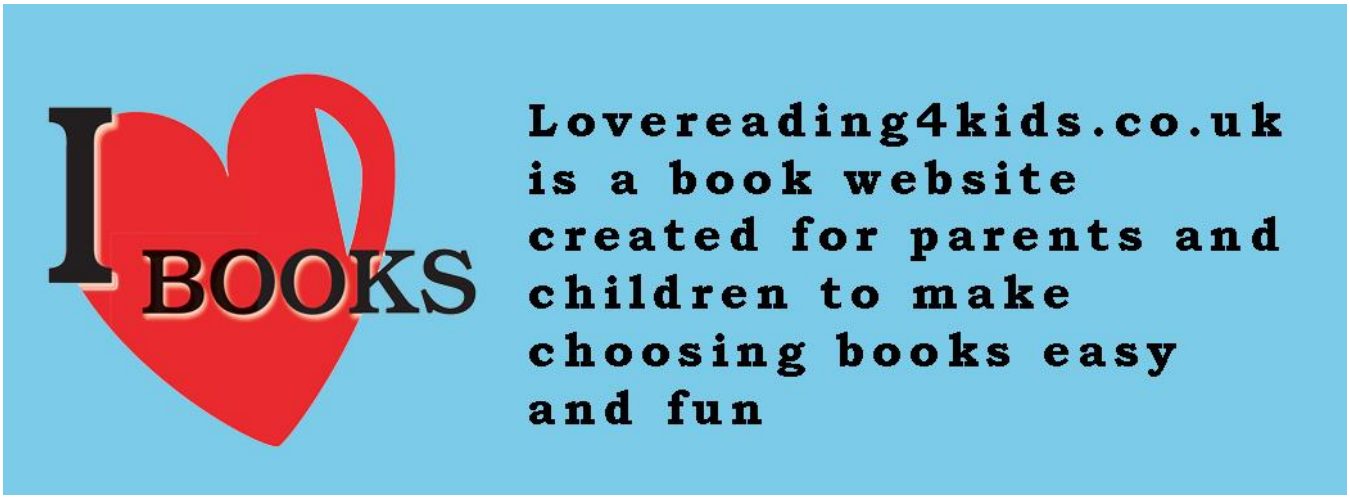


Opening extract from

The Last Beginning

Written by

Lauren James

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For my parents, who are always
exactly where I left them.

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PROLOGUE

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS CAMPUS, SCOTLAND, 2051

"Dad, I'm bored," Clove whispered into her father's ear. It was nearly dinnertime and Clove was *starving,* but the evening talk – a very long and technically complicated speech that her mum, Jen, was giving to a group of fellow scientists at her university – wouldn't finish for another half an hour. Her parents had insisted she come, even though she had been in the middle of a Sim with her best friend, Meg. Apparently, aged eleven, she wasn't allowed to stay at home on her own, even if she promised not to move from the sofa the whole time they were gone.

"Shh," her dad, Tom, said. He patted Clove's arm consolingly. "The exciting bit is coming up."

Clove didn't see what could happen to make this evening interesting.

She looked around the lab, which was a lot tidier than usual. Whenever she'd come down to the basement to visit her parents at work in the past, it had been a mess of wires, discarded circuit boards and empty cardboard boxes. Once she could have sworn she saw a mouse nest inside an old computer case, but her dad had resolutely denied it.

Clove tried very hard to tune back into the speech, which was about some kind of grant the university had just received to further fund her parents' research.

"… there are, of course, still issues to be overcome," her mum said, "especially with regard to radiation leakage. However, a huge amount of progress has been made. In fact, the rest of the group and I are delighted to be able to give you a demonstration of the technology here this evening."

The crowd gasped.

"If you would all like to gather round." Her mum sat down at a large computer in the centre of the laboratory. It was connected to an enormous piece of equipment that took up half of the lab. People moved in closer to watch, wine glasses in hand, as Jen started running a program on the computer screen.

Clove snuck a glance at the buffet table, which was set up near the entrance. There were *chocolate* eclairs. Surely no one would notice if she started eating now. She had to listen to her parents talking about work every day – there was nothing remotely exciting about it. They worked on something called Einstein-Rosen bridges, whatever those were. At a push, she was more interested in her father's work, which was about computer programming. Clove really liked computer programming.

A blonde teenage girl wearing a long green scarf saw Clove eyeing up the buffet table. She winked at her. Clove twisted back around, trying not to blush at being caught out.

Her dad nudged her arm. "Look, Clove."

Clove reluctantly turned to see her mum type a final command into the computer. Noise filled the lab – a whirring groan that seemed to shake the walls and vibrate

the air. The scientists shifted, expectantly, and then Clove saw what they were all staring at.

