



## SOPHIE KIRTLEY

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Sophie Kirtley grew up in Northern Ireland, where she spent her childhood climbing on hay bales, rolling down sand dunes and leaping the wild Atlantic waves. Nowadays she lives in Wiltshire with one husband, three children, two cats, three guinea pigs, five fish and an uncountable number of newts.

Sophie has always loved stories: she taught English in secondary schools for many years and has worked in a theatre, a bookshop and a tiny pub where folk tell fairytales by candlelight. Sophie is also a prize-winning, published poet, writing for both adults and children.

*Hartboy* was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize and for SCBWI The Hook 2017. Her picture book *Moles ...* according to Mike won the 2017 Writing Magazine Picture Book Prize.

### About *Hartboy*

It's 7767BC. Deep in the ancient forest a baby is crying, all alone. She's just been born, but already her ma is dead and her pa has gone. Only her big brother, Hartboy, is left to care for her. But Hartboy has just fallen in the river ...

The time is now. In the very same forest Charlie is running; running away from a family at breaking point; running away from tomorrow; running towards the river ... As past and present entwine, Charlie and Hartboy find themselves fighting for survival and learning that friendship is stronger than fear.

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# HARTBOY

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## *Chapter One*

### *Hunt*

**M**ANDEL FOREST, MIDSUMMER EVE, 9000 SUMMERS AGO  
*(Each chapter opens with a comic book frame)*

*Comic book frame: Longshot. A hunting scene in the ancient forest.*

*In the foreground, a Stone Age child (Hartboy) sits in a hazel tree with his spear trained on a wild boar who grazes in the clearing below.*

#### **Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve**

I hide on the mossy branch of the hazel tree, my legs dangling into nothing. I wait. The wind rustles the leaves; a wood pigeon coos; branches creak and crack like old bones.

A wordless shout. Far off, from the direction of the Spirit Stone. The Hunters are coming.

I squint into the hazy sunlight. I can see a ripple of trembling trees where the Hunters carve and smash through the forest. The crack-thump-rip of sticks grows louder as they tear their way closer and closer to my hiding place.

The Hunters hack through the bracken and out into the patch of sunshine, right at the foot of my tree.

It's them.

Lamont. Beaky. Nero.

The Hunters.

I don't dare breathe.

Lamont stands, hand on hip, and peers into the forest. Beaky circles the

tree, jabbing at rabbit holes, prodding the undergrowth with a long, sharp stick. Nero growls, black ears pricked, hackles raised, nose to the ground.

My heart thuds hard and loud.

Nero stops. He sniffs and lifts his nose towards me.

Then Nero turns his head sharply away. He can hear something. I can hear it too: there's rustling in the bracken.

Nero looks to Lamont. Lamont lifts a finger to his thin lips. Beaky nods.

Of course. They think the noise is me.

The thing in the undergrowth rustles again.

Lamont signals a countdown with his fingers:

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

With sticks raised the Hunters charge into the bushes.

A young deer bounds out on the opposite side, tail pale amongst the tree shadows. It springs away and is gone.

Nero chases after the deer, barking.

'NERO!' yell Lamont and Beaky, waist-deep in a tangle of brambles.

I see my chance.

I scramble from my tree and I run.

Beaky shouts, 'It's Charlie!'

But I don't look back. I run. Down the hill, through the forest, towards the river. My feet pound the ground and my fists pummel the air. I charge over the wooden bridge and up the steep gravel path on the other side. Each breath is heavy. My chest hurts.

I hear the thump of the Hunters running across the bridge. They're gaining on me!

In the clearing, I tug on tufts of grass to heave myself up to the top.

I reach the Spirit Stone and I lean with my forehead pressed on to the cool grey rock.

'Home,' I say, high-fiving the Spirit Stone.

Slumping down on to the grass, I close my eyes and gasp air into my aching chest.

I won the game.

Nero reaches the Spirit Stone next. He just stands there panting. Lamont and Beaky don't bother running the last bit once they know I've beaten them. Lamont clammers up the mound and flops down next to me.

'Close one, Charlie,' he says. 'That deer put us off.'

'Just you blame the deer,' I say. Lamont does a little half laugh and pokes me in the side. Lamont's dog Nero comes over, long tail wagging, his eyes on the stick in his owner's hand.

'Go get it, Nero.' Lamont tosses the stick down into the clearing. Nero charges all the way back down the hill again.

'Oy!' yells Beaky, still clambering up the mound. 'You nearly got me with that stick, Lamont!' When Beaky finally reaches the Spirit Stone she collapses beside us, breathing hard. 'Next time,' she pants, 'there's absolutely – no way – I'm being – a Hunter – that forest is far,' she swallows, 'far – far too big – to find – anyone – in.'

'Just you blame the forest, Beaky,' I say. We all laugh, even Beaky.

