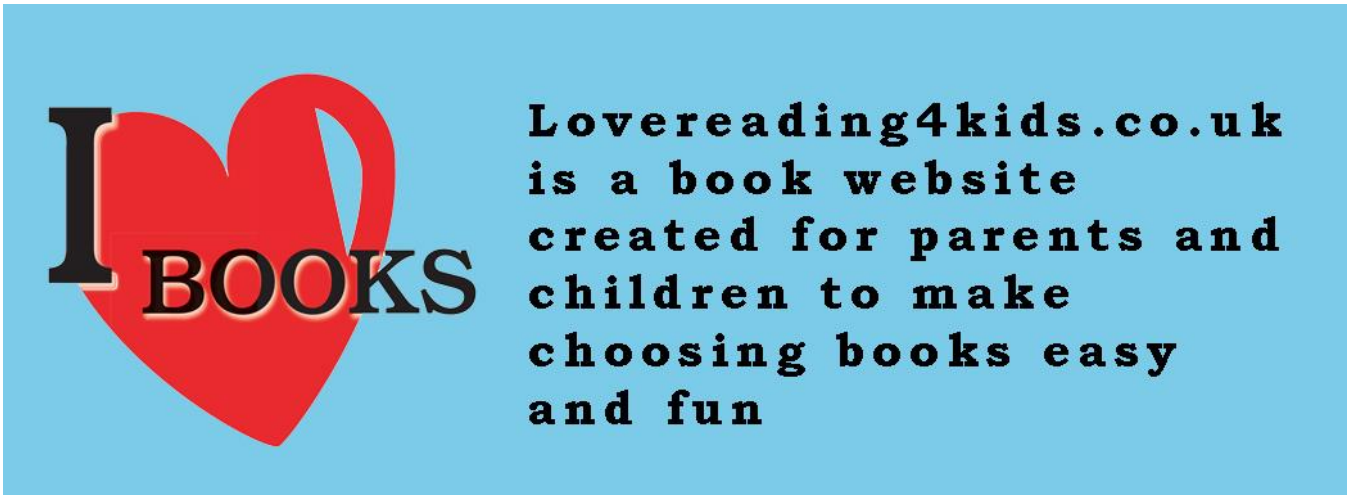


Opening extract from

More of Me

Written by

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To all the honeyz in the Hun Club x

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prologue

I have grown in strength inside her. Filled her cells with mine until we must split apart. It's not my choice – that's how it's always been for us.

Though we've done this many times before, I know she is afraid, because I share her heart. Her memories are mine, hazy sometimes, but mine. I feel what she feels. I have walked where she has walked, been in her every step. I have kissed where she has kissed. *Ollie*. I sigh but the breath that comes out is hers. It's time to breathe for myself. It's time to live.

She is in that dream place where her body cannot move and her mind is unsure and scattered. I stretch and fill every cell, feel them all expand and swell to make room for me. I search for the weakest point to break out and find it: the little finger of the right hand.

Some deep memory tells me it's always been this way. The first cell splits with a tiny pop; she hardly notices.

I'm controlling our breathing now. We take a deep lungful of steadying air and tense. I press our shoulders into the bed and that's when she realizes. That's when she starts to fight.

Our minds are still merged and her panic leaks into me. For a second I can do nothing, but it's started now and there's no stopping it. I refocus on that weak spot. I try to lift my knuckles, to pull them away, but it's the tip of the little finger that frees itself. I bend back my hand. The fingers come away with a syrupy tear. She is fully awake now. For a moment we fight for control, but she cannot hold me and I wrench my arm free. The raw ripping sparks in every fibre, every sinew – we burn together. I work on the other arm, pushing through the fingertips, feeling every cell split and seal up again, as hers do, releasing me.

Guilt flickers through me. Mine, not hers. I am moments away from being Teva and she…she will be left behind.

She fights. Her arms grab at mine but there is no turning back, there's no longer room for both of us.

