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Opening extract from

# Between the Lives

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# PREFACE

I am a liar.

Not compulsive.

Simply required.

I am two people. Neither better than the other, no superpowers, no mystical destinies, no two-places-in-one-time mechanism – but two people. Different in ways fundamental, even though at the most basic level I look the same. My physical attributes, my memory and my name follow me. For the past eighteen years, everything else, *everything*, about me is different. Twenty-four hours as the first of me. And in the blink of an eye, twenty-four hours as the second of me. Every day, without fail, it goes on…

I've never told anyone. By the time I was old enough to figure out everyone didn't have two lives – by the time *that* little shock settled in – I didn't know where to begin. *How* to begin. And society, both of them, didn't want to know.

When I was a child, I didn't realise I was different from everyone else. But I'm pretty sure I've always been this way – this two-lives way – which means I was probably born twice, was a baby twice. No surprise I'm glad I can't remember that. Being torn from one set of arms and thrust into another every twenty-four hours? Well, it doesn't

matter how much they love you… Can anyone say, issues?

Practice makes perfect though, and I like to think of myself as a pro. I've ironed out the kinks; identified the major pitfalls and how to avoid them. I manage. I know who I need to be in each of my lives, and I try not to confuse my brain with the 'infinity questions' anymore.

I've learned to accept that in one life I love strawberries, while in the other my taste buds cringe at the flavour. I know that in one life I can speak fluent French, but even though the memory of the language comes with me, in my other life I must not. Then there are easier things to remember, like Maddie, my gorgeous little sister in one life, and my not-so-great big brothers in my other.

Above all else – though I try not to think about it – I know which life I prefer. And every night when I Cinderella myself from one life to the next a very small, but definite, piece of me dies. The hardest part is that nothing about my situation has ever changed – the only thing I can be certain of is the fact that my body clock is different from everyone else's. There is no loophole.

Until now, that is.

# CHAPTER ONE

# ROXBURY, FRIDAY

I broke my arm today.

Capri and I were heading for the subway. I had a Coke can at my feet, soccering it along the pavement, flashing sweet and mostly sour smiles to the suits who gave us 'hooligan' looks as we passed. We attracted that kind of attention. Funny how clothes and a generous serve of eyeliner can do that. In my other life, no one would dare give me that kind of eye-swipe. But there was something satisfying about it. My faded black mini and lace-up Doc Martens helped give me what I needed.

My identity.

Capri skipped ahead, her black hair bobbing, halfway between dreads and undecided. 'I bet the guys are already there,' she said over her shoulder, speeding up.

I suppressed a groan, hoisted the Coke can onto the tip of my toe, kicked it into my hand and picked up the pace. At the top of the stairs I paused to toss the can in the trash, and then…un-paused. I don't know if it would've happened anyway. But right at that moment, one foot in the air about to step down onto the first of fifty-odd steps, I saw him.

Well, I think I saw him.

A round-bellied, middle-aged man. Dressed in a dated taupe suit and scuffed red-brown shoes. He was thinning badly up top and sweating due to either excess fabric or body weight. He looked different than usual, but in that moment I was certain. *Fruit shop guy*, my mind whispered.

It was a glitch.

They happened every now and then, and they always threw me.

My foot never found sure landing. Instead, it missed the step and caught the edge. I fell forward, propelled towards the bottom, making a fool of myself the entire way. Legs over ass, I flashed a good few dozen people on the way down, showing them pretty much all I had to offer.

Capri, great friend that she is, was laughing before I even came to a stop. And not just a private little chuckle behind her hand before she could pull herself together. No, she all but wet herself, sliding down beside me as I tried to cradle an arm that felt like it could, at any second, fall off my shoulder.

Eventually, and mostly due to commuters making grunting noises about the fact they had to go around us, I pulled myself to my feet. Capri was still laughing, pausing every now and then before obviously replaying the moment in her mind and cracking up yet again.

Jesus. I wished I was in my other life at that moment. This was not the type of thing to let happen in this one.

'I think I'll need to go to the medical centre,' I told

Capri, who was only just beginning to realise I'd genuinely hurt myself.

