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Opening extract from

The Shapeshifter: Going To Ground

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1

Something was tickling his feet. His bare toes had come into contact, buried under the quilt, with something odd. Something tickly.

Dax Jones turned from right to left in bed, a pale lilac light beginning to filter through his closed eyelids. Flipping his pillow over for some pleasing coolness, he rested his cheek again and instinctively pushed his feet down once more. Something tickled.

With a spasm of shock, he jerked back his feet and shot upright in his bed, nearly knocking his head on the low shelf that clung to the wall with metal brackets. Dax's heart raced. Something weird was in his bed. Something very weird. He

flickered on the edge of shifting, but needed his hands to pull back the quilt.

With a deep breath he leaned forward, seized the pink bedding, flicked it back—and almost screamed when he saw the eyes. Staring, blue, unmoving. Lifeless eyes in the face of a severed head. It was the silky blonde hair which had tickled his toes. Dax didn't scream. He shuddered and leapt to his feet, banged on the wall, and bellowed 'ALICE!'

His eight-year-old half-sister arrived rather too quickly, making Dax instantly suspicious. 'What?' she asked, innocently, pulling her pink dressing gown around her and frowning with fake concern.

Dax narrowed his eyes at her and then pointed to the head in his bed. It still stared, motionless, at the ceiling, a waxy smile on its lips. Blood-red lipstick had smeared across the curve of one rigid cheek.

'Oh! There you are, Barbie!' cooed Alice, and tucked the head under one arm, like the ghost of Anne Boleyn, a naughty smile on her face. The almost-life-sized plastic doll's head was set upon a shoulder-shaped pedestal and sold in great numbers to little girls who wanted to play at hair

and make-up. It was usually to be found on Alice's dressing table, festooned in ribbons and hair clips and smothered with glittery eye gel and strawberry scented lip gloss. It was disgusting at the best of times, but to think he'd had his *toes* on it. He grimaced with revulsion.

'The next time you do that, I'll put it in Dad's vice and turn the lever until its eyes pop out!' growled Dax at his sister but she was already running out, giggling.

Dax shuddered again and looked around the small room that had been his sleeping place for the last few weeks. Once it had been his: khaki green, damp, and dark. Since his departure to Tregarren College last year, though, Alice's mum, Gina, had swept in and redecorated it in shades of lilac and pink. Shortly after, Alice had swept in and stuffed the room full of dolls. Dolls of all shapes and sizes simpered down from shelves on the walls, pouted up from little wicker chairs in the corners and grinned madly through the pink net curtain at the high windowsill. Baby dolls, teenage dolls, ballerinas, belly dancers, funky street kid dolls, medieval queen dolls, and more and more baby dolls. Whatever Dax did in this room,

he had a rapt, staring, smirking audience. And if he ever *did* hit his head on the shelf over the bed, one of them went 'I love you more than bunnies!' and gave an insane gurgle.

Dax flopped back into bed with a groan and eyed the gap above the windowsill dolls, where a narrow top window flipped outwards behind the pink net curtain, allowing some fresh air in. He felt a flicker again and took another deep breath. Not to gather his courage this time, but to squash his desperate urge to shift and get outside the house. He'd been back here for what seemed like an eternity, since he and his friends had fled the wreckage of Tregarren College. And, as the new college wasn't quite ready, it would be at least another two weeks before he could get away from Alice and her dolls and Gina and her tight, suspicious smile.

Gina was his stepmother. She wasn't a wicked stepmother. She wasn't a nice one either. It had been some time now since he'd had to endure all the little spiteful acts that had shaped their relationship for the last eight years—poking and slapping, undermining his confidence, throwing out his favourite possessions, and banishing him

to the garden for any reason she could think of; sometimes for no reason at all. Dax had been only four when he met Gina, just a few months after his mother had died. Gina had arrived so *thoroughly* in his life, replacing the mother he had already begun to struggle to remember, and supplying a sister in less than a year. Dax's dad had got a job on the oil rigs not long after. He was never home much; he seemed to be happier in the company of the North Sea.