I lift my toes and feel them suck away; they brush the bedclothes as they come free. My new skin is sensitive, not used to being touched – I almost can't bear it. I wrench my legs up and kick away the covers. Her hands are on our face now.

She can't stop it.

I have to be free.

I *will* be free.

one

Six months had flown by. Six months since I'd fought my way out of Fifteen's body and taken over as Teva. Six months since Fifteen had been trapped at home and I'd been free. It didn't take a maths genius to work out what that meant. I had just six short months until a new Teva tried to fight her way out of me. Only I wasn't going to let it happen. I wasn't going to be stuck in this madhouse for ever, with all my former selves driving me completely doolally.

I was sat cross-legged on my bed, twisting Peepee's ears through my fingers while I tried to think. We all had a Peepee – a little grey rabbit filled with tiny beans so he flopped in your hands. A warm memory took me by surprise; Mum tucking him into bed with me on the day I emerged. She didn't quite get that a new Peepee wasn't the same as the original, but giving each of us our own version was one of the few things she did that actually made a difference. I remember exactly how I'd felt in that moment: kind of

relieved and kind of put out. I still wanted Fifteen's Peepee. What a stupid thing to want when I was about to take everything else. Ollie. Mads. Everything.

Six months, then, to stop it happening to me. And I *was* going to stop it. I was absolutely *not* giving up *my* life for someone else to take over.

So I had to do something about it.

Ten out of ten for determination. Nought out of ten for a decent plan. I nibbled the raw skin on my fingertips, a habit Mum totally hated – along with scratching behind my knees, flicking the cover off my phone, wanting to have a future – you know, just the small things in life.

Mum liked to pretend everything was fine. We didn't even need a doctor, apparently. And I'd asked. Quite a few times. She always cut me off with a variety of excuses, all of which boiled down to the same thing – Mum's number one rule: the world must not know about our freakery.

Not long after I emerged, I'd called a meeting of Tevas, to find out if the others knew anything I didn't. Fifteen wouldn't come – no surprise there – but, apart from little Eva, the rest of them did. I got Eight to listen out for Mum.

"Like a spy?" she said, clapping her hands together and taking up position by my bedroom door. I dimly remembered us reading a lot of Famous Five around that age and totally loving anything a bit secretive.

I'd looked around at them all. Fourteen leaning against

my dressing table, arms folded tight across her chest; Seven sat at her feet gazing up adoringly. Thirteen and Twelve, more like twins than anything else, sprawled across my bed like they owned the place, laughing at celebrity arm fat in Mum's *Chatter* magazine. Nine and Ten sat on the floor, legs crossed, heads tipped together over an exercise book. They were writing an autobiography – probably the world's first to be written by two people about their one life. That was also the most interesting thing about it, seeing as they didn't really have a life any more. Six was huddled in a corner, making herself as small as possible, and Eleven was going through my wardrobe looking for stuff so she could dress herself up as Hermione Granger. A doomed mission as we all had the same short, fluffy, blonde completely un-Hermione-like hair.

That's all of us. There's no Four or Five. I don't know why.

I said: "We need to discuss our future."

"*Your* future, you mean," Fourteen said.

"No, *all* of our futures."

"We don't have a future though, do we?" she said. "This is it for us."

I didn't have an answer to that so I just said, "I was thinking about going to a doctor."

Six whimpered in the corner, then jerked to her feet and bolted out of the door.

"Oh, good one, well done," Thirteen said, stomping out after Six, rapidly followed by Twelve. I watched them leave, astonished at the reaction. I turned to the others. "Why is Six so upset?"

Ten looked up from her writing and said, "Probably scared."

"What? Why?" I *could* remember things we'd shared, but it was hard if I didn't know what I was looking for – like sifting through a dusty junk shop to find something you'd never seen before. I tried to find something in the memories Six had left behind, but all I got was a dark feeling of unease.

Nine said: "Doctors will just want to experiment on us."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," I said.

