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opening extract from

Running the Risk

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1

The girl in grey fled across the forest—and the shapeshifter followed.

She had been running now for thirty minutes or more, and fine beads of sweat were forming on her upper lip. The creature was closing on her; she could tell. Beyond the faint chorus of bird-song she could hear only her own breathing and the thud of her expensive running shoes, but she knew without doubt that it *would* spring any time now. It would spring and she would be beaten. Suddenly, with a scream of surrender, she hopped up onto a fallen log and spun around to face it, hands on her hips, breathing hard. The creature leapt.

It landed softly on the log beside her without so much as a clip of its claws. It sat, curled its tail about its forepaws and regarded her with a grin which looked somewhat startling on the face of a young, red fox.

Lisa hurrumphed with annoyance. She sat down heavily and picked some leaf litter from the instep of her running shoe. 'You have a natural advantage, Dax!' she said grumpily. The shadow of the fox flickered and curled and now Dax was checking out his own shabby trainers.

'What, with a hundred and thirty pound running shoes against these old scruffs?' he teased. 'Don't beat yourself up. You really had my lungs working this time. You're definitely getting faster.'

'Hmm.' Lisa pursed her lips and folded her arms. He hoped she wasn't going to stay in this mood. Running normally made her feel good, even when he beat her, which he always did when he was DaxFox—as DaxBoy he wouldn't have a hope. Lisa was the fittest twelve year old he'd ever met.

'What's up?' he asked, knowing he probably wouldn't get an answer.

'Nothing,' she muttered, getting to her feet.

'More messages?' Dax peered at his friend. A well-turned-out blonde (babe in waiting, was what Gideon called her), she didn't look the type to be bothered by more than where her next new outfit was coming from, but, sadly, Lisa had had more to be bothered by in the past twelve months than most people get in a lifetime.

'Nothing!' she said, with that warning note in her voice.

'Come on—let's run back to the others now,' said Dax. 'I won't shift this time—so it'll be fair.'

She glanced at him. 'You're just humouring me!' she said, but with a flicker of interest. Lisa *loved* winning.

'Yep!' agreed Dax. 'But you've got to give me a head start!' He bounded off the log and away back through the trees and Lisa gave him precisely five seconds before giving chase. She passed ten seconds later. Good. He hoped the extra sprint might do the trick for her. When the messages came they could sometimes be very dark and unpleasant. Often they came with visions. Not that you'd ever know with Lisa. There was no airy-fairy stuff about the girl; no spooky voice and fluttering eyelids.

When Lisa got a trance the most you'd be likely to notice was a slight rubbing of her left shoulder while she stared hard at something. Sometimes she got a cold patch of pins and needles there. 'Like they're leaning on it, yakking in my ear!' she'd complained once.

Frankly, Lisa did not hold with the spirit world communicating with the earthly one—especially when the spirits chose to communicate through *her*, which they'd been pretty much queuing up to do since last summer. There was no question that her unwelcome gift was a useful one, though. Lisa could find lost things in a matter of seconds. You only had to ask and she'd raise her eyes to the heavens and mutter at you, close them briefly for a second, and then tell you exactly where your missing sock or key or bar of chocolate was. Sometimes she'd get fed up and say testily, 'Don't be so lazy. Have a *look* before you ask me!' She always knew when they hadn't.

Finding lost *people* was the less pleasant part of her ability. Usually they were *dead* lost people, or worse, people who were lined up for being dead fairly soon.

When he finally caught up with her, she was

back with Gideon and Mia in the clearing. Gideon was still lying on the grass, half asleep in the warm spring sun, his freckled arm covering his eyes, a ladybird, settled on his tufty fair hair, and Mia was sitting up, her arms around her knees, peering at Lisa closely. Going by Mia's expression, the extra sprint hadn't helped Lisa much. Lisa was flopped down on her knees, dragging the scrunchy band out of her hair and shaking her ponytail loose with a growl of frustration. 'Eeeesh! I *hate* these ones!' she cursed. She worked her fingers rapidly across her scalp and then down onto her left shoulder, as best she could reach. Mia moved across to her and touched her head gently with one hand. Within a second Lisa's face softened and the stressed lines across her brow eased away. Even two metres away, Dax could feel the soft cool pulse of Mia's healing.