A light had gone on in part of the equipment attached to her mum's computer – a sort of glass box. Sitting in the centre of the box was a single red rose. The noise coming from the rest of the equipment grew louder until Clove could feel the vibrations in her eardrums and chest. The wine glasses trembled, adding a faint high-pitched screech to the sound.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. As Clove watched, the noise cut off all at once, and the rose—

The rose disappeared.

Everyone exclaimed in unison. There was a moment of complete silence. Another moment. Then the air inside the glass box shuddered and blurred. When it cleared, the flower had reappeared.

Clove couldn't believe what she'd just seen. Around her, the audience burst into enthusiastic applause.

Her mum stood up from the computer, a proud smile on her face. "What you just witnessed was the world's first ever public demonstration of time travel."

Clove drew in a sharp breath. Time travel? She hadn't realized *that* was what her parents were working on. She hadn't even known time travel was possible.

Her mum was talking again. "It has taken many, many years of research by a dedicated team of physicists and computer scientists to get to this point, and our work has only just begun. The current technology only operates on a small scale, in terms of both object size and time travelled.

With our new research grant, we hope to improve the equipment to allow for travel of living objects, and through time periods of more than a few seconds. We will also target the biggest issue with the current technology: survival." She gestured back to the glass box.

Clove's mouth gaped open. The rose's once vivid red petals had curled up and faded to a putrid brown, the stem was shrivelled and black. The rose was dead.

"Radiation levels experienced during the transfer are too high for anything to survive," her mum explained. "We will need to eliminate this issue in order to achieve our ultimate goal: human time travel. But I have high hopes that we will all be back here in several years to celebrate just that success."

The crowd burst into applause once more. Clove, completely overwhelmed with amazement, clapped as hard as she could. Once everyone had quietened down, her mum began answering scientific questions about the equipment, but Clove wasn't listening. She couldn't take her eyes off the time machine and the withered rose inside it. Her mum and dad had built an *actual time machine*.

As Clove watched a dead petal slowly fall from the flower, she made herself a promise. When she was older, she was going to work here with the machine – even if it meant spending all her free time between now and then studying. Then one day, when she'd helped to get the machine working, she was going to be the first person to travel through time.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

An Unauthorized Biography of Clove Sutcliffe

When we talk about Clove Sutcliffe from an academic perspective, it is clear she had a huge part to play in the history of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries. Scholars often forget, however, that she was a complex character in her own right, regardless of her historical impact. Her upbringing, parentage and childhood were far from typical, and this is worthy of study in itself.

File note: Extract from *An Unauthorized Biography of Clove Sutcliffe*, first published in 2344

ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND, 2056

Clove was sulking. She was supposed to be working on a programming problem that her dad had set her, but she'd just had a realization and she needed to dwell on it. Her realization was this: her best friend liked a boy. Clove had thought she would have a few more years before she lost her best friend to a *boy*. It wasn't just any boy, either. Judging by the message that Meg had just sent her, the boy she'd chosen to set her sights on was none other than *Clove's cousin.*

Nuts_Meg 18:02:45 DARLINGGGGG I HAVE A COMPLAINT.
LuckyClover 18:03:14 File it with the appropriate authorities.
Nuts_Meg 18:03:57 I am worryingly close to it, loser.
Nuts_Meg 18:04:02 Anyway why have you been holding out on me?? You have family members who are powerful babes! How could you not tell me about Alec?

As Clove reread Meg's last message, her heart clenched. She should have guessed this would happen. At Clove's sixteenth birthday party, Clove had watched Meg and Alec talking together in the garden. Meg's face had been turned towards Alec's, her mouth curved into a flirtatious grin. Meg's soft blonde hair had fluttered in the wind in that picture-perfect way it always did, like, if you touched it, it would be softer than air. Meg had pushed it away absently as she let out a laugh. Clove hadn't been able to hear her, but she didn't need to – she knew Meg's laugh better than her own.

She should have known then that Alec would destroy everything.

For some reason, just the idea of Meg and Alec together was stopping Clove from being able to get back to her programming. That was unusual, as most of the time programming helped her to feel grounded. She had started it as a way to deal with her hyperactivity. It gave her something to focus her attention on when her parents were frustrated with her endless energy.

When she was twelve she had been diagnosed as a "gifted child with hyperactivity issues", which seemed to Clove a rather extreme way of saying that she was a bit jumpy, intensely focused, and made easily impatient

with inactivity or slow teaching. She could get excessively dedicated to things she was interested in, though, which was one thing her teachers did appreciate. She could program for hours and hours with scant thought to the outside world, until her parents came to her room to force her to eat some dinner (or breakfast, if she'd been working all night).