Ten backed her up. "It's true, actually. Mum told us. She won't let you go anyway. Ask her. I bet you a million pounds she won't."

"Well, I knew that already," I said. "I could go on my own."

"No!" squeaked Seven, shooting to her feet. "I don't want to be an experiment."

Fourteen slipped an arm round her shoulder and said, "Don't worry." Then to me: "There's no point seeing a doctor; I tried that. They thought I was making everything up to get attention."

Fourteen's memory bobbed to the surface of my brain, clouded with embarrassment. I blushed on her behalf. The doctor she'd seen had been about ninety – he'd sighed, muttered something about *girls your age* and suggested a psychiatric referral. Nice.

I said, "Maybe if we went together they'd believe us. You'd be walking proof I wasn't mad."

Seven clenched her fists. "No! I'm not going and you can't make me."

Fourteen said, "Just forget it. Mum'd go nuts if she knew you were even thinking about it."

"But if we got help, you wouldn't have to be stuck here all day."

"Really? We could all go into the world and everyone would love us, would they? The freak family? I don't think so."

Fourteen took Seven's hand and left, shaking her head. I looked at Nine and Ten. They shrugged and gathered up their things. End of meeting.

As I went downstairs, Six was under the banister peeling the wallpaper off and Mum was waiting for me by the bottom step, disappointment radiating from her. Nine and Ten were lurking behind her – they'd clearly dobbed me in.

"Why, Teva?" asked Mum. "We're fine, aren't we? We manage okay? Other people won't understand you, darling, not even doctors. They'll think you're…"

"Crazy? A freak? Yeah. I know. You've told me enough times."

"Not a fr…just…people can be very unkind."

"If you're ashamed of us, I could go to the doctor with a couple of the others. *You* don't need to come."

"I'm not ashamed! I just know what will happen. They'll want to do tests on you – horrible tests. They might take you away from me, Tee, put you in hospital. Why won't you trust me?"

Her bottom lip wobbled and I felt horrible. That bottom lip got me every time.

"Don't cry, Mum. I do trust you, of course I do."

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You have to believe me, Teva. We're better on our own. You've no idea how cruel people can be."

Maybe she was right. Maybe she had taken us to a doctor and it had been so awful we'd buried the memory deep, deep down.

So I'd left it at that with her, but I hadn't given up. I spent literally hours on the internet trying to understand what was wrong with us.

The lure of Google was irresistible. I pulled my laptop onto my knee and started a new search.

It was hard to know what to look for. "Splitting cells" brought up stuff on spreadsheets. "Body inside another body" brought up stories about twins who had got stuck inside each other in the womb. Nothing explained us. And in the end all medical roads on Google tend to lead to one terrifying possibility: cancer.

Just thinking about that sent new panic wriggling through my veins. I told myself: *It's not cancer. It can't be. I feel too well. We'd be in hospital having treatment. Even Mum wouldn't stop that happening if we had cancer.*

Cancer did not grow a whole new version of a person. I stroked Peepee's ears until my heart stopped pounding and I could see my laptop clearly, without all the words blurring together.

I scanned the results page and saw a new Wikipedia entry. With a little bloom of optimism, I clicked on the link. It was

just some kind of science-fiction joke. I was clearly not half girl, half fly. I didn't have boggle eyes or a hairy back or a terrible temper. Okay, maybe the temper, but I'd pretty much got control of that over the last few months, so I wasn't counting it. I drummed my fingers lightly on the keyboard; it rattled softly. I went back to the results page. Google was getting me nowhere.

Maybe I wasn't looking properly. I mean there's no librarian on Google is there? You're totally alone – you and a billion answers. As I stared at the list of websites, though, I had an idea. Maybe there were other people with the same condition looking for information just like me? What if *I* put something on the internet and let them find me? Would that work?

I pulled the cuff of my cardigan over my knuckle and wiped the lens of my webcam. Maybe if I told the world, someone, somewhere, would have an idea how to help? I hesitated.