'She all right?' he panted, skidding to his knees next to the two girls.

'She's fine,' muttered Lisa, grumpily, but not with much aggression. 'It's just this wifty-wafty, faffy, fluffy, blit-blat . . . ' she tailed off, but they all got it. The thing Lisa hated most about her ability was the vague bit; the sense of *something* about to happen, but no firm idea of what.

'Is it one of us?' asked Mia.

'Yes—no—I don't know!'

'Well, stop grinding your perfect little teeth—you know it won't help!' said Gideon, caustically, from under his arm. 'The more manic you get about it the harder it'll be to work it out!'

Lisa's eyes flashed and Dax thought serious trouble was brewing for Gideon.

'Gideon! You could be a bit more sympathetic,' reproved Mia, narrowing her lovely violet eyes at him.

Gideon sat up and grinned. 'You know that doesn't help either,' he said. 'She's like a bad-tempered dog with nothing to bite. Let her get it out of her system—go on, girl!' He threw an apple from the remains of their picnic at her and Lisa caught it with an athlete's reflexes and hurled it hard back at him. Gideon let it get to within a centimetre of his face and then stopped it dead with a blink. But he gave an obliging yelp, as if the fruity missile had smacked his nose, instead of floating obediently in front of it.

'Again?' he said, scooping it out of its stasis and offering it up for another throw.

Lisa shook her head. 'No . . . it's no good if it doesn't actually *hit* you. It's much more satisfying

when you squeak for real.' She got to her feet. 'Thanks anyway, though, Gid. Let's get back now. Dad'll wonder where we all are, and I expect Marguerite is doing a gigantic tea.'

Dax and Gideon exchanged pleased smiles. Marguerite's teas were fantastic. In fact, everything at Lisa's mansion was fantastic, from the mosaic-lined swimming pool in the beautiful seven acres of gardens to their huge guest bedroom with its own bathroom; Mia had one to herself! Marguerite was a fantastic cook and housekeeper. The butler was pretty cool, too. Lisa's dad was rich, and there was no hiding it. Lisa was oblivious to it; she'd been born into wealth—but the evidence still made Dax, Gideon, and Mia gasp.

'Imagine what it's like, living at Lisa's *all the time*!' marvelled Gideon as they walked along the winding woodland path back to the estate. In fact, the wood itself was on the estate and also belonged to Lisa's dad. 'No wonder she didn't want to come to Cola Club. She's got her own horse and everything!'

'Her dad's all right, too,' said Dax.

Maurice Hardman was an intelligent man who had made huge amounts of money in something

to do with metal. He was delighted to have his daughter back for the holidays and found it hard to refuse her anything—even having a bunch of peculiar kids coming to stay.

'Well, *my* dad's all *right*,' muttered Gid. 'But he *never* gives me ponies and swimming pools! It's not fair!' He did a pretend pout.

In fact, he'd had a great time at home in his little house in Sussex, telling his dad about their adventures and trying so hard to lift the television with his mind power, that in the end his dad gave up trying to watch the sport (telekinesis plays havoc with the reception) and went off to get the radio.

It made Dax feel a little bleak to think about the good times his friends were having with their fathers. As members of the Cola Club not one of them had a mother still living, which made their dads doubly precious. Dax had only seen *his* dad for a total of four days since last summer. All through his first term at Tregarren College in Cornwall, he'd been expecting his father to pay a visit. He'd had letters and postcards saying that Robert Jones *would* come—soon! Couldn't wait to come and see everything, and find out how a son of

his had been selected by the education department of the *government,* no less, to go to this very special school.

Of course, he didn't know that the college was filled with something *other* than extra brainy students. These students were all Children of Limitless Ability, each with extraordinary powers, such as telekinesis, clairvoyance, healing, illusion and—in Dax's case only—shapeshifting. Across the course of eighteen months, 109 had been found and safely gathered in.