'Oh shit. Sorry, Sabine. I thought you were okay.'

I shrugged, instantly regretting it when a searing pain shot up my arm. 'Probably just a sprain.'

Luckily the medical centre wasn't far and we could walk. The idea of being crammed into a train carriage with a funky arm didn't work for me at all. Capri sent Angus, her sort-of boyfriend, a text to let him know we wouldn't be meeting up at our usual after-school caffeine haunt. If it weren't for the throbbing pain in my arm, I'd almost have been relieved. Capri and Angus had been trying to set me up with Davis for the past month. Nice guy, no spark.

'It *was* pretty funny though,' Capri persisted as we walked, still slipping into bouts of memory giggles. She could be a bitch sometimes, but deep down she was okay. And she was the only friend in this life I'd managed to keep hold of, mostly because she didn't care that I seemed…well, to put it in her words, *like I was somewhere else half the time.*

I flashed her a smile. 'Lucky I was wearing hot underwear!'

Which I hadn't been, of course. And thanks to my ass-in-the-sky display she, and more than a handful of Boston commuters, knew it.

Capri laughed so hard she snorted. 'Yeah. Floral print is making a comeback.'

And then my arm hurt, because I was laughing too.

Even while dreading that some bastard with their iPhone might have already uploaded footage of my floral booty to YouTube.

Broken.

At least it was only my wrist. But I'd be plastered up like a disaster zone for the next six weeks. Capri had already drawn some weird screwed-up bat-thingy on it. She was into Goth currently. On top of the half-dreadlocks, she'd dyed her beautiful blonde hair black and persisted with floor-length skirts even on the hottest days.

I was happy sticking with my street-wise look. I wasn't as fanatical about it as Capri, I just made sure I perfected the don't-mess-with-me part. It was important, especially around Roxbury – which was still categorised as one of Boston's 'due for regeneration' areas. And although Mom and Dad would have preferred an extra five inches on my skirts, my look didn't send them into complete freak-out mode.

By the time I got home it was after 9 p.m. As soon as I opened the front door, I could hear Maddie bounding from her room towards the stairs. The door was barely closed behind me when she came barrelling down the steps three at a time.

'Binie! Binie!' She was just about to launch herself from the bottom step into my arms – one of her signature moves – when she saw the cast on my wrist.

'What happened?' she asked, coming to an abrupt halt.

To Maddie, I was invincible. Probably because half the time when I was sick I pretended not to be, always worried about unintentionally overdosing if I took medication in both worlds. It wasn't easy when I had tonsillitis, but I couldn't very well have *that* operation twice. And I'd certainly never broken anything before.

'It's okay, Mads. I just broke my wrist when I fell over.'

She looked mortified, the corners of her mouth trembling. Having a six-year-old kid who worships you look so grave caused me the worst pain of the day.

I smiled one of my goofy numbers for her. 'Hey, kiddo, check it out!' I pulled my arm out of the sling, revealing the plaster and Capri's bat-thingy. I twisted my arm to show her an untouched expanse of white. 'I saved this whole area for you. You think you can draw something on it tomorrow for me?'

Her eyes lit up. She took hold of her long strawberry-blonde plait hanging over her shoulder and swayed. 'Really? Me? You wouldn't mind?'

'Hey, you're the best rabbit drawer I know. You think you can draw one of those bouncy ones you showed me the other day?'

She nodded vigorously. I could already see her picturing it in her head.

'Cool. I'll make sure no one else draws on this section and tomorrow afternoon it's all yours. But you better go back to bed before Mom catches you!' Of course I could already see Mom out of the corner of my eye in the kitchen

doorway, but experience had taught us all that it was easier if I got Maddie to sneak back to bed by herself. I gave the top of her head a ruffle and she flung her arms around my waist, carefully avoiding my bad side.

'Love you, Binie.' Her squeeze tore at my insides. Getting through days without her was one of the hardest things. I squeezed back.

'See you in the morning,' I said lightly.

They were the same words I'd said to her so many times. And every time I finished the sentence in the secret silence of my mind – *the day after tomorrow*.

