And just like that, I say goodbye to any hope of having a decent day. Of all the wish instructors we could’ve ended up with, we got Mr. Wakefield.

“In fact, if I remember correctly, you made your wish last November.”

Merrill sighs and comes down off the high from his rant. “I’m here for moral support.”

“I’m sure Mr. Wilkes can manage without you,” Mr. Wakefield says, walking to the front of the room.

“He can’t, actually,” Merrill grins, his anger already forgotten. “I mean, the kid is a disaster. Who knows what he might do or say if I’m not around? In fact, if I leave, it’ll dramatically reduce his ability to absorb information. Do you really want to be responsible for Eldon’s lack of education?”

I don’t bother stifling my laugh. Penelope, who’s turned around to look at us, rolls her eyes.

“Mr. Delacruz, is it possible you’re suffering from transference? Perhaps you worry about your own ability to function outside of your friendship from Mr. Wilkes.”

Mr. Wakefield is a trip. At some point, he missed a very important memo, the one informing him he's our principal, not a therapist. The dude has some intense fixation with psychology—specifically, with Sigmund Freud. I think he even tries to look like him.

"You know what, sir?" Merrill says. "I think you're right. I *am* having some issues. Certainly, there's no better cure than staying here, where I can benefit from your expert guidance."

Mr. Wakefield considers for a moment, stroking his pointy beard. "Fine. You may stay. But don't be a distraction."

"I wouldn't dream of it."



Outside, the wind howls, and inside, Mr. Wakefield discusses the mechanics of wishing.

"But, Mr. Wakefield, *why* are there wishes?" Merrill asks earnestly, as if he really wants the answer. He doesn't. He's being difficult for his own amusement—and mine, I suppose.

In the front row, Penelope sighs.

No one—certainly not Mr. Wakefield—knows why there are wishes. No one knows how wishing works or when exactly it started. All that matters is that it *does* work. It *did* start. Everything else, well, maybe you don't want to question it too much. Maybe some mysteries are better left unsolved.

"You stand on the brink of the most pivotal moment of your young lives," Mr. Wakefield says, ignoring Merrill. "A

moment that will be cemented in your consciousness. So powerful that it will touch the deepest part of you and leave you forever altered.”

He paces back and forth in that weird way of his, on the balls of his feet. Maybe he’s trying to make himself seem bigger. I could probably pick up Mr. Wakefield with one hand. I have a vision of doing that, picking him up by his collared shirt and throwing him out of the room. Class has barely started, and his psychobabble is already hard to deal with. Anyone would have been a better instructor than him.

“I recommend that all my wishers keep a journal to track this very emotional journey.”

I mean *anyone*.

Mr. Wakefield claps his hands as if a brilliant idea occurred to him. “Why don’t we spend some time exploring our feelings about our wishes? Who would like to begin?”

“I will,” says Penelope.

Surprise, surprise.

“I’m both excited and nervous. I’ve had my wish picked out for more than a year. I repeat it to myself every night before bed to get the wording perfect. You have to be very careful about your wording. This might be my best chance to make the world a better place, and I plan to take advantage of it.” Penelope smiles like a contestant in a beauty pageant. I’m sure she’s barely suppressing the urge to wave and blow kisses at us.

“I think I threw up in my mouth,” Merrill whispers to me.

“Lovely, Miss Rowe, simply lovely,” Mr. Wakefield says, beaming. “What about you, Mr. Kildare?”

“It’s Archie.”

“Yes, yes, it is. And how do you feel about your approaching wish?”

“How do you think I feel? I feel fucking *awesome*.”

Mr. Wakefield sniffs. “As much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, I ask that my wishers find civil ways to express themselves. Let’s leave the vulgarities for peer time, yes? Mr. Wilkes, what say you?”

“About vulgarities?”

Merrill laughs.

“About your *wish*, Mr. Wilkes.”

All eyes are on me. I’m used to that. The part where I have no idea what to say or do? Totally unfamiliar. “Uh. I don’t know. I feel fine.”

“You must have more to say than that. Are you excited?”

I don’t respond.

Mr. Wakefield nods sympathetically. “Wishing can be overwhelming. One can experience many emotions building up to the big event. It’s hard to know where to direct those feelings. Tell me, have you ever found yourself crying after an important football game?”

Jesus.

“It’s not *that*,” I say. “I just haven’t decided what to wish for.”

“I’ll take your wish off your hands if you can’t think of a way to use it,” Archie offers.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Perhaps you should make a list of everything you consider important,” Mr. Wakefield suggests. “Sometimes, taking inventory of our past and present allows us to better forge a path into the future.”

“Yeah. I’ll get right on that,” I say.

Merrill laughs again.

I’m struck by how simple everyone makes wishing sound. Like it’s no big thing. Sure, it has the power to change your entire life. It has the power to *ruin* your life. But whatever. Pick a wish and move on. And if you end up with a lifetime of regret, well, you learn to deal with it.

“We’ll return to our emotional responses in a bit,” says Mr. Wakefield. “Let’s switch gears for a moment and discuss what you can expect on your special day.”

He passes printouts around the room. It’s a map of the cave system where wishes have been made since Madison was founded about a century ago. Mr. Wakefield leads us through the route we’ll take, what we’ll see, what we’ll hear. He tells us how it’ll work, from the moment we meet Mayor Fontaine in the parking lot until we say our wishes out loud.

That’s the simple part, the part that comes with easy-to-follow

instructions. It's what happens before and after that fills me with uncertainty. The part where I have to decide on a wish—and live with the consequences.