Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Killing Woods

Written by

Lucy Christopher

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

BEFORE

1

Saturday Night. August.

Emily

Something was draped across Dad's outstretched arms. A deer? A fawn that was injured? It was sprawled and long-legged, something that had been caught in a poacher's trap maybe. A mistake. So this is where Dad had been all this time, in the woods and cutting this creature free. I breathed out slowly, squinted at the mist that hovered around Dad like a ghost. I took my hand from my bedroom window, leaving the memory of my skin on the glass. Then I raced down the stairs, through the hall and into the kitchen out back. Throwing open the door to the garden, I waited for him there.

It was ages since Dad had brought back something

injured, and he'd never brought back a deer, though I could remember helping him free a roe deer from a snare in the woods once. Back then his hands had moved quickly and gently, darting from the wire on the doe's leg and then to her neck for a pulse, stroking her constantly. This was something like that again. Saving another deer could be a good thing for Dad, something to take his mind off everything else, to help bring him out of his dark place.

I heard Dad's feet scuff on the cobbles in the lane, saw his movement. I tried to pick out the shape of the deer's body, but it was all wrong. The legs weren't long enough, neither was its neck. I took a step towards them. And that's when it made sense: the shape.

It wasn't a deer Dad was carrying. It was a girl.

Her neck was tilted back, her bare arms glowing in the moonlight. Her clothes were soaking. The garden gate creaked as Dad manoeuvred through, struggling. How long had he been carrying her? From where? I moved backwards into the kitchen. Dad had done things like this when he'd been a soldier who saved people, maybe he was being a hero again. Then I saw that this girl's skin was grey, blue around the lips like smudged lipstick. Her long hair was plastered across her face, dark from the rain. I saw her green short-sleeved shirt and the silver bangle on her arm. I wanted to sweep the wet hair from her face, but my hand was half-raised when I stopped myself. I recognised her. I *knew* this girl.

'What happened?' I said.

Dad didn't answer. His face was red and damp; he wheezed as he pushed past me. The girl's fingers trailed over my arm, and they were cold – dead cold – like a stone found in a cave. Dad laid her carefully on the kitchen table as if he were putting her to bed. He turned her head to the side and stretched out one of her arms so she was in the recovery position. He touched her neck gently, just like he'd touched the neck of the trapped roe deer so long ago. But this deer didn't move, didn't struggle or try to stop him.

Her name was Ashlee Parker.

I made myself bring my fingers to her wrist, waited long enough to be sure. I knew I should be panicking, should be calling an ambulance . . . but Ashlee Parker's eyes were staring at me, fixed in position, brown and big.

'She's got model's eyes,' Kirsty had said once. 'She's beautiful. It's no wonder Damon Hilary follows her everywhere.'

Damon Hilary. Something twisted inside me when I thought about him – of how he'd react to this.

I rested the tip of my finger on Ashlee's cheek. I wanted to help her struggle and leap free, disappear into the trees. I could only hope that everything screaming through my head was wrong.

'Is she . . .?' I hesitated. 'Is she . . . OK?'

Dad didn't answer. I don't know what he thought, whether he hoped she would wake up. But I'd seen the small red marks on her neck, the blue speckles of bruises spreading out like flowers. I could see she wasn't breathing at all.

What had she been doing in the woods?

How had she got like this?

I don't know how long we stood there, with the moon and stars shining through the kitchen window like spotlights. It felt like forever. Eventually there was a creak upstairs: Mum was up.

'Everything all right down there?' she called.

Maybe she'd been waiting for Dad to return too, pretending to sleep like I'd been earlier, listening to the summer storm. I heard her slippers treading in the hall, then the kitchen door swung inwards and immediately Mum was complaining about Dad keeping us up with worry, lecturing him about staying out during thunder.

'You know how you get when the weather's like this . . .' she was saying. 'You shouldn't . . .'

Then she saw Ashlee.

She made a tight gasping sound as if she'd sucked up all the oxygen in the room at once. She looked at Dad then back to Ashlee. She stepped across and felt for a pulse.

'Who is she?' she said, her voice low. When he didn't answer, she strode across the room and grabbed Dad by the shoulders. 'What's happened?'

She moved towards the telephone on the windowsill, her eyes running over Dad's muddy face and wet clothes, then over Ashlee again. The wheezing sound from Dad's chest got louder.