Mom had her back to me when I came into the kitchen. 'Tea?'

'Yeah,' I said with a sigh, slumping into one of the tarnished wooden chairs at our chipped kitchen table. Our less-than-perfect kitchen fitted in well with our coming-apart-at-the-seams house.

Mom filled up the kettle using a massive plastic gallon bottle. It was the same one we'd been using in the kitchen for the past two weeks. The problem wasn't that the S-bend got blocked; the problem was that Dad had tried to fix it. Big mistake.

Mom pottered with the mugs, pulling out her favourite rose one followed by my preferred Daffy Duck mug.

'What happened?' she asked, barely taking her attention away from her task. Even at this time of night, it wasn't a surprise to see her still dressed in her work clothes,

her greying hair pulled back in a tight knot, her heavily starched shirt tucked in at her slender waist. Mom and Dad were all about appearances. Mom, in particular, needed her family functional and firing on all cylinders.

'Subway stairs,' I answered.

With her shoulders set, she finished making the tea and sat across the table from me. 'You should've called.'

I adjusted my sling, glad that I would only have to wear it for a few days – the cast covering half my forearm was bad enough. 'You would've just wanted to come and help.' And take over, I thought. 'There was no point dragging Maddie out of bed just to sit in the stupid waiting room at the medical centre. Anyway, Capri was with me.'

Mom pursed her lips as she passed me my mug. 'Such a comfort. Don't suppose she's discovered the many uses for a hairbrush yet?'

I shrugged and blew on my tea. 'She has a look going, Mom. She's happy with it, what's the problem?'

Mom stared at me as if the answer to that question was oh-so-obvious. She'd prefer I hung with a different crowd. Sometimes I wished I could tell her that I did. I stared into my mug as once again I considered that, given the choice, Mom would probably want my other life for me rather than this one. But that kind of thinking was never worthwhile.

'Dad still at work?' I asked.

Mom nodded.

Dad worked long hours. He kept the drugstore open late Tuesday through Saturday, but apart from keeping a

qualified pharmacist on duty, he didn't like to pay late-night wages, which meant he was rarely home before midnight. The drugstore would be a good business if they actually owned it, but instead they'd signed into a lengthy – and unprofitable – management contract. Even with extra staff, Mom and Dad split a heavy workload. They saw little of us and even less of one another. But they were relentless, determined to send Maddie and me to a good college.

At least that was one thing I could do for them. Going through school twice does help in the smarts department. Last year I'd pulled out the brain gene in Roxbury – much to Capri's disgust – and even cashed in last month with a partial undergrad scholarship to Boston University.

The thing is, I'm not even keen on the whole college thing. School twice is bad enough, college twice will suck – and god knows I won't be able to avoid it in my other life, so I'd been hoping to skip it in this one. But when it came down to it, I just couldn't do it to Mom and Dad. Or face the wrath that would follow.

Pleasing everyone in my two lives has left me feeling raw at times. And frustrated. And exhausted. And…well, a lot of things I tried hard not to admit. There was no point.

'If you're hungry, there's leftover cake in the fridge.'

I shook my head. We'd been working our way through the gigantic chocolate cake Mom had made/massacred for my eighteenth for the past week.

'I grabbed something earlier,' I mumbled, looking away.

'I could've phoned Dr Meadows,' she said, still hurt I hadn't called her.

'Mom, don't worry. Everything's okay now.' I flashed her my arm and an I'm-just-fine smile. 'Wrist broken, arm in plaster. There's nothing else anyone could do. In a few weeks it will all be back to normal.'

And that's when it dawned on me.

'Shit!' I barked, catching my spit-fall of tea in my good hand. I'd been so thrown by the glitch, by seeing fruit shop guy, I hadn't even considered the real problem.

'Sabine!' Mom snapped.

That was one thing my moms had in common: the no-swearing rule. But right then I didn't care. Mom was lucky I hadn't let the F-word fly.

'Sorry, Mom. I just…I remembered my final history essay is due on Monday and I haven't finished it.' I straightened my back to strengthen the lie. The days of feeling guilty about lying to my parents were long gone.