If Dax's dad *had* visited, he would have gone through a careful briefing procedure before being allowed on to the campus. Strictly speaking, no student should show off his or her powers outside the carefully controlled 'Development' classes, but it was impossible to keep it from spilling out from time to time. As you wandered down the crooked cliffside paths of Tregarren, towards the churning blue-green Cornish sea, you were apt to see at least one or two students floating tennis balls or *fading out* in front of your eyes or staging small fireworks displays from their open palms.

But Dax's dad, like only a handful of other dads and some stepmums, knew nothing about

his child's ability. And he'd been at home for so short a time, sharing those precious hours with his wife, Gina, and their daughter Alice, that there had been no opportunity to say anything.

Gideon noticed Dax's expression and made a guess. 'Didn't get much time with your dad, then?'

Dax sighed. 'If you added up all the minutes we spent without Gina yakking in one of his ears, or Alice sticking to his back like a limpet in a pink dress—about half an hour, I reckon.'

'Half an hour should've been long enough!' chided Gideon. He couldn't believe that not one of Dax's small family knew about his ability. 'You've got to tell him, Dax! He should know!'

'Yeah—well—like I said, it was minutes at a time, and, Gid—how do you say it? By the time I'd nearly got to it, Alice was back in with another revolting doll to show him, or Gina was . . . *rubbing his shoulders*!' Dax made an expression of revulsion. He had no love for his stepmother, who had been given to slapping and poking and locking him outside in the garden for being 'ungrateful' or showing 'attitude'. Of course, as soon as Owen Hind had shown up, telling her that Dax was 'very special' and selected for education at a top college,

at no expense, Gina's regard for him had magically changed.

He didn't know what was worse, when he'd first arrived home back at Christmas. The Gina of old, who was spiteful and unloving—but at least honest about it (when his father wasn't looking)—or the shiny *new* Gina, who put extra chips on his plate and called him 'darling'. Of course, she couldn't hide her calculating expression from him *all* the time. She was trying to work out how she and her daughter might benefit from having a 'genius' in the family. She was also afraid. Afraid that Dax, now grown an inch taller and looking so well on the Cornish sea air and the good college food, might one day tell his father about his stepmother's nasty little ways back in the old days.

Of course, Gina didn't know that Dax sometimes *thanked* her for her mean nature. He often wondered if, without being locked out one autumn afternoon, he would ever have achieved his first *shift.* He'd got trapped and panic stricken in the hot garden shed and that was how it all began. At first it seemed that only extreme fear, panic, or anger could bring it about. An encounter with two bullies who'd beaten up his school friend Clive

was the next occasion when Dax had shifted. Wild with fury, he'd sent them on their way bloodied and screaming. That same day, Owen had arrived.

Gideon was still pulling a face about the idea of Gina rubbing Robert Jones's shoulders. 'Yuck!' he said, sympathetically. 'But, Dax—hasn't he *asked* yet? Isn't he curious? I mean, mate, you're quite bright and all that, but anyone can see you're not a genius! You're not weird enough. Well—not in the *normal* way.'

Dax wondered how somebody could be *normally* weird, but he let it go. 'No—he's never asked. In fact, you know what? If I had to use one word to describe what my dad is like around me, it would be . . . *nervous*.'

'Nervous? You're kidding!'

'No.' Dax stepped carefully over an ivy-clad log, falling back from Mia and Lisa up ahead. His face was a mask of control, but Gideon could see the hurt and anger glimmering behind it.

'What does he have to be nervous about? Especially if he doesn't know!'

'He doesn't just *not* ask me. He *never* asks me. When I talk about Cola Club, even about the football pitch or the lido, or Owen's woodsman lessons,

he sort of grins and nods—and then ruffles my hair and changes the subject. It's . . . weird. Like he *does* know something, but doesn't want to admit it.'

'You should just say it!' declared Gideon. 'Just look him in the eye one day, and say "Dad—I turn into a fox." That'd make him pay attention.'