'Was she in the woods?' Mum's voice rose. 'With you?' Her fingers were shaking as she pressed the numbers on

the phone. Eventually she got through. 'We need an ambulance . . . police.'

I wanted to tell Mum that this was Ashlee Parker from school. I wanted to say that I didn't know what had happened, and neither did Dad, and that he was trying to save her . . . but the words stayed lodged in my throat like something half swallowed. Mum gave our address, hung up, went back to Dad. Her nails dug into his shoulders. Dad gulped air like a fish, one of his panic attacks starting. I knew I should go get his inhaler, or start talking softly to him – reminding him of where he was and who we were – but I couldn't move. I couldn't stop looking at Mum's frightened eyes.

'Tell me what happened, Jon!' she demanded.

I edged towards the open door to the garden. *Give Dad time,* I wanted to say. *Let him explain.* But Mum wanted answers, and that made me panic too . . . made me want to get away.

'Dad found her,' I whispered, saying what I wanted to be true. 'She was in the woods, walking . . . lost.'

Mum looked at me: the first time either of my parents seemed to notice me that night. 'She's dead, Emily.'

Her words sent me feeling for the door handle, for something to hold on to. Then Dad's sudden shout made me jump.

'She wasn't supposed to be there!'

It was what he always said when he came out of a flashback. The same words. He was in a flashback again, he had to be. Mum was right. It must have started from

hearing the thunder, from being out in that storm when he shouldn't have been anywhere near it.

Mum brushed the hair from Ashlee Parker's face. 'Did you do something, Jon?' she asked very quietly.

I lurched forward, wanting to stop Mum's words, stop all of this. 'How could he?'

Mum held out her palm, wanting Dad to answer for himself.

'He's just in a . . .' I said. 'He's just . . .'

Dad's hands were trembling. He was panicking badly, losing it, like I'd seen him lose it so many times before. Only this time was worse: his eyes were wilder somehow, still glazed in that nightmare. Did he even know where he was? Who we were?

Mum kept looking at Dad. 'If you know something, Jon – anything! – they'll take you away, they'll ask you, over and over . . .'

'Away?' Dad's arms shook too. 'Away, away . . .' He repeated the word like it was snagged in his mind.

'Away from us. The woods. You'll be gone in a police car . . . Do you understand?'

'Gone,' Dad repeated. 'Gone.'

He looked from Mum to Ashlee Parker and then through the window to the woods like he was searching for something. Trying to remember. Trying to pull something back. He crashed to the floor like all his bones had snapped, his body juddering as he grasped at the worktop. I went towards him, but he held an arm across his face as if he thought I'd hit him.

'Sorry,' he said, his eyes watery. 'Sorry, sorry, sorry . . .' He looked at Mum desperately. 'But they were shouting . . . the soldier told me I'd done it.' He shook his head and murmured, 'Me, me, me . . .'

The same words. The same story about the soldier who'd yelled at him during that firefight: who'd told him he'd killed a civilian. Dad was remembering being in combat that last time, flashing back.

Mum realised it too. 'But this girl isn't the same,' she told him firmly. 'Not the one you killed.'

'The same!' Dad wailed. 'Same.'

He lashed his fist into the kitchen unit; blood ran down the cupboard. When Dad got like this Mum usually told me to go to my room and sometimes she joined me. We'd listen to him shouting into the night, wrecking things as he raged. Outside the rain started again, heavy and persistent, but no more thunder. Dad gasped and gasped.

'I was in the compound . . . and she was . . . she was there and I . . .' Dad tripped on his words, stopped and tried again. 'I didn't mean to . . . but the enemy, they were hiding . . . out there in the dark . . . all around . . .'

'You're not in combat now, Jon! There's no firefight! You haven't shot anyone!' Mum was almost pleading with him. 'You're in your kitchen. You're with your wife and daughter. You're an ex-soldier in a flashback, that's all!'

Dad blinked. Maybe Mum thought she had him back with us because she added, 'But you have brought home a girl, Jon, and she's dead.'

‘I didn’t mean . . .’ Dad turned towards the rain coming in sideways at the kitchen window. Was he waking up?

‘But the soldier . . . he told me. He said it was . . .’ He shook his head, kept murmuring, ‘. . . me, me, me . . .’