

# **The Willow Keeper**

by Mark Whitaker

# Chapter 1

It was dark and someone was shaking me awake. I tried to turn to see the alarm clock but my shoulders were pressed flat against the bed and from right next to my ear a voice said, 'Shhhh!' The breath that wafted across my face smelt of the chilli we'd had for tea.

'Joel?' I whispered. 'What time is it?'

He gave me another shake.

'Shush, will you? You'll wake Mum and Lily.'

'What time is it?' I said again, whispering this time. 'What's going on?'

Joel let go of my shoulders and I could feel him leaning on the bed next to my pillow.

'It's about half one,' he said. He let go of my shoulders and I twisted round to see the clock. Its big green numbers said 1:24 AM.

'What are you doing awake?' I asked.

Joel leant in close and said, 'There's someone outside.'

I shuddered. 'What,' I said, just breathing really, not even whispering, 'outside the door?'

'No. There's someone in the garden. Looking up at the window.'

I felt a lump appear at the back of my throat.

'Is it him?' I asked.

'Who?'

I had to swallow hard before I could say, 'Dad?'

'No, of course it's not,' said Joel. He sounded annoyed. 'I've told you, Sam, Dad's gone.'

'Who is it then?'

Joel paused and I could hear his breath coming out through his teeth as if he was trying to steady himself.

'It's the Willow Keeper.'

'Joel, stop it,' I said, 'you're frightening me.'

'How do you think I feel? I'm the one who saw him.'

I reached out for his wrist. 'Promise me you're not making this up.'

'I promise. I heard a noise and looked out the window and he was right there by the flowerbed. He was looking straight at me.'

'How do you know?' I whispered.

'I could see his eyes,' murmured Joel, 'staring straight at me and glowing, like a cat in the car headlights. It was spooky.'

'No, I mean how do you know it was him? The Willow Keeper?'

There was just a moment's hesitation and then Joel said, 'Because I've seen him before.'

I gasped.

'I was taking a shortcut through the woods. I went past the clearing and there he was.'

'Where?'

'Right where they say. By the willow.'

'Did he see you?'

'Not that time, no.' Joel sounded calm again now.

'When was it?'

'Few weeks ago.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

He put on the voice he used for talking to Lily. 'Because I know what a scaredy-cat you are, Sammy.'

'Don't call me that.'

'What, scaredy-cat?'

'No, Sammy.'

'So scaredy-cat's alright?'

'Shut up, Joel.'

He stood up. 'OK then, Sam the Brave, want to have a look?'

He always tricked me like that.

'He's right outside the window. Come and see.'

I didn't say anything.

'Or is Sammy too scaredy-cat?'

I pulled the covers back and climbed out of bed. We both knelt down in front of the curtains, noses perched on the windowsill.

‘Ready?’ whispered Joel.

‘Wait –’ I started, and then the curtain was up and over our heads and I was looking out into the garden.

It was empty.

‘You liar,’ I hissed. ‘I’m going to tell Mum.’ I turned to look at Joel, expecting to see the usual grin, but he was just staring out of the window.

‘Sam, I swear,’ he whispered, ‘he was right there. I promise. Why don’t we go out and look for footprints?’

‘Because there won’t be any and Mum’ll kill us. I’m going to bed.’

I got back into bed and a moment later heard Joel doing the same. It was quiet for a bit and then he whispered, ‘Sam.’

‘What?’

‘Honestly, I wasn’t joking. I saw him.’

‘Joel, leave me alone. I’m going to sleep.’

‘I’m telling you, Sam, he looked me straight in the eye.’

‘I’ll tell Mum you kept me awake.’

It went quiet again and I thought he’d given up, but a moment later he said one last thing.

‘Just wait and see what happens tomorrow. Then you’ll believe me.’

## Chapter 2

The next morning I could have kicked myself for telling Joel I was frightened. It was so obvious it was just a trick to give me the creeps but I'd fallen for it anyway. I didn't think even Joel would get up in the middle of the night just to scare his little brother, but then he knew I didn't believe anything he said any more so maybe he was getting desperate. I had to tell him that I didn't really believe he'd seen the Willow Keeper or I'd never hear the end of it. It would be like Miss Burton's wooden leg all over again.

Joel loved to remind me about that. Miss Burton was my first-year teacher in juniors, and Joel had been in her class two years before. The last night of the summer holidays, we were just going to bed when Joel said, 'Sam, do you want to know a secret?'

'Yes,' I said. I was a lot younger then and not suspicious enough.

