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opening extract from

The Shapeshifter: Finding the Fox

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BEFORE

A dark shape came to him in the soft grey mist of not quite awake and not quite asleep. It moved around the small strip of floor next to his bed but didn't frighten him, exactly. The way it breathed and the way its clawed feet snagged hesitantly on the thin carpet told him it was sad. That it had known great pain.

And it was leaving.



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Dax Jones spent a lot of time in the back garden. Thinking about his attitude.

It was an unlovely garden; a rectangle of uneven grass with charmless grey-green bushes at its edge, split by a concrete path which led to the shed, behind which was a compost heap. A washing line stretched between two posts almost the entire length of it, kinked by pegs and sagging in the middle.

Today the back door was banged shut so hard the panes rattled. Through the glass Dax could see Gina shooting the top and bottom bolts across, the undersides of her pudgy upper arms swinging violently with the effort. 'You can do some weeding

while you're out there,' she said, her voice muted by the glass, but still sharp with dislike. Dax hadn't had the right expression on his face during lunch. Even though he ate all the burnt bits without complaint, his attitude had sneaked up on him, apparently. Again.

'Alice and I are going to town and when we get back I'll expect to see the garden weed-free. We won't be back till teatime, so if you need a drink you can use the outside tap.'

She regarded him through the glass for a moment. Dax tried to remain still and expressionless. 'And you can take that stuck-up look off your face!' she suddenly snapped, and then turned on her heel and was gone.

Dax let out a sigh of relief and sank down onto one of the white plastic patio chairs on the four feet of concrete outside the patio doors. The mildewy water lying in its lowest curve immediately seeped into the seat of his jeans. Dax stood up again. He was perfectly still and perfectly quiet. At the front of the house he heard the door open and slam shut, Alice's shrill voice from the drive, Gina's reply, keys jingling and, finally, the car departing.

In the silence that followed, anyone watching the boy in the back garden might have thought he was calm. Meditating, even. And it was true that Dax often *seemed* calm.

Dax never shouted. Dax barely even raised his voice at home. It wasn't that he didn't get angry. He sometimes got so angry he could explode. There had been times when he'd been so angry he'd frightened even himself, like the summer evening when Gina had cleared out all his wildlife books and art stuff, and given them to a jumble sale collector. 'When you've got your *own* house you can fill it with junk,' she'd said to him, hands on her hips on the upstairs landing, *daring* him to argue. He'd been so filled with fury and bitterness that he'd nearly—truly, *honestly*—run at her and pushed her down the stairs. He had actually *seen* himself do it, *felt* the warm gasp of air from her shocked mouth in the millisecond before he shoved, heard her shrieks of rage and the noisy, satisfying thuds as she bounced from step to step and hit the hallway floor like a sack of sand.

Only, of course, he hadn't. He'd just screwed up his fists in his pockets and dug his fingernails into his palms so hard that four tiny crescents

could still be found in each an hour later. And then he'd gone quietly back into his room to look at the gap under his bed, where his treasured books, paper, and charcoal had once been. It looked back at him, balefully, like an empty eye socket.

Over the years he'd learned a trick. When he started to feel that shake in the pit of his stomach, that feeling like an earthquake under the planet's crust, getting ready to spew blazing molten rock right up and out into space, he pushed down hard with his mind. He pushed down hard with an imaginary thick metal bin-lid and squashed the angry lava back down into his core. In his head he tried to see his lava cooling down and going dull red and then grey and clunky like in those pictures of the lower slopes of Mount Etna. Eventually he'd make it go solid and cold.

The only problem with this was that several volcanoes' worth of cold anger was knocking around inside Dax Jones. He went around with an almost permanent stomach ache. Even he didn't realize how heavy it made him.

He walked the concrete path to the shed to find a hoe for breaking up the weedy patch that

ran from the compost heap to the scrubby low brambles at the far end of the garden. When Gina had said 'weed-free' he'd known better than to think she was joking.

The small shed was a warm, woody chamber of old balls of raffia, plastic pots, gardening tools, and bags of peat. Its door was unlocked, but kept from swinging in the wind by a stout piece of wood, which turned a 180 degree arc on a stout nail. It was loose and you had to watch it didn't swing down and clout you on the temple as you walked in. Dax shoved it up, holding it in place as he pulled open the door and wandered into the little shed. He spent a fair bit of time in here on days when he was 'thinking about his attitude'.

He rummaged into the far corner for the hoe, and as he was trying to untangle it from the skinny grip of the rake, there was a sudden gust of wind outside and, with a woody thud, the shed door banged shut. Dax hauled out the hoe with a final tug and had turned to go back outside when there was a tiny squeaking sound and a small clop. It wasn't until he pushed the door that he realized what this meant. The thick wooden latch had just flopped back down. It had often done this, but

never in the seconds that followed a sharp north-easterly gust of wind. Never just as the shed door had slammed shut, with a boy inside.

No matter how unlikely this chain of events might seem, Dax realized, with a jolt in his carefully quietened body, that it just *had.* He was shut in. He shoved hard against the door. It didn't budge at all. He gritted his teeth and eyed the small window, but unless he was prepared to smash it, that was no good. It didn't open. There was a loose plank at the back, behind the bags of peat. He pulled the heavy vinyl sacks aside and prodded at it, but there was no way he could fit through the gap.