Of course, Alice and Gina had got used to having both the men in their family at long distance over the past year. Dax wished they could get used to it again. Soon. He missed Gideon and Lisa and Mia—and it was so hard to talk to them on the phone. You never knew who might be listening. Dax sighed and got up again. He tugged the pink net along the taught wire that held it, allowing a more normal colour of daylight through, and scenting wild creatures on the breeze that wandered in; creatures foraging in the woodland some way off behind the back garden boundary. He sucked the air in hungrily and then glanced at his bedroom door. It was early. Gina wasn't even up yet and she usually had a lie-in on a Sunday. Alice probably

wouldn't bother him again for a while, now that her doll's head joke had gone so well. He might have half an hour or more . . . long enough?

Dax wrestled with his conscience and tussled with his instincts. Then wrestled with his conscience again. He leaned across the narrow room to a chest of drawers and eased the top drawer open. Inside it lay a folded piece of thick white paper, bearing a governmental crest. Below it was a list of instructions. Non-negotiable instructions, which he read again.

1. Please remain calm and relaxed and enjoy your break at home.

2. DO NOT, under any circumstances, display your COLA abilities to anybody—indoors or out.

3. If you have ANY worries or concerns contact your allocated counsellor IMMEDIATELY, at any time (24 hours) on the number advised.

4. Remember to call in at weekends to Control (on weekdays your tutor will call in on your behalf).

5. REPORT immediately any changes in your physical or emotional health, to your allocated counsellor.

6. If you suspect, through accident, that your COLA status has been revealed to anyone other than those who already know, contact Control IMMEDIATELY.

The information ended with an assurance that a new base for the Colas was being organized as swiftly as possible, and the new college term would begin in the early autumn. Dax knew it was happening fast. All across the UK, more than a hundred twelve and thirteen year olds were in danger of revealing their incredible secrets at any moment. At first he was amazed that the government department in charge of looking after the Children Of Limitless Ability seemed so relaxed about the situation. In the last two years a collection of children had suddenly begun to display the most incredible powers—healing, vanishing, creating utterly convincing illusions, telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance. All the stuff you thought only happened in books and films, had begun to happen—to *actually* happen—to these children only. One of the Colas could even shapeshift into other creatures.

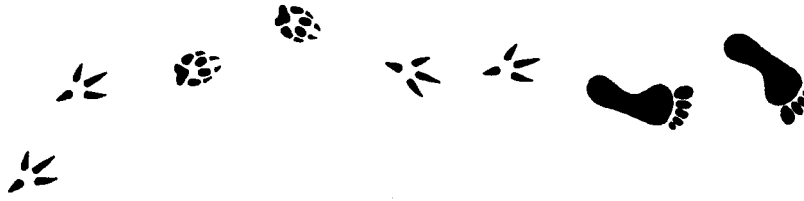
Dax listened across the landing for noises from Gina's room. Nothing. He closed his bedroom door quietly, still weighing up the risks. Of course, by now he knew that the government wasn't really relaxed about the situation at all. Since the Cola's remote college in Cornwall had been destroyed,

measures to find a new, safe, and suitable location would have been pushed through at top levels, at top speed. The Colas were being tutored at home and kept out of harm's way until the new location was ready. And if they *did* misbehave the government would know. *Immediately.* Dax knew this. He could hear it. Not just in the occasional extra click on the telephone line, but in the very air around him.

More wildlife scents cruised across from the window and Dax folded the crested paper and put it back in the drawer, sliding it shut. Half an hour, surely. Half an hour. If he went from here, it was only Alice and Gina he had to worry about—and sooner or later they were going to have to know anyway. Did he dare? He closed his eyes and focused on the electrical pulses of communication in the air around him. Yep . . . it was Mike and Dave on duty today. Mike, who liked to do crosswords, and Dave, who liked to talk, quietly, about his girlfriend troubles. In the street at the front of the house they would be camped, as still as they could be, in the dark blue Transit van that had been parked a few doors along since mid-May. Dax grinned. They still didn't understand

what it was they were expected to report back about . . . if they ever saw it.