'It's about Miss Burton,' Joel said, coming over and sitting on my bed. 'You know, your new teacher at juniors.' I nodded. 'The thing is,' Joel said, 'she's got a false leg.'

'Really?' I said.

Joel nodded. 'A wooden one, like a pirate. Except hers is better. It's not like a stick, it's leg-shaped.'

'Which one is it?' I asked.

Joel smiled and tapped his nose. 'Just you look closely,' he said with a wink. 'You'll see.'

By the next morning I went to school with a picture in my head of Miss Burton as some old hag, hobbling around on her one good leg. I decided she'd probably have a walking stick and maybe a few warts, and long black hair tied back in a bun. I was just deciding whether to tell Danny Shepherd about her or keep it to myself when a voice up ahead of me said, 'Good morning, 3B. I'm Miss Burton.'

I looked up and at first I thought I must be in the wrong classroom. The woman looked nothing like Miss Burton at all. She was tall and thin and looked younger than Mum. Her hair was blonde, not black, and it was all curly and glossy. She had a pretty face like one of the

women on the magazines they had in the doctor's waiting room. But most surprising of all she was wearing a *skirt*. And not a very long one either: it just covered her knees. As she sat down behind her desk I caught a glimpse of two bare legs poking out underneath and in that split second they both looked normal enough. But never mind, I thought to myself with a smile. With the whole day to look at them side by side this was going to be *easy*.

Or so I thought. That night Joel and I discussed it in whispers while Mum got the tea ready.

'They both look the same,' I said miserably.

'I know,' said Joel. 'It's amazing, isn't it?'

'But they're the same colour and everything. And exactly the same shape. And she walks just like normal people.'

Joel was nodding away. 'Honestly,' he said, 'I didn't believe it at first. But it's true. Solid oak right up to here.' He patted his trouser pocket.

'Really?' I said in disbelief.

'Really. You know how Mum has a razor next to the bath? Miss Burton has a piece of sandpaper.'

'But... how does she bend her knee?' I said.

'Haven't you ever heard of hinges?' said Joel, and then Mum came in with our tea.

The next day Miss Burton was wearing a skirt again, exactly the same length as the day before. I took every chance to look at the bits of her legs I could see but they were a perfect match. Once, as she walked past me towards the front of the class, I could swear I saw the muscles moving in the backs of *both legs*. I couldn't imagine how it was done but it was very, very clever.

It was only much later that afternoon that it finally occurred to me. If Miss Burton's skirt just covered her knees when she was standing up, surely you'd be able to see them when she sat down. That's how it always worked with skirts. The only problem was that Miss Burton only ever sat down behind her desk, and the front of her desk hid her knees from the class. She obviously did that so we wouldn't see the hinges. Somehow I needed to get right down on the floor and peep underneath.

I was in the second row back. I looked across at Danny Shepherd's desk next to mine. He was sharpening his pencil in the class sharpener – one of those big ones with a clear plastic

box underneath where you could see all the shavings curled up like hamster bedding. After you finished you had to go to the bin and empty it.

‘Danny,’ I whispered. He looked over.

‘Can I use the sharpener after you? I’ll empty it.’

Danny finished doing his pencil and handed it over.

I gave my pencil a few twists until it was sharp as a pin. Then after a quick glance to both sides I took off the top and tipped the scraps onto the floor next to my desk. In case anyone was looking I sort of sighed and shook my head and then I got down on all fours and starting scooping the shavings into my hands. And then, making sure my head was right near the floor, I had a quick glance upwards.

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Dad seemed to be out for ages that night. Mum and Joel and I sat there pretty much in silence. Every time I looked at Mum she just glared at me. She was pregnant with Lily and she was huge now – not long to go, she kept saying. Somehow it seemed worse to have upset her now because she spent so much time groaning and gasping and struggling to get about. Maybe that was why she seemed more angry with me than usual. Every time I looked at Joel he just grinned.

Eventually we heard the front door and Dad walked in and sat down next to Mum. He looked at me for a while then he gave Mum a pat on the leg as if everything was OK.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ve had a talk with Mr Wilkinson and Miss Burton. I think we’ve managed to get everything sorted out.’ Mum looked relieved. ‘Miss Burton says she gets it quite a bit,’ Dad said to her, ‘but not normally with first-years.’ He turned and said to me, ‘Sam, there’s nothing wrong with a boy of your age, or any other age, wanting to look at girls.’ Then he grinned and added, ‘especially one as nice to look at as Miss Burton.’

Mum gave a kind of choking noise and stared at him, her arms wrapped round her big belly. The smile dropped off Dad’s face a bit.

