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Opening extract from **All Our Yesterdays**

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ONE

Em

I stare at the drain in the center of the concrete floor. It was the first thing I saw when they locked me in this cell, and I've barely looked away since.

At first I was just obstinate, dragging my feet in the thin prison slippers they gave me so they were forced to pull me along the hallway by both arms. But when I saw the drain, I started to scream. It grew in my vision until it dominated the little cinder-block cell, and I kicked at the men who held me, trying to wrench my arms out of their iron grasp. I could only conjure the most gruesome scenarios for why they'd need a drain in the floor.

Whatever horrors I imagined haven't come to pass—at least, not yet—but the drain still dominates my attention. It's like a lodestar to me, pulling my focus back to it again and again. Even now, I'm lying on my side on the narrow cot against the wall and staring at the thing as though there's still something to be learned from it. Five and a half inches across, thirty-two little

holes, and a dent the size of a nickel just off the center.

“What are you doing?” The familiar voice is faint through the heating vent.

“Baking a cake.”

He laughs, and the sound makes me smile. I’m a little surprised my muscles still remember how to make the movement.

“Are you staring at that drain again?”

I don’t say anything.

“Em, please,” he says. “You’re only going to drive yourself crazy.”

But I have something else in mind.

Today, finally, I’m going to uncover all of the drain’s secrets.

I hear the footsteps of an approaching guard some time later. Time is hard to judge in here, with no clocks or windows or any activity to break up the long flow of seconds. All I have to mark time by are my conversations with the boy in the cell next door and the waxing and waning of my own hunger.

My stomach growls at the sound of the boots against the cement, the sound like a bell to one of Pavlov’s dogs. It must be lunchtime.

The heavy metal door slides open enough to reveal Kessler, the guard with the face like the smoldering of a doused fire. Most of the guards are indifferent to me, but he really hates me. Resents being made to wait on me, I guess, bringing me my meals and fresh changes of the plain blue clothes they’ve given me to wear. It makes me smile. If he only knew what I was accustomed to before

the world crumbled around us like a house eaten from the inside by rot.

Kessler holds the lunch tray out for me, and I move quickly to snatch it from his hand. When I'm not fast enough, he drops it with a clatter to the floor, sending bits of food flying in every direction. The indignity of scrambling for anything Kessler offers me burns at my insides, but for once I'm eager for my meal. Though not for the brown, sloppy food on the tray, of course.

For the cutlery that comes with it.

Kessler gives me a sharp, mocking grin and slides the door of my cell shut again. As soon as he's gone, I grab the spoon and fork off the tray and begin examining them. There's no knife; there never is. The soggy meat doesn't require cutting, and they're probably afraid I'd stage a daring escape attempt with the dull plastic utensil, brandishing it at the men with machine guns outside my cell.

I put the tray to one side and sit cross-legged by the drain. I try the fork first, pressing the tongs to one of the screws that holds the grating in place. As I suspected, they're too thick to fit the grooves, so I toss it. It skitters across the concrete and lands by the tray.

My only hope is the spoon. I press the curve of it against the same screw, and this time one edge catches. I hold my breath, as though any change in the air pressure of the room might undo things, and press down onto the spoon, trying to use it to loosen the screw. It slips. I try it again a half a dozen times, but it's no good; the spoon keeps slipping off the screw so that I'm pressing

and turning into nothing but air. The curve of the spoon is too severe to fit against the straight groove of the screw head, and I nearly hurl the spoon against the wall in frustration.

I stop with my hand raised in the air. Take a breath. *Think.*

The handle of the spoon is far too thick to fit the groove, and the base too wide, but . . . I touch the rough concrete of the cell floor, which is prickly and cold against my palm. It could work.

When Kessler comes back for my tray, I'm waiting for him. My stomach is hollow and aching, but I haven't touched the food. I need the full tray of slop intact. Kessler slides the door open, and as soon as the space is big enough, I hurl the tray through it.

"This is disgusting!" I shout. "We're not animals!"

Kessler ducks, and the tray flies into the wall behind him with a crack. He flinches and swears when flecks of brown and green food speckle his face and uniform. I suppress a wicked smile for the half second before Kessler raises his hand and strikes me hard across the face. I crumple to the floor, stinging tears rising into my eyes at the blow.

"Crazy bitch," Kessler says as he shuts the door on me.

I can only hope he'll be so angry at having to clean up the mess that he won't notice the missing spoon.

I wait as long as I can just to be safe. One hour, maybe two? Then I pull the spoon out from where I've hidden it under my thin foam mattress. I break off the head, which leaves a sharp edge, and measure it with my fingers, comparing it to the groove in the screw.

I scoot over to the wall and put my face close to the heating vent. "Hey, you there?"