Mom looked at me skeptically. 'Since when do you do homework on a Friday night?' She gestured to my arm. 'And I'm sure your teacher will allow some leniency.'

'No, it's fine. I'm almost done.' I wiped my tea-wet hand on a dish cloth and grabbed my mug. 'I'll go finish it now so I won't have to worry about it all weekend.'

I weaved through the kitchen and up the stairs, my mind scrambling to figure out exactly how I was going to handle this one.

Broken arm.

Two lives.

This had never happened before.

It was close to 10 p.m.

Shit.

Only two hours to figure out a plan.

I wouldn't be sleeping tonight. In either life.

I hated problems that flowed over – it meant I wouldn't be able to sleep before the Shift. I could already feel my palms getting clammy. It always scared me, being awake at midnight.

I tiptoed past Maddie's room. Right then, I couldn't cope with her; I didn't have a brave face at the ready.

After loading up the pillows on my bed, I sat down, resting my arm on top of the pile.

'I am the master of my own world,' I chanted to myself. 'I manage what happens to me. I can do this.' But my words were false and quickly fell away as the truth slammed into me and held on with an iron grip.

*I've broken my arm.*

*I. HAVE. BROKEN. MY. ARM.*

'Idiot!' My stomach tightened with fear and I tried unsuccessfully to slow my breathing.

Usually I have a built-in radar for this type of stuff. The cans and can'ts. How it all works. It's pretty simple really. My body, and anything inherent to my body – my mind, my memories – goes through the Shift. But that's it. Material things – clothes, jewellery, even nail polish – get left behind. The only other thing that stays with me is

my name. For reasons I can't explain, both sets of parents called me Sabine.

Bottom line, if I cut my hair in one life, it will be likewise affected in the other. I dyed a hidden section of hair pink once, and although the dye didn't travel, the pigment of my hair was affected enough to look different in my other life – I've never dared to experiment further. If I'm sick in one life then I'm sick in both. If I get a tattoo in one world – not that I plan to, much to Capri's disappointment – I'm almost certain it would only be visible in that life. Ink won't travel, though the healing pains would be felt in both. If I had my nose pierced, the hole would exist in both lives, but the ring would stay in only one.

I pressed my fingers to my temples. I hated thinking about this stuff. Most of it was just weird and made me feel…wrong. Like *I'm* wrong. To avoid mistakes, I was careful *all* the time – trimming my hair only when I needed to, keeping it long and its natural boring brown, never giving it the kind of style either of my worlds would really approve of. Hovering somewhere in between. Safe. That's where I stayed, all the time. Safe. Prepared. Alone.

*I have two lives and yet I'm a ghost.*

In less than two hours I'd be in my other life and I'd have three *very* big problems. One, I'm not supposed to have a broken arm there and have no reason to have broken it. Two, the cast won't come with me; it's a material object. And three, it's my belated eighteenth birthday party tomorrow night and a broken arm will not go with

my dress. At. All.

I lay back, stared at the paint peeling off the ceiling and tried to figure out a solution. The only one that made any sense was going to hurt. A lot. But throwing myself down the stairs when I woke up was the only way I could be sure to convincingly fake the same injury.

About half an hour before the Shift I changed out of my clothes, shimmying my fitted mini off with one hand and wriggling into my oversized T-shirt nightie. I ditched the sling; it was more hindrance than help. I left my black Doc Martens until last, wincing as I gave a one-handed pull to loosen the laces before using my feet to kick them off.

I relied on rituals. Found comfort in the patterns I'd developed over the years. I settled into bed, ignoring the sheen of sweat on my forehead and the sick feeling in my gut as I arranged myself against the pillows as usual, making sure there would be nothing out of the ordinary to return to tomorrow night.

I almost made it too.

But with only minutes to go, my mouth started its telltale watering. I had to bolt to the bathroom to throw up before hurrying back to bed before midnight struck.

The last thoughts that slipped into my mind marked the beginning of the change in my worlds. *How could this have happened? How has nothing like this happened to me before?*