We sit there, saying nothing, looking out over our forest. I look at the river; I follow its twists and bends all the way to the sea. I look at the farmland cut neatly into green rectangles of fields, like slices of cake. I look at our town, how it spreads greyly up from the riverbanks, surrounding our forest, which surrounds this clearing, which surrounds this mound, which surrounds the Spirit Stone. *Home*, I think to myself. And I think about Dad then. And about Mum. And about the baby who'll be born soon.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Home*

**M**ANDEL FOREST, MIDSUMMER EVE, 9000 SUMMERS AGO  
*Comic book frame: Midshot. Hartboy's home and family.*

*One low egg-shaped hut, next to the Spirit Stone. The Spirit Stone has eleven rings carved into it. There is an open fire where the boar is cooking. Hartboy is with Pa and Ma, who is heavily pregnant. Hartboy's spear, Ma's spear and Pa's spear are all pronged into the earth nearby. Rings are also carved into the spears as year markers.*

## **Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve**

The light has that golden tinge now and shadows are stretched. I really ought to go home. Check on Mum. The baby was due three days ago so it's bound to be here sometime soon. A little tingle creeps up my spine: soon I'll have a little brother or sister and everything will change.

'I'm off,' I say, standing up.

'I am never moving again!' says Beaky, lying there with her long red hair spread out on the grass. Lamont sprinkles a handful of seeds on her face. Beaky sits up and thumps him. I laugh.

'See you tomorrow,' I say.

'... for your birrrthdaaay!' sings Beaky.

'Are we still camping out?' asks Lamont.

'Of course we are,' answers Beaky, before I even have a chance to think about it. Nero wags his tail like he's in agreement.

I pat Nero's soft black head. Then I yell, 'Bye!' as I turn and run back down to the forest.

The air in the forest tastes cool and shadowy. The trees on either side of the path lean in slightly, so it's dark like a tunnel. I can still hear the faint echo of Lamont and Beaky's laughter. A big, clumsy bird flies out of a tree; it's so close to my head I duck; my foot skids out in front of me, and I end up sitting on the path. The bird lands on a branch on the other side of the tree tunnel and stares at me. It's a wood pigeon with feathers the colours of early morning sky: grey and pink and silver.

I look down at the gravel I disturbed when I slipped. One tiny, flat stone catches my eye, not because it's beautiful, but because it's triangular. I press my finger on to its tip; it's as sharp as a spearhead.

I get up and fiddle with the stone as I walk.

'Whooo?' says the wood pigeon, with its head on one side. 'Whooooo? Whooooooooooo?'

'Charlie Merriam,' I reply and the wood pigeon flies off.

'Chollie. Murr. Umm,' says a low voice from high in the tree behind me. A voice I do not know.

I drop the sharp stone and I run. Faster than I've ever run before. Because this time, it's not a game.

**Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve, 9000 Summers Ago**  
I SIT IN HAZEL TREE.

I WAIT.

QUIET QUIET.  
SMALL WIND.  
LEAVES SWISH.  
BRANCHES CREAK.

‘WHOOOOO,’ SPEAK PIGEON VOICE.  
‘WHOOOOOOO?’  
‘I HARTBOY,’ I SPEAK TO PIGEON  
QUIET LIKE BREATH.

PIGEON LOOK ME.  
I LOOK PIGEON.  
I LOOK SPEAR.  
SMALL SMALL PIGEON.  
I WAIT.

I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT.  
SUN MAKE SMALL SHINE  
ON SHARP SHARP SPEARHEAD STONE.

I WAIT.

CRACK CRACK NOISE IN FOREST.

CREATURE?  
CREATURE MAKE CRACK CRACK NOISE?

CRACK, CRACK NOISE COME AGAIN.  
I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT TIGHT.  
CREATURE CLOSE!

CREATURE BIG?  
I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT TIGHT TIGHT.

WHERE CREATURE?

CRACK.

I LIFT SPEAR.  
I LOOK IN FOREST.

LONG LONG SHADOW WALK IN TREE SHADOWS.  
I LOOK LONG LONG SHADOW LEGS.  
NOT CREATURE LEGS!  
MAN LEGS!  
PA?

SHADOW MAKER WALK UNDER HAZEL TREE.  
DARK DARK.  
I TRY LOOK.  
NOT PA.  
NOT MAN!  
NOT BIG LIKE MAN.  
BOY?  
GIRL?

‘WHOOOOOO?’ SPEAK PIGEON VOICE.  
‘CHOLLIE. MURR. UM,’ SPEAK SHADOW VOICE.

CHOLLIE MURR UM WALK IN SMALL SUNLIGHT.  
I LOOK CHOLLIE MURR UM.  
CHOLLIE MURR UM HAIR BLACK.  
CHOLLIE MURR UM WEAR BLUE DEERSKIN.  
BLUE DEERSKIN!

‘CHOLLIE MURR UM?’ I SPEAK.

CHOLLIEMURRUM RUN FAST FAST FAST.

BLUE BLUE CHOLLIEMURRUM GONE.

**Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve**

I run and I run and I run. The forest is just a blur of green and the only sound I can hear is the pounding of my heart. I reach the fork, then I run up the path and along the high wooden fences; to my gate, to my garden, to home.

I burst in the back door.

‘Mum!’ I yell.

‘What’s the matter with you, Charlie?’ asks Dad. He’s cooking spaghetti in the kitchen.

I can’t even speak I’m so out of breath.

Mum is in the doorway. ‘Are you OK, love?’

I try to work out in my head how to explain to them what just happened. How to tell them about the voice I heard in the woods. I realise how ridiculous and stupid it sounds.

‘I’m fine,’ I finally answer.

‘OK,’ says Mum, drawing out each syllable and raising one eyebrow.

‘Are *you* OK?’ I pant at her. ‘No baby yet?’

We all look at Mum’s utterly massive belly and we laugh.

‘Not quite yet,’ says Mum.