With a sigh, Dax sank on to the floor of the shed and prepared to wait out the three or four hours until his stepmum and half-sister came back. By now they would probably have arrived at the giant indoor shopping centre on the edge of town, where they would spend an astonishing amount of money on something pink and glittery to go either on some part of Alice, or in some part of her room. A pinker and more doll-filled room than Alice's you couldn't hope to find—but there was always something that could be added to it.

Dax had the smallest bedroom at the darkest end of the house, where a damp patch leached through in the corner under the eaves. The window in it was high up and shallow, like a letter-box. A network of tiny wires ran through the glass, so if you smashed it the pane wouldn't shatter, but just hang there like a crunched-up clear mint. The mean amount of light that filtered in through it came only for a couple of hours at the end of the day. The room was just big enough for his bed and a high, narrow chest of drawers. The walls were painted a dull khaki green and the curtains were brown.

His dad had plans to extend the house one day, over the garage. It would mean a proper sized room for him. But his dad was almost never there. He worked on the oil rigs, way out at sea. He was gone for weeks and weeks at a time, and when he came back there was so much that Gina wanted doing, or Alice wanted doing, that Dax didn't really get much attention. Besides, his dad always looked so exhausted when he came back that Dax was glad to be the only one who didn't add to it. So his tiny room looked set to stay tiny. Dax told himself it was like a den. Like a fox

hole. At night, when his letterbox window was tilted open, Dax could sometimes hear foxes in the woods at the edge of the estate.

And more than once he'd heard the foxes in the garden. You could smell, sometimes, that a fox had been through. In the garden shed, Dax could smell it now. A hot, sour, almost grassy smell. Dax wasn't sure whether he liked it or not, but mixed in with the woody smell of the little hut, it was oddly comforting.

As the late morning wore into afternoon, the sun came out, and the little shed grew very hot. Dax began to get thirsty. He was hungry, but being thirsty was worse. His tongue felt like sandpaper in his mouth. He remembered reading somewhere that nomads crossing the desert used to suck stones to keep their tongues from drying out. He thought seriously about sucking one of the stubby little screws in his father's toolbox, behind the peat bags. He would, soon, if this didn't get better.

He looked up to one of the little wooden shelves and thought about the bottles there. Two were dark green and very dusty. One was clear glass, with a lemonade label on it. It almost certainly *wasn't* lemonade. It was practically certain

to be white spirit or turpentine or something else that would burn your tongue off if you tried to drink it, but still, to see it there, looking so *much* like lemonade, as the shed grew hotter and hotter, and the sweat began to make his T-shirt stick to his back, was torture.

For a while, Dax kept his mind off the bottle and its contents of almost certainly *not* lemonade, by doing little drawings of a fox on the chipboard floor of the shed with a bit of old red brick.

The fox stood, with one paw raised, bushy tail out straight, its furry neck craned round and its sharp nose pointing back over its shoulder, as if suddenly called by someone. It wasn't bad. Dax was quite a good artist. His teacher had said he should try for art school one day.

Gina had snorted when she'd heard that. As far as she was concerned, Dax was going to stop sponging and start working for his keep as soon as he turned sixteen. The world had enough charcoal drawings of boats and oil paintings of eagles, thanks very much!

The fox looked and looked, back over its shoulder. Dax stared hard at it, ignoring the little sploshes of sweat that were now dripping off his face.

He felt his eyeballs getting hot, he stared so hard. The fox began to slide across the woodchip. It slithered, quivered, waved in the heat haze, seemed to flick its eye back towards Dax. In the distance, he could *hear* a fox bark, high and shrill. Through the gap in the planks at the back end of the shed, that acid stink of wild dog pulsed through on a draught.

Dazed and drugged by the heat and the smell and the brick outline of the fox that waved and shimmied across the floor, Dax suddenly snapped his head up in a panic. The air felt hot and thick in his throat. He dug his fingers hard into the chunk of brick, trying to ward off the panic, but it just kept rising. He had to get a drink. He *had* to!

Madly, stupidly, Dax leapt up and lunged at the high wooden shelf. One of the green dusty bottles fell off and hit him hard on the bridge of his nose, sending a bullet of coppery taste to the back of his throat. A large, dead spider, folded into a crunchy spinning wheel, fell onto the red-brick fox with a papery thud. Dax thought, oddly, of brazil nuts. Even as these things happened, his hands had fumbled across to the white glass bottle, with the faded lemonade label, and were twisting

the dusty screw cap off the top. It was on tight . . . maybe it was fresh, unopened, wet sweet lemonade! It would be hot, but it would be *wet.* It would be a *drink.*

At the third twist, the loose metal ring beneath the cap scored a fine cut into Dax's right palm, and then the top gave. The bottle made a small popping noise, as if it was, indeed, full of lemonade. But the hot scent it punched up into air was not lemonade. It was white spirit. It hit Dax right between the eyes, making them water and his nose fill up with an unbearable tickling sensation. An unexpectedly forceful sob came out along with his sneeze. He dropped the bottle, and the smell of white spirit rose like an evil gas, cutting across every other scent in the shed. The spirit that hit the bottom of his jeans felt at first shockingly cool, and then began to get warmer and warmer.

Dax felt dizzy and sick. He knew he was going to faint when a sound like taps being turned on to their very fullest swept into his head. His last thought before he fell was that he ought to get his nose out of the gap in the planks at the back of the shed, to get to fresh air. Or he would possibly never wake up again.