‘Well, the thing is, it’s OK. I mean, it’s normal. You know, girls, boys, all that stuff. But there’s a right place to do it and a wrong place. Do you see what I mean?’

I gave a little nod, although I didn’t really.

‘It makes Miss Burton feel... well, uncomfortable if boys keep staring at her legs,’ Dad said. I glanced over at Joel, sitting near the book shelf. He had a smile from ear to ear.

‘Well she should try wearing longer skirts,’ muttered Mum.

‘Love, that’s not the point,’ said Dad. ‘Sam, you know, just keep your eyes somewhere else, OK? Like on your work. Or at least on legs your own age.’

Mum tutted and Dad got up and ruffled my hair. ‘No harm done, eh?’ he said. ‘Now, what’s for tea?’

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How could I have told them that I thought Miss Burton had a wooden leg? Joel would have lied through his teeth and I would have ended up looking even more stupid. By then, of course, I knew full well that she had two normal legs and that Joel had got the better of me in front of my whole class, not to mention Mum and Dad. So I just kept my mouth shut and promised to myself that I’d never believe a word Joel said ever again. So you see, that night I really didn’t believe Joel about the Willow Keeper. Not at first anyway. But the next day, things changed.

## Chapter 3

I had to hurry to keep up with Joel the next morning. He'd never liked walking to school together, and since he'd moved up to the high school he'd started trying extra hard to get rid of me. He strode along so fast I had to half run behind him. I must have looked like some kind of puppy.

'Joel!' I called. 'Wait!'

He kept walking. We hadn't had a chance to talk at home and I needed to tell him I didn't believe him. I ran for a bit and caught up.

'Joel, it's important. Slow down.'

He kept going but looked at me over his shoulder.

I grinned and said, 'Good one last night.'

Joel looked forwards again.

'What do you mean, Sam?' he said eventually.

'The stuff about the Willow Keeper,' I said. 'Being in the garden. It was a good one.'

Joel spun round and grabbed me by the shoulders.

'Are you saying I made it up?' he said. His cheeks were all bunched up and angry. I didn't expect him to be like this.

'Well...' I said, looking in his eyes for any sign of a smile, 'you know...'

'No I don't know, Sam. You tell me.' There was definitely no smile in there. 'Are you saying I made it up?'

'Only to scare me,' I muttered. 'Not like you were lying.'

He stared at me for ages and then said, 'He was there, Sam.' He let me go and marched off down the road until he disappeared round the side of the post office.

When my legs stopped shaking I set off after him. Joel had never really got angry with me before. Whenever I did anything to annoy him he usually just liked the excuse to get his own back. Even last year when I crashed his bike and bent the wheel he just gave me a dead

leg and smashed up some of my cars. But this was different. It was like something had really got to him.

I turned the corner and almost ran straight into him. He was talking to Jonny and another lad called Craig who'd just been into the shop for sweets. I didn't really know Craig, but I'd seen him coming home from football practice with Joel the last few weeks. His family had just moved in round the corner from us.

'Here he is,' said Jonny when he saw me. 'Catch up, slow coach.' I shrugged and we set off along the pavement. Joel was walking slowly with the other two now so I didn't have to run. Craig held out a bag of cola bottles and I took one and said thanks.

'You not playing tonight, Joel?' he asked.

'Yeah, course,' said Joel.

'So where's your kit, man?' said Craig. Joel looked over his shoulder and sighed through his teeth. He just had his normal bag with him. I hadn't noticed either. I suppose we both had other things on our minds.

'I'll go back for it at lunch,' he muttered and plodded on.

I don't know why I said it. Maybe something in me was trying to explain to the others why Joel had forgotten his kit and was acting so funny. It was just one of those things that came out of my mouth before I had a chance to stop it. I said, 'Joel saw the Willow Keeper last night.'

I saw Joel's shoulders flinch, and then he kept going as if he hadn't heard me. But Jonny stopped dead and turned round.

'Did you say what I thought you said?' he asked. Joel and Craig turned round now too. I nodded and waited for Joel to say something.

'What's the Willow Keeper?' said Craig.

'Shush,' said Jonny with a flick of his hand. He looked me right in the eyes. 'Honestly? You're not winding me up?'

'No,' I said. I was beginning to feel a bit stupid now. Joel wasn't saying a word.

Jonny turned to look at Joel and I could just see the side of his face. His eyes and mouth were wide open. I didn't know what was going to happen next, and then Jonny's face split into a grin.