I hear the tortured squeak of rusty springs as Finn rolls off his cot. “Just headed out. You’re lucky you caught me.”

I press my fingers to the cold slats of the vent. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that only a foot of concrete separates us. He feels so far away.

Does he ever touch his side of the wall and think of me?

“Could you sing?” I say.

“Sing?”

“Please?”

“Um, okay.” Bemused but willing. Finn never says no. “Any requests?”

“Up to you.”

He starts singing something that sounds churchy. A hymn, maybe. I didn’t know until after everything started—once we were on the road, everything about our old lives left behind us like the exhaust that trailed from the truck smuggling us out of the city—but Finn went to church every week with his mother. He even liked it. I was shocked by that at the time, although I can’t remember why now. Maybe because religion was never a part of my life, or because the idea of prayer and church potlucks and sermons seemed so far removed from the Finn I knew then.

The Finn I *thought* I knew then.

His voice is good, a strong tenor with a texture like cool cotton against the skin. You’d never guess it to look at him. Or, I don’t know, maybe you would. I haven’t laid eyes on Finn in months. Maybe he doesn’t look the way I remember.

With Finn’s voice reverberating against the cinder-block walls until it fills up every crack and crevice, I press the sharp edge of

the broken spoon against the concrete. I drag it back and forth over the rough surface, slowly filing down the plastic. I move faster and faster, the scrape of the spoon against the floor mingling with Finn's voice in my ears.

Despite the chill in the cell, sweat prickles on my forehead from the exertion. I stop and check the width of the spoon against the screw. It's not thin enough yet, but it's closer. I go back to filing, clutching the spoon so tightly that my hand begins to ache. This is going to work; I'm sure of it.

Finn stops singing, but I hardly notice, I'm so focused on my task. "Em, what are you doing?"

"It's going to work," I whisper to myself.

"What is?"

I check the spoon again, and this time the sanded edge fits perfectly into the groove of the screw. I jam it in and feel the temperature of my blood rise. A dull little voice in the back of my mind asks me why I care so much about this stupid drain, but I barely hear it over the pounding in my head, like a drummer leading soldiers to war. I begin to turn the spoon, but the screw doesn't budge, held in place by years of dirt and rust and God knows what else. I turn harder, trying to force it to move, until the plastic creaks and threatens to snap.

"Come on, damn it!"

I pinch the spoon at the very base, as close to the screw as my fingers can manage, and turn. With a squeal, the screw begins to move. I laugh, little huffs of air that feel foreign but wonderful on my lips. When that screw gives way, I attack the next and the next, scrabbling at them with my fingernails until they bleed

when the spoon doesn't work fast enough, and finally yanking at the grating when only a few threads of the last screw are holding it in place.

It pops off in my hand, suddenly nothing more than a thin piece of metal, and I drop it with a clang.

"Em, what's going on?"

Finn sounds anxious now, but I don't have time to care. The drain is open and exposed, finally. I reach inside of it, the rational part of my brain telling me that I won't find anything there but a cold pipe, but something deeper and more instinctive inside of me whispering of . . . what? Purpose? Destiny? One of those other big things I stopped believing in years ago?

That something isn't surprised when my fingers close around an object hidden in the drain. My body tenses as something wild and joyful bursts open inside of me, like my muscles know to contain the explosion. I tug the object free, pulling it out into the light, and stare.

It's a plastic freezer bag, ancient and dotted with years of hard-water marks and mold. Such a mundane object—which conjures memories of the peanut butter sandwiches I used to find tucked in my gym bag—seems wildly out of place in my tiny prison cell. Inside is a single sheet of paper, white with blue stripes, like I used in school, with a frilled edge that shows it was ripped out of a notebook.

I open the bag with trembling fingers, suddenly scared. I knew there was something important about that drain from the moment I laid eyes on it. It isn't natural. Nothing about this can be good.

I pull out the sheet of paper and get my first good look at it. The room becomes a vacuum around me. I try to inhale and find I can't, like all the air is gone.

The page is almost entirely covered in writing. Some lines are in ink, some in pencil, the lines at the top so faded with time that they're difficult to read, and those at the bottom looking almost fresh. Every sentence but the one at the very bottom is crossed out with a neat, thin line.

There's a name at the top of the page, written in familiar block capitals, and the line at the bottom is bold and dark, the words carved into the paper like the person who wrote them pressed the pen deep into it.

That person was me.

I've never seen this piece of paper before in my life, but the handwriting is definitely mine: my cursive *e* when every other letter is in print, my sloping *k* and too-skinny *a*. Some primal part of me recognizes it, like a phone ringing in another room.

I start to shake. In this time and place, a letter I don't remember writing means something very specific.

But it's the last line that makes me scramble for the toilet in the corner of the cell.

You have to kill him.