Clove closed her code, so she could devote her attention to the imminent disaster of Meg's love life. She replied to Meg in a way she hoped didn't express her annoyance.

LuckyClover 18:04:26	being attracted to neither boys nor close blood relatives, it never occurred to me that he was a babe
LuckyClover 18:04:28	Sorry
Nuts_Meg 18:04:55	u r fired
LuckyClover 18:05:12	from being your personal dating website?
Nuts_Meg 18:05:33	Yes
LuckyClover 18:05:49	aw, mannn! The benefits were so great
LuckyClover 18:05:54	oh wait …
LuckyClover 18:05:59	… there weren't any
Nuts_Meg 18:06:17	girl's got jokes today I see
LuckyClover 18:06:43	yeah whatever. So did I tell you my dad's well cute, want me to set you up?
Nuts_Meg 18:07:03	sure, he's a silver fox.
LuckyClover 18:07:09	Ew
LuckyClover 18:07:11	EW
LuckyClover 18:07:21	well, that backfired
LuckyClover 18:07:33	heterosexuality is gross
Nuts_Meg 18:07:51	don't be heterophobic
LuckyClover 18:08:17	that isn't a thing
Nuts_Meg 18:08:37	it will be if you keep this up
LuckyClover 18:09:15	you must feel so discriminated against

Clove tried not to feel bitter, but if Meg couldn't fall for her, did she really have to fall for *her cousin*?

A message from Spart, their household Artificial Intelligence system, popped up on Clove's watch screen and interrupted her thoughts.

```
> Your mother is about to enter your room. Hide any and all
  illicit substances now.
```

Clove rolled her eyes at the message. Their AI lived in all their home computers and watches and picked up vocal instructions from anyone near by. Spart organized their lives, and tended to make a general nuisance of himself as he did so. Clove thought this was because her dad had programmed him with a few extra features, including a personality, which meant Spart tended to think he was human.

"Come in," she called to her mum.

"Can you come and sit with us for a moment, Clove?" her mum said after opening the door. Her voice sounded oddly nervous. "Your dad and I want to talk to you about something."

Clove said a quick goodbye to Meg. She was slightly relieved to leave the conversation before it got too serious. Then she followed her mum downstairs to the living room and settled on the sofa. Her curiosity increased as she watched her parents communicate with each other silently. They were so in sync that they sometimes seemed able to talk to each other without speaking at all.

A notification popped up on Clove's watch. Meg had replied to her goodbye with a snap of herself smiling dreamily into the camera. She'd written ALEC <3 across it in red. Annoyed, Clove swiped left to delete the message.

"Clove," her dad said, after clearing his throat, "we've got something to tell you." He let out an exhale. Clove saw her mum squeeze his hand. "It's time to tell you the truth. We think you're old enough now to understand it."

All Clove could hear was the blood pounding in her ears.

"Now, Clove, we love you. You are a wonderful, beautiful daughter—" He paused.

She stared at him. "What? What is it?" Her words came out croaky.

For an agonizing heartbeat, nobody spoke.

Then her dad continued. "This is hard to say…"

"What?" she said hoarsely. "Just tell me."

Her dad sucked in a long breath. "When you were born, something happened to my brother … who was your natural father. Something happened to him and your natural mother."

Clove felt her face go stiff. She couldn't think. She couldn't process anything he was saying. Adopted. *Adopted?* She didn't feel adopted. Wouldn't she have guessed?

"We raised you because they couldn't," her dad went on. "Genetically, I'm actually your uncle."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Clove asked. She felt betrayed, displaced, horrified, and a hundred other emotions she didn't know how to put into words.

Her parents exchanged glances. "Your birth mother made us promise to wait until you were old enough to understand," her mum said. "She was worried you might not be able to handle it. It's sensitive. But now you're sixteen, we thought—"

"What?" Clove said, in a choked-off half-laugh. "That *now* I can handle it?"

"It's more than just you being adopted. It's also … because of what happened to your natural parents … because of who they were." Her mum stared down at her hands.

Her dad shifted in his seat.

Clove was itching to move, her knee jumping with the hyperactive twitchiness that always came when she was upset. She leant forward to stop it. "Why? Who are they? What happened to them? Is it because they didn't want me? Is that what you're saying?" Clove was finding it hard to process her thoughts.

"Oh, Clove," her mum said. "No, no. It wasn't like that at all. They loved you very much."