'Well,' mumbled Dax to himself, making a decision as he pulled on his jeans, T-shirt, and trainers, 'they might see it today. If they're looking.' Just like that, he'd decided. And with barely a thought he had already shifted. He was at the window in a second, balancing on the thin metal of the frame, his piercing eyes taking in the tiniest detail of any movement in the garden, the wasteland beyond and the dark wood that lay behind the allotments. He dropped down two feet to the concrete outer sill, paused to read the air, and then shot into the sky.



2

It was incredible to think that this was only the third occasion that he had done this. As the earth fell away beneath him and wisps of light early-morning cloud whirled away from him, Dax felt a joy that was unique to this moment. To shake off the lumpy, clumpy weight of human form and shift into the fastest falcon on the planet was every bit as dazzling as it should be. Had he been able to shout he would be bawling YEEEESSSSS!!! with a throat thick with emotion. As it was, he let out a shrill avian cry of *Creeeeee—Creeeeee—Careet!*

When the houses below were matchbox small, he flipped into a stoop, curling his peregrine body into a corkscrew dive which cut through the

warm rising air that wanted take him back up. His plummet back to earth was so fast that the air around him seemed to turn pink, but when his eyes adjusted to the wider view, the detail snapped back into sharp focus, even at 140 miles per hour. Below him lay the awkward curve of his road, the grey roofs of the houses dull in the morning sun. A snake of green rectangles were the gardens and a paler green landscape adjoining them was the wasteland. This in turn became a patchwork of allotments, and sprawling in to the east of these was the dark loveliness of the wood.

Across the tapestry of land he could see a hundred or more creatures stirring, foraging; some already running in fear. A pair of pigeons flapped frantically towards the cover of the woods. Dax's cry of joy had been a death siren to them, and he knew, without a moment's doubt, that if he chose to pick one off in mid-air, he could do it as easily as collecting a pebble from the beach. Pigeons were fast and evasive, but Dax, the peregrine falcon, saw everything played out before it had even happened, such was his speed.

And he did think about it. He hadn't killed yet, as a falcon. No falcon mother had taught him,

but he knew precisely how to hunt. The pigeon would whirl and wheel and try to dodge him, but he would seize it in mid-air with his raptor claws. Together they would tumble to earth in an embrace of death and as they went, his talons digging in tighter with every hopeless struggle the pigeon made, he would dip his beak into the rainbow grey feathers on its collar and snap its spinal cord. His prey would be dead before they hit the ground and there he would cover it with the flecked grey mantle of his wings, like a protective parent, for a second or two, before breakfast.

The pigeons were in luck today. Dax thought he might well hunt before he returned to the doll-filled bedroom, but not as a falcon. He pulled out of his dive and arced through the humid rising air above the allotments. The steaming compost heaps made a heady smell and mice and voles scurried into their depths in panic. Dax coasted low above the wigwams of bamboo cane with late runner beans curling around them, past weather-beaten sheds and bulging water butts, and landed on the low branch of an oak at the edge of the woodland. He waited a while, roosting, scanning for any early gardeners, runners, or dog walkers.

Nothing. Good. He was exhilarated, but tired and hungry. Dax flew to the woodland floor and shifted from falcon to fox.

The joy was more gentle than for his falcon shift; he was used to it, but he knew the fox was his truest form. He might eventually learn to shapeshift into anything, but his first instinct would always be to the fox. DaxFox trotted through the woodland, scaring a whole new batch of animals. Woodland dwellers had little to fear from a peregrine; a peregrine hunts wide open areas, cliffs, fields and clearings, but the fox could be almost anywhere. Dax felt faintly guilty. He should have sneaked downstairs and eaten a little breakfast before he'd escaped the bedroom. That way the rabbit he was after could have lived a bit longer. But now he knew he *had* to hunt. Not just because he was hungry as a fox, but because he would be *famished* as a falcon, and possibly not even able to fly back into the house. The soaring and stooping and corkscrew aerobatics had cost him a huge amount of energy. No real peregrine would do it for fun.

