Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

# Stirring The Storm

Written by

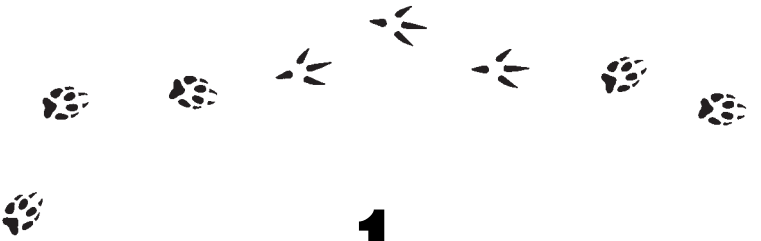
**Ali Sparkes**

Published by

**Oxford**

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



# 1

The snow glowed in the half-moon light, a glittering white quilt across the valley. It covered hedges, softened walls, delicately mantled the trees, and drifted across the frozen lake in tapering fingers.

Only one set of tracks could be seen marking the whiteness; tracing a path around the handsome stately house, skirting the frozen water, and then heading straight for the frosted woodland.

A fox, sending a flurry of fear through the winter wildlife, was trotting swiftly west.

Dax Jones reached the first few slender young oaks at the edge of the copse and lifted his snout. It was a *fantastic* night to be a fox. As soon as he'd

smelt the snow coming, early that afternoon, the hair on the backs of his arms had stood up and he'd said to Gideon, 'It'll be here by four o'clock! You wait! And by midnight it will be thick all over the fells. We have to go out in it! We can be the first ones to walk in it!'

But when it came to rousing Gideon, the boy had hidden his messy blond head under the duvet and groaned. 'Can't . . . too tired . . . you go, Dax. Tell me what it's like when you get back.'

Dax had shoved him and muttered, 'You know your problem, Gid—you've got no sense of adventure!'

Gideon had snorted, 'Yeah right!' and Dax had grinned, shaken his head, and leaped nimbly onto the windowsill, pulling up the sash and surveying the wondrous scene below.

Now he was part of it. He could have been crunching heavy boot-shaped indents into the cold sugary crust over the grass—but the light touch of his paws on the snow was delightful to him. One of the best things about being a shapeshifter was that he could experience the world three different ways—as a boy, as a fox, and, if he felt like it, as a falcon. Tonight though, in this strange

white world, nothing could beat being a fox. Dax streaked across the temporary tundra and deep into the woods, where the snow was lighter, blown in sideways by the wind and powdering down softly between the branches to pick out twig and leaf and berry in silvery-blue highlights. The wildlife tensed, but he was not out to hunt tonight. There was no need. And the smaller creatures could smell this too. Voles and mice moved judiciously away into the undergrowth, but soon relaxed. Dax walked on, passing the badger sett and nodding at the snout of the chief badger boar, just emerging to check out the snow for himself. The badger regarded him for a moment, gave a small grunt of recognition and ambled on out into the moonlight, his striped head turning left and right, sniffing the chilled air.

Dax wished, for the hundredth time, that he was able to actually have a conversation with other animals. He *could* communicate with them, but it was mostly about body posture and scent and the occasional telepathic flash. He had worked out a few months ago that the badgers were quite relaxed around him. He had even gone down into their sett once and found them all staring at

him in surprise, but without hostility. Rather like polite relatives who had been visited without warning by a distant cousin. They knew the fox was no threat to them; although Dax walked through his little wood as king—there was no predator higher than he—he'd never be idiot enough to take on a badger.

He was drawn back to the edges of the woodland by the promise of deeper, more luxurious snow to bound through. Leaping from a fallen log, he found himself engulfed up to his furry chin. He couldn't help laughing out loud—a light volley of happy barks. He rolled over onto his back, collecting white flakes on his thick winter coat. Then he was suddenly on his feet again, stock still. Scenting. Listening. Watching. Something was coming.

At the perimeter wall, a quarter of a mile away, a shaft of golden light opened up. The electric gate was moving. A black vehicle was coming in. Dax swiftly turned and jumped back on to the log, where he shifted instantly to a peregrine falcon; sharp round eyes glittering black in pools of yellow. In a blink his vision had improved tenfold. With no difficulty at all he made out a soldier

at the booth leaning out towards the car, rifle held across his chest, nodding and in conversation with the driver. The driver's hand, gloveless and large, patted the sentry on the shoulder before withdrawing, and the black four-by-four moved on, following the wide gravel driveway up to the lodge, as the electric gate slid shut behind it.

Who was out this late? wondered Dax. It must be getting on for 1a.m. Even the scientists were normally tucked up in bed by now. He shivered and felt a tickly sensation at the back of his neck. He'd felt that a few times recently and wondered if it was some kind of warning. But nothing in his life at the moment suggested any trouble coming. There'd been plenty of it over the last couple of years, but for nearly eight months he and all the other Children of Limitless Ability here at Fenton Lodge had simply got on with schoolwork and play and arguing and mucking around without interruption—unless you counted a rather heavy cold they'd all managed to get in the last couple of weeks. No—it had all been pretty normal. Well, as normal as it *got* when you were a Cola.

Dax thought about flying after the car to find out who it was, but it was too cold. Peregrines are

not night fliers even in the summer, when a few leftover warm thermals from the day might still be creating a bit of uplift. Here in the deeply chilled Cumbrian hills of January, he could manage a swift wing up and down from his bedroom window, but more than that would be folly. He decided to leave the late night driver to his own business, and have a bit more snow play. The glazed lake was calling to him. They'd all been forbidden to go on it by Mrs Sartre, the college principal, even though for days the smooth sheet of ice had looked about a foot thick, and startled geese kept sleighing across it in confusion whenever they tried to land. As a fox, Dax didn't weigh a third as much as he did in boy form, so he was more than happy to take the risk. Grinning to himself, he made his way ungracefully through the snow, lurching this way and that in the drifts. He wished Gideon was out with him to see this, but at least he wouldn't have to feel guilty about not letting his mate follow him out on to the ice.

The glistening sheet sent prickles of shock into the pads of his paws, even though they'd already been numbed by the cold of the snow.

Dax gasped and then he chuckled; a raspy, growly sort of noise, and put all four paws onto the ice, claws digging in to stop himself sliding. There was no crack—no noise at all. And later he was to wonder why he didn't hear the man coming, given that his fox ears were so incredibly sensitive. All he knew was that five seconds later a white shape descended upon him and seized him so fast and so silently that he had no time to even glance around. He heard his sharp teeth clack together as a hand efficiently snapped his shocked muzzle shut; felt himself lifted expertly and pinned to the chest of his assailant, and before he'd even had the chance to growl he was borne with great speed back towards the wood he had just left.

Panic would have had him screaming and snarling if he had not been able to call now—a little late—upon his senses. He knew who this was, and the knowledge stunned him into silence. Deep inside the wood he was at last deposited on the floor.

'Don't move. Don't speak,' instructed the man, quietly, and Dax realized he was panting hyper-fast, the hair rising and tickling again on his neck, his heart rattling in his chest like a runaway train.

He couldn't believe his eyes when the man pulled his hunting knife from inside the thick white hooded jacket he wore, tested it for keenness, knelt down and took hold of the back of his neck.

'Don't shift. You'll handle it better like this,' said Owen Hind, angling the knife. 'Get ready. Don't cry out. This is going to hurt.'