There was a tiny problem with my genius plan: Mum. She'd go nuts if she found out.

I'd do a practice – that wasn't breaking any rules – and then, if I looked like a total twit or I changed my mind, I wouldn't post it. I got up and dumped my dressing gown in a heap behind my bedroom door, to slow down anyone trying to come in, then I pulled my laptop back on my knee and waved at the camera.

"Okay. So, hi. I'm Teva Webb. Well, the current me at any rate. My mum would hate this – me talking to you.

Don't trust the internet, Teva, paedophiles are sneaky – they'll look for reflections in your eyeballs and work out where you live…"

Rambling like a lunatic wasn't going to help. I tried again.

"Hi, I'm Teva Webb, Freak of Nature. I have a large family – a very large family. There are twelve of us plus my single, never-goes-out mother – that's nearly one a year for the whole of my life. It's a miracle, I hear you cry, yeah? Well… no. Here's the thing. I've got this condition where I don't quite grow up like normal people…"

I stopped. The reality of what lay ahead of me closed off my throat for a second. Six months…it wasn't long enough. I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyelids. *Come on, Teva…* I breathed out a shaky stream of air and turned back to the camera.

"So, here it is. Roughly every birthday, a new me forces its way out of the old one. I don't know exactly how it works. I know it hurts. I know every cell inside me will split apart and seal up again until the new me has completely torn herself away. I think it's a bit like how twins separate in the womb, only with a lot more cells.

"Once it's started, we pull apart like Velcro. That makes it sound easy. It's not. Imagine you're trapped in glue, the whole of your body, and if you don't pull yourself out you'll drown. The glue tries to hold you but you tear yourself free, and when it finally lets go, it seals over and hardens."

The thick silvery skin in the crook of my elbow niggled

at me. The insides of my joints itched most of the time – the skin there was flaky and scarred. I had a theory it was because they didn't quite seal properly after the separation and were constantly trying to repair – you know, how the skin under a scab does when it's getting better? It was worse when I was stressed, and thinking about the future was about as stressful as it got. I forced myself not to scratch and turned back to the camera.

"I don't know why it happens. I only know it will. I'll still be here, but a new Teva will take over my life. Thanks to my mother's paranoia, only the new version of us leaves the house. That's not even the worst of it. Only three of us have a room to ourselves. Fifteen because she's so…hmm…what? Let's be fair – cross? Angry? Constantly furious – mostly with me. And Six because, well, she's weird. I've got the last free room because, obviously, I couldn't share with Fifteen. But when the new Teva comes along, I'll have to share with her. Only it's not exactly sharing, because I have to give up everything."

I sighed and reached for my phone. My lifeline to the two people who kept me sane, who reminded me I had a place in the world. For now, anyway. It was nearly quarter past seven. Ollie finished football at half past. My Ollie. *Mine*. A sudden surge of anger fired me up and I turned back to the camera for one more minute.

"I need help to fix this. I need someone's help from out there. When my time comes, when a new Teva starts to fight her way out of me, I need to be ready to stop her. She's not taking my life. She's not."

My voice squeezed into a dry husk.

"I hate it, hate it. It's five months and twenty-three days until my next birthday and I'm going to find a way to make it stop. I am."

two

My bedroom door bumped against the bundled-up dressing gown and Eight slipped into my room, helpfully picking up my doorstop and trailing it across the floor to my bed.

"Thanks," I said, flipping the laptop closed. "I put that there to keep you lot out."

She climbed onto my bed, a little blueprint of me. Pale skin with a permanent blush, even paler tufty hair and deep-blue sleepy eyes.

"What you doing?"

"Yeah, what you doing?" said Nine, sauntering in with her recorder swinging menacingly from her fingers – I absolutely was not in the mood for a screechy recital of "God Save the Queen".

I said, "Nothing, and if you're planning on playing that thing, please do it in your own room. Or in the loft. Or on the moon."