"Clove," her dad said, trying to speak calmly. "Darlin', it's … it's hard to explain. They were—"

"They were *what*?" she demanded. *"Tell me."*

Clove stared at her parents – her *adoptive* parents, not her real parents at all – and felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She didn't understand. Nothing made any sense.

"I'm getting this all wrong. Clove, I'm sorry," her dad – *Tom* – said. "Let me explain properly." He faltered. Her mum – *Jen* – took his hand again. "Maybe it's best if I just come right out with it. What do you know about Matt Galloway and Kate Finchley?"

Clove knew quite a bit about them. Everybody did – they were famous. There was even a film about them. They were two students who, in 2039, had found evidence that the

English government was developing a biological weapon, with plans to release it on the rest of the world if there was another world war. The students had fled across the border into Scotland with an accomplice. Matt Galloway had been arrested, then later he had escaped from prison and disappeared without a trace, along with Kate. The English government had been dissolved as a result of what the students had found out. As such, they were credited with saving the world from biological attack. No one knew where they were now, though. They'd been missing for over sixteen years – the whole time Clove had been alive.

"The political activists?" Clove felt a little dizzy.

"Matt Galloway was my brother. He's your natural father. Kate Finchley was … *is* … your mother. It was us – the three of us – that uncovered the conspiracy by the English government."

Clove let out a noise: a kind of brittle bark. "You?" Surely her dad, who was going grey and spent all of his time hunched over a computer, hadn't… "*You* shut down the English government?"

"Yeah, that was us." Tom scratched the back of his neck. "Before I met Jen, I wasn't a professor of computer science. I was a hacker. It's not something I do any more. Everything that happened with Matt and Kate sort of scared me out of it."

Clove's throat was as dry as if she'd swallowed a spoonful of flour. She couldn't keep track of everything she was being told. Her dad was a hacker? Her dad wasn't her dad at all? Her real parents were *famous*?

"What happened? Where did they go? How did *you* end up with *me*?" she asked.

"After Matt was arrested," Tom said, "Kate and I came to my parents' house, in Scotland. Your mother was pregnant, and gave birth to you here. Afterwards, Kate decided to go back to England, to try and free Matt. He had evidence of the weapon with him when he was arrested, you see, so nobody believed us." Tom stopped, giving her a chance to ask questions. She blinked mutely at him, and he continued. "Kate thought that if she could break Matt out of prison, they could use the evidence to tell the world about the weapon and make sure it was destroyed before the English military used it in war. We didn't want Kate to go. It was a crazy plan. How could she break Matt out of prison? She wouldn't listen, and even though she hated to leave you, she thought it was something she had to do. I agreed to look after you until she returned." Tom stopped, swallowed.

"She never did," Jen finished. "Your parents disappeared. We know that Kate managed to break your father out of prison. How, I have no idea – it should have been impossible. But Kate managed it. They even managed to send evidence of the biological weapon to NATO shortly after Matt's escape without getting caught. The English government was shut down. But we don't know what happened to your parents after that. Tom didn't hear anything from either Kate or Matt after the prison breakout – they just disappeared."

"You just let her – my mother – go off alone? You *stayed here*?" Clove tried to stop her face from twisting into a grimace.

Tom stared at her, but he didn't look like he was seeing her at all. "I've regretted it every day since." He rubbed a thumb across his knuckles. "Officially, they are still classified as missing. That means they either managed to escape to France, or perhaps even back to Scotland, or they were secretly taken prisoner by the English government."

No one spoke for a while. Clove felt wobbly, a little sweaty. Eventually, she said, "Have you never tried to find them?"

Tom scrubbed his hands over his face. "I've enquired about them, and I've got dozens of online alerts set up for any mention of them. But there haven't been any leads in a long time. I would have done more, but I had to be careful. I'm still wanted by the English authorities – I can't go and physically look for them."

Jen patted Tom's hand. "It's been pretty scary over the years. When Tom first told me, I worried all the time that something would happen – that English spies would find him. He'd changed his surname, but that didn't make me feel any safer. I've learned to live with it, and we've been left alone, so far. Technically we're all in hiding."

"We're *in hiding from the law*?" Clove asked.

"Well, I am. The English law, at least," Tom admitted. "Your mum took on a lot when she decided to marry me: a single dad with a six-month-old baby and a secret history of crime."

Jen smiled at him, softly. "You're worth it, hon."

"I don't know how I'd have done it without you." Tom leant over and kissed Jen quickly. Clove couldn't bear to

watch. Her whole world was crumbling in front of her and they were acting like it was nothing.

"So I'm not really Clove Sutcliffe?" she asked, trying to bring them back to what was important.