So Dax paused at the edge of a small clearing within the wood, still and silent, watched the rabbit

for a while and then pounced. He killed it instantly, the boy inside him still experiencing a pang of guilt. He ate fast and efficiently, leaving little for the woodland scavengers and being careful to wipe his snout and paws on the dry, tussocky grass. The first time he had hunted he had shifted back to a boy, only to find Owen staring at the caked blood in his hair. Eugh!

The meal did its magic. Dax felt a surge of strength and gazed around him happily. Perhaps half a mile away a vixen was out with her almost full-grown cubs. He could scent them clearly. No dog fox registered, which was just as well. He wasn't in the mood for a fight with the local bloke. He turned away from the fox family, first sending a pulse of calm and indifference in their direction, just in case. Although he had never been able to exactly talk to another fox, he could pulse out messages to other animals—and they to him. A sort of mixture of raw telepathy and scent, he suspected. Smell was vital in the wild and it had been one of the first changes he had noticed, just before his first shift into fox form the previous year. Yes—scent and telepathy—he'd experienced it more than once now. In fact, it was entirely possible that a

vixen had saved his life earlier that year, when she had shot past in a blur of red and pulsed GO! at him, seconds before a pack of foxhounds and huntsmen on horseback had thundered through.

Dax went for a walk, relishing every step. As a fox he felt every muscle, sinew, organ, and tendon working in perfect rhythm. All was as it should be: the air playing with the white spray of whiskers that fanned delicately from his snout, the sticks and leaves massaging the soft grey-pink pads of his paws. The woodland relaxed around him, its inhabitants seeming to sense that he was well fed and not interested in further hunting now. The colours and textures sang out to him. It seemed like such a long time since he had been in this form in a wood. Florets of brown and yellow fungi grew in pretty scallops around old logs; clusters of jewel-bright berries glinted in the pale golden shafts that reached in past the trees, oak bark ran like a frozen river, shining black beetles rafting through the green and brown currents.

A bell sounded from far away: the town clock carried through on the still air. Eight chimes. Dax paused, one paw raised and his ears cocked. Eight o'clock. He sighed, emitting a whispery growl. He

really should get back now. He must have been gone twenty minutes and at any time Alice could bash back into the doll's annexe, or Gina could rap coldly on the door and tell him to take a shower and make it quick. The fox sighed again and ran to the edge of the woodland, leaping up and shifting in mid-air to the falcon. The falcon whirled clear of the trees, but made no attempt to do aerobatics this time. Dax scanned the houses and gardens and the road below him and spotted the roof of the dark blue Transit van. He knew it was a bad idea, but he just couldn't resist it. How likely was it that Mike or Dave would be looking up at the sky right now? Dax grinned to himself, inwardly, and flew softly down to the van, landing on the grooved metal rack on its roof, careful that he didn't clunk his talons against it. Even so, he heard Dave say, suddenly, as if roused from sleep, 'What was that?'

'What?' said Mike, slurping a drink from a plastic cup.

'Ah . . . nothing,' concluded Dave. 'I think I was nearly asleep then. I hate this job.'

'Yeah, well . . . could be worse,' muttered Mike, but he didn't describe exactly how it could be worse.

'Kid never goes anywhere anyway,' grumped Dave. 'Must be one of these computer geeks or something. Never goes anywhere.'

'No—no computer. We'd have picked it up,' said Mike. 'He's into wildlife stuff, isn't he? Keeps a bird. Feel sorry for that bird. Fancy being cooped up all day when you're, like, a wild animal? It's not right.'

'Yeah, right—tell me about it,' said Dave, with feeling. 'You know what?'

'What?' said Mike, although he didn't sound as if he wanted to know.

'I could really do with a bag of Maltesers.'