Dax gave his friend a *look.*

'*Well!*' protested Gideon. '*Show* him then! That'd really make him stop in his tracks.'

Dax sighed. 'Maybe it's best that he doesn't know. I don't think he could handle it. All the time he was there he seemed, I don't know, so sort of . . . *brittle.* He didn't even look at me very much. And when he got called back to the rig early last week (just like—ha! ha!—he did at Christmas), he seemed happy to go.'

Up ahead, Lisa had stopped again, and Mia was looking at her with some concern.

'What is it?' said Gideon, as they caught up. Lisa was rubbing her shoulder again and looking very stressed.

'They just won't let *up* today!' she said, through gritted teeth. 'I'm going to have to run some more.' Lisa sometimes found that the only way to shake off the nagging of the spirit world was to outrun

it. Dax felt a sudden shiver of concern. Whatever it was that was trying to get Lisa's attention was snagging at his too.

'You two go on back,' he said to Mia and Gideon. 'I'll run with Lisa some more.'

They nodded, understanding, and headed for the distant gates to the Hardman house.

'C'mon,' said Dax and shifted. He fled away fast, giving her something to chase and planning to let her catch up soon. It worked. She gave an indignant yelp and was after him in a second. After a few minutes he slowed down and waited for her to catch up and they settled into a companionable jog.

Any idea what it's about? he sent her, but she shook her head.

It's just too vague, she sent back. *I think . . . Uh-oh! Watch out, Dax—DOG!*

Dax cursed himself for not paying more attention to his fox senses. Dog had been *clearly* on his radar for at least two minutes, but he'd thought it was some way off. It was, in fact, but as the Labrador and its owners breached the top of a small hill they could see clearly down the track to where the twelve-year-old girl was running

side-by-side with a fox. To shape-shift back to a boy now would be a disaster; he would be seen. So Dax simply slid into the undergrowth like molten red metal and Lisa ran on up the hill, trying to look as if she'd never been in the company of wildlife.

I'll see you back! Lisa intoned in his head, and Dax moved swiftly away from the main path until he could no longer hear or smell the humans and the dog. He paused under the waxy green leaves of a rhododendron bush and considered whether to shift back into DaxBoy and rejoin Lisa on the path, further up, or whether to just run back as DaxFox. It would be laborious to run back with Lisa in boy form. Dax was quite fit as a boy, but always felt horribly heavy and lumbering compared to his fox state. Whenever he ran he would instinctively want to shift. Sometimes he felt more natural as a fox; a thought which worried him slightly.

As he pondered, a sudden hot burst of fox sense tore through him. Dax felt the fur on his back prickle and a pulse of *terror* suddenly hit his nose. The scent of another fox, in fear of its *life*, was so strong that Dax literally jumped into the

air, catching his ears on the tangle of branch and leaf above him. At that moment a blur of copper streaked across the woodland in front of him. It was a vixen and as she shot past, he picked up one message in her terrified head, which she'd sent directly at him. 'GO!' Dax didn't hesitate. He leapt away after her, sensing that something truly terrible was in pursuit.

Dax was very fast, but the vixen was faster. He saw only the flash of white at the end of her tail before she was gone from his view. Behind him he could feel a rumbling force; the very ground was singing with it, as if a fast and deadly train were approaching on a track. He couldn't work out, at first, what it could be. The dog perhaps—but no, it had to be more than that. Most dogs were daft, lollopy things, standing almost no chance of outsmarting a fox and often only wanting to play.

Most dogs, said a cold voice inside his head, as he continued to pelt headlong through the springy branches, leaving a flurry of disturbed leaves in his wake. But what about pack hounds? As soon as the thought formed Dax could smell them, perhaps half a mile away. Hounds. Horses. Humans.

Three awful aitches. Now, with a cold, sick horror creeping around his throat and shoulders, he could hear the guttural baying of the dogs. Dogs who wanted no toy, no game, no choc drops. Dogs who wanted blood. *His* blood.