"You are, legally. I took Jen's name when we married," Tom explained. "But if our family was a little more conventional, you'd be Clove Galloway."

"Galloway," Clove repeated, trying the name out. "Clove Galloway."

Hearing it aloud made it real. Suddenly it all clicked. Matt Galloway and Kate Finchley *were* her parents. Her real, actual parents. There was a film about them. About *her parents*. She'd watched it in a history class once. She'd had to *write a paper* about them.

They were her *parents*. They had saved the world.

Aloud, slightly hysterically, as if it was the most important thing she'd learnt that day, she said, *"MY PARENTS HAVE A WIKIPEDIA PAGE?"*

"They've probably got an IMDB page, too," Tom said, and despite the coldness that had begun to spread through her body, Clove began to laugh, too loud and too manic, and found she couldn't stop.

Eventually, after she'd calmed down and drunk a whole glass of water, Clove managed to ask some more appropriate questions. "Didn't my … mother leave any plans about what she was going to do after she rescued Matt?"

"No, she didn't. If she had a plan, she didn't share it with me." Tom carefully lined up a coaster with the edge

of the table. “But I didn’t push her to. I was done with it – I didn’t want her to go. But I couldn’t stop her. She was set on saving Matt. And in some ways it was a relief… I was out of it. Free.”

“What about me? How could she just leave me like that, with nothing?” Clove’s voice cracked.

“Kate left you with me and your grandparents,” Tom said. Somehow, to Clove, that didn’t seem enough. What was an uncle to real parents? What were her grandparents – who were great but getting kind of old and sleepy – to a mum and dad?

“She always meant to come back. It was only supposed to be temporary. And she did leave something for you,” Tom added. “A box of letters. They might tell you more. We never opened them. I promised Kate I wouldn’t. Spart, do you know where they are?”

Spart’s tinny voice came from his watch.

> The box is in a filing cabinet in the most eastern corner of the loft.

> There’s a nest of mice in the adjacent box. I have called an exterminator, who will arrive tomorrow at 1300 hours. Does this meet with your approval?

“Thanks, Spart. I’ll get it,” Jen said.

She stood up, kissing Clove’s forehead as she left the room. Clove breathed in the familiar scent of Jen’s perfume and wondered again how it had never occurred to her that this wasn’t her real mother. Shouldn’t she have known,

somehow? Shouldn't she be able to feel something like that?

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Clove asked, while they waited for Jen to return.

Tom sighed. "Kate – your mother, I mean – made me promise to wait until you were older, so that you would understand it all properly. I was happy to do that. For a long time when you were young the situation was still very dangerous. We couldn't risk you mentioning anything about it at school. After Matt escaped from prison, the English authorities were searching for him and Kate for years. Even though they had saved the world, Matt's prison break meant that they were the most wanted criminals in England, so I was in hiding. While they could never do anything about me officially as I'm under Scotland's protection, we always thought that they might try to do something to me in secret, to get information about your parents somehow. It was imperative that no one knew who I really was, or where Tom Galloway had gone. Your grandparents – my mum and dad – came into hiding with us. They changed their names too.

"If our location had been leaked, all of our lives would have been in danger. Whatever the English government did to Kate and Matt in the end … that would have happened to me, and maybe to my parents and to you and Jen too. We couldn't have told you the truth, not back then." Tom smiled slightly as he said, "A part of me did wonder if you knew, though, somehow. Do you remember after you watched the film about them, darlin'? You used to play with Meg at being 'Kate and Matt', running away from the police."

Clove gasped. "I remember that. I always wanted to be

Matt. I used to steal your glasses so I looked like him. Meg was always Kate because she liked her hair." The memory caused an ache in her chest. What would Tom and Jen have been feeling, watching them play all those years ago? It must have been basically impossible to keep the secret hidden.

"It was just easier not to tell you anything," Tom continued. "And we'd built up lives here. We didn't want to have to go on the run. Especially not with our work at St Andrews. Everything was just coming together with the time machine. It wasn't worth risking it, not when all of our work was at stake too."

Clove swallowed. She stared at her knees. She knew that Tom was watching her with concern, but she couldn't meet his eye. It was clear that he was relieved to have finally given up the burden of secrecy.

When Jen returned with the box, she put it on Clove's lap. "Take your time reading through it. You don't even have to look at it now if you don't want to. It's a lot to take in. If you have any questions, we're here to answer them. We love you, Clove."

Clove closed her eyes and tried to let Jen's hug calm her, the way it had throughout her childhood. But all she could think was that it should have been a different pair of hands holding her. Her mother should have been someone else.