Riveting though the conversation was, Dax knew he should really go. Besides, he could pick up stuff from Mike and Dave even in the house, sometimes, in certain weather conditions, when he shifted to a fox. Once, when Gina and Alice had gone out, he had stayed behind and sat in the hallway for an hour, in fox form, just listening in on Mike and Dave. He liked Mike and Dave better than Martin and Philip, who were the other shift. He actually felt sorry for them—he couldn't imagine a more boring job than being on government surveillance outside his house. He'd given up resenting it some

time ago, when he realized they even had to follow him down to the shopping centre with Gina and Alice. Dax found it utterly tedious going out with Gina and Alice and it actually made him feel slightly better that some other poor mugs had to suffer it too.

He had never tried to catch Mike or Dave out—or the other two men paid to watch and listen to him. It didn't seem fair. They weren't aware of his special abilities and they were only doing their job. Today, though, he was in a slightly rebellious mood. His flight and his hunt had put humour back into his heart and as Dave continued yearning for Maltesers a funny idea arrived in his head. Instead of heading back over to his house, he flew silently down the road to the corner, where the newsagent's was already open. He dropped into the litter-strewn alleyway at the back of it and shifted quickly into boy form, knowing there was some change in his jeans pocket. He sauntered round into the shop, making little eye contact with the teenager on the till, and bought a packet of Maltesers. Outside, he sidled back into the alleyway, took the edge of the red plastic packet in his teeth, and shifted with a leap back into the falcon.

He was dragged down by the packet in his beak much more than he expected and was glad he had to hold it for only three seconds. Swooping along the quiet road he dropped the packet with pinpoint accuracy onto the windscreen of the Transit. He just heard the exclamation from Dave before he whipped up and away and whirled tightly around to the back of the house. He shot straight in through the letterbox window and landed on the scratched metal frame of the bedstead. Immediately he shifted back to boy form and was on the floor, laughing fit to burst, when Gina came in, three seconds later.

'What's up with *you*?' she asked, her sallow face puckered with distaste.

Dax sat up and shook his head, still grinning. 'Just . . . um . . . thought of something really funny,' he said. He knew he had to be careful with Gina. She wasn't the bully she used to be, not since the government had convinced her that her stepson was a 'genius' and had taken him away for special education. Gina was canny enough to realize she might get some benefit from Dax's 'specialness' at some point—she also seemed to sense that he was different now. That he had some power, although she had no idea what it was. Nor did Alice. Not

even his father knew, although Dax had tried to tell him.

No—Gina might not be as sharply unpleasant as she had been, but she still wasn't to be trusted. She and Dax had a strange understanding these days. They both knew that the other knew that things had changed. Neither sought to ask or explain—they just kept each other at a careful distance. Gina did the basic minimum for him: laundry and food and an occasional trip out with Alice. She never asked about his life and Dax never volunteered anything. It wasn't totally comfortable, but it was better than it used to be.

Alice was different, of course. She did ask questions, but she was eight and a girl and it was easy to tell her to get lost. One day though, he knew he *would* tell her—show her. He didn't get on with her but he did care about her. He would sooner show her than Gina. Gina would probably hit him with a broom and call pest control.

'You've got a call,' said Gina, flatly, ignoring his subsiding mirth. She pulled the walkabout phone from the pocket of her quilted orange housecoat and handed it to him, before retreating from the room and closing the door.

'Dax?' demanded a girl's voice. 'Dax? Oh, for heaven's sake. Tell me I *wasn't* in your stepmother's pocket. Oh—that's too revolting! I could hear the phone banging against her blubbery skin. Yuck!'

'Hi, Lisa,' grinned Dax. 'Nice to hear from you.'

'What *were* you laughing about?'

'Oh—I'll have to tell you later,' he sighed, sitting back on the bed and sending her a message in which Maltesers featured strongly.

Lisa Hardman giggled. 'You didn't!' she said.

There was a pause in which they both tried to work out two conversations at the same time. One conversation was the 'normal' one, usually extremely dull, which was being recorded by Mike and Dave in the Transit van. The other conversation didn't require cables and telegraph poles—that was the telepathic one, enabled by Lisa's incredible powers as a psychic.

Not everyone could send and receive messages with Lisa in this way. Some of the Colas could manage something, usually in times of great need or stress, but only Dax, as far as he knew, could carry on a proper conversation with Lisa from the depths of his mind, across several counties. It was something to do with being a part-time fox, they

reckoned. It was a bit patchy sometimes, and it definitely helped to make some other form of contact first, to kick it all off, which was why Lisa was phoning him and not just wafting into his mind unannounced.

'How is your dad?' said Dax, out loud. Maurice Hardman had been in a car accident earlier that year and was still recovering.

'He's good,' said Lisa, and then went on to talk about her dad's physiotherapy and the visiting nurse and all kinds of general stuff. If it sounded a bit lacklustre to Mike and Dave, it was because she was carrying on an entirely different conversation with Dax on the telepathic line.

Dax—you need to get here. You need to come and see me as soon as possible.

I can't! sent Dax. *You know they're watching me all the time!*

Look, Dax, she came back, testily, *it's not like I'm missing you or anything! This is important. I can't explain it now—it's too difficult with the talking out loud stuff. And I'm still not sure what it is . . . exactly. But it's to do with Gideon. You need to get here!*

At the sound of his best friend's name, Dax caught his breath. Gideon had gone through such

terrible times this year. He couldn't stand the thought of him having any more bad luck.

What? What about Gideon?

'Anyway, I'm taking him out for walks now,' Lisa droned on, out loud. *I told you! I don't know! Not yet! You need to be here. Stop arguing with me and shift your furry backside into a feathery backside and get down here!* 'He's doing really well. He'd love you to visit. Maybe we can ask Owen for a pass and get you down here.' Lisa knew full well that no such pass would be issued by Owen or any other Cola teacher. All Colas were grounded, for their own safety, until the new college was found.

'I'll see what I can do, Lees,' said Dax. 'I'd love to take off for a while, but I'm just doing as I'm told. I don't want to get into trouble.' *All right! I'm coming. Can't just yet though. Too late today. I'll leave at first light tomorrow—should be with you for breakfast. Can you hang on till then?*

'No—we mustn't get into trouble,' agreed Lisa, vapidly. 'But maybe you'll be allowed.' *Yes—OK. That'll have to do. I'll try to find out more. My shoulder's like a block of ice but it would help if someone would just SAY what's up. God, they're annoying me today!*

Dax grinned. When Lisa got messages from the spirit world (and, as the most powerful Cola medium, she got a lot), they could often be as tangled and confused as they were persistent. When she had first got her 'gift' she had fought against it and refused to co-operate. The spirits queuing up for her services seemed to lean on her left shoulder, because whenever a particularly powerful vision or message came through, it would get so cold it would ache. Dax could picture her now, in her beautiful manor house hallway, on the phone, rubbing her shoulder fiercely and glaring into the beyond.

'I'll ask Gina and Owen and let you know,' concluded Dax, for the benefit of Mike and Dave's recording equipment.

'OK—call me back! Bye!' Lisa hung up with a last pulse of telepathy. *First thing, Dax! First thing!*

Dax put the phone down and found his hands were shaking. What was happening to Gideon? He wished he could phone him and ask, but he couldn't. Even if he knew about something being wrong, Gideon probably couldn't say. He, too, would surely have worked out that all their phone conversations were being monitored. And anyway,

if Lisa didn't know what the problem was, it was highly unlikely Gideon would. Lisa was a psychic, a clairvoyant, a medium, and a dowser. Gideon was a telekinetic. He could make your telly dance around the hallway, but he couldn't hear spirits talking or see into the future.

Dax couldn't see into the future either, but the present was beginning to bother him. Yesterday he could just about manage being stuck at home with Alice and Gina. Today was going to be a lot harder.