‘You the man!’ he said, raising a hand. Joel seemed to hesitate for a split second and then he grinned back and gave Jonny a high five. Jonny gave him a low five back then spun round to me and went, ‘Boo!’ Joel laughed and Craig did too, although not properly because he still looked confused. They started walking again. There was nothing for it but to follow them. I looked at my shoes and hunched up my shoulders so they wouldn’t see my face.

‘So come on,’ said Craig, ‘what’s the joke?’

‘The Willow Keeper?’ said Jonny. He put his hands on Craig’s shoulders and said in this creepy voice, ‘He comes in the night.’ Joel sniggered.

‘Yeah,’ said Craig, ‘and?’

‘It’s just some rubbish story,’ said Jonny. ‘It’s been around for years – you know, like the Yeti or the Loch Ness Monster. He lives in the woods, right, and nobody ever sees him. But when you do – when he looks straight at you with his mad eyes...’ He paused and then in a slow, Darth Vader kind of voice he said, ‘Something you have lost will be returned to you.’

Craig looked at him for a second. ‘Is that it?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jonny, ‘I told you it was rubbish.’

‘He doesn’t murder your first born child or turn your skin inside out or anything?’

Jonny shook his head.

‘Big deal,’ said Craig. We walked on, but further down the road he said, ‘So what does he look like?’

‘Who?’ said Jonny.

‘You know, the whatsit, the Willow Thing. Is he just like, you know, a bloke? Or has he got hair and fangs and stuff?’

‘Dunno,’ said Jonny, ‘it’s only nutters who see him. Try asking Sam.’

‘Shut up, Jonny,’ I said.

Jonny gave Joel’s shoulder a shove and they both laughed.

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Joel must have gone back for his football kit at dinner because I didn’t see him on the way home. Our road was the last on the estate and by the time you got there after school it was just me and Joel left, although he always pretended he hadn’t seen me. But that night, there was no sign of him.

I got in, dumped my bag at the bottom of the stairs and shouted hello while I took my coat off. Mum's voice replied from somewhere upstairs. From the living room I heard the thud of Lily launching herself off the sofa.

'Sam!' she cried. 'Look!'

The door swung open and she came stumbling out into the hall, her face flushed with a huge grin. She was clutching something in her chubby hands and when she saw me she held it out and said, 'Look! Aggie Aggie!'

It was then that I saw what she was holding, and I was so stunned the breath went right out of me and I ended up kneeling on the floor next to her. Raggy Annie was Lily's favourite toy, a big, floppy doll that someone had bought her when she was born. Lily slept with her every night, and she was beginning to live up to her name, getting tatty round the edges and still stained with drool from where Lily had chewed her when her teeth were coming through. Mum had never been able to get her away from Lily long enough to wash her.

And then suddenly, about a week ago, Raggy Annie had disappeared. Nobody remembered where they'd last seen her, except for Lily who kept wailing, 'Aggie Aggie in my cot!' over and over again. But Raggy Annie wasn't in Lily's cot, and after we'd searched the house from top to bottom we hadn't found her anywhere else either. It was as if she'd vanished off the face of the earth. Mum had tried everything to calm Lily down, but for the last week Lily had spent every evening crying herself to sleep.

Now, though, she looked about as happy as it was possible to be. 'Aggie Aggie!' she cooed, climbing onto my knee and dancing the doll on the floor in front of us. 'Aggie Aggie!'

'You found her,' I said, trying to sound normal. 'Where was she, Lily?'

Lily pointed back into the living room and chirped, 'Chair!'

'On the chair?' She nodded proudly. 'You show me then.' I led her back into the living room and pointed at the armchair by the window. 'Here, Lily? Was it down the back?'

'No,' said Lily, '*dat* chair.'

'Do you mean the sofa?' I said.

'No!' she said impatiently. '*Lily* chair.' She tottered across the room and slapped her hand on the chair next to her dolls' house. It was a little wooden chair, like one of the ones by the dinner table but Lily-sized. It was only slightly bigger than Raggy Annie herself. There was no way she could have got lost underneath it.

‘Raggy Annie was on here?’ I said. I took the doll and sat her up straight. ‘Like this?’

‘Yeah!’ squealed Lily and clapped her hands. ‘Aggie Aggie on Lily chair!’

I went upstairs to find Mum. She was in her bedroom, folding a pile of clothes.

‘Hi Mum’ I said. ‘Lily’s pleased about something.’ Mum smiled. ‘Where did you find her?’

‘I didn’t,’ said Mum. ‘She did. I’m surprised you didn’t hear the squeals of delight all the way from school.’

‘But she said she was –’

‘On her chair, I know.’ Mum finished folding a shirt and put her hands on her hips. ‘You know what she’s like, Sam. It’s anyone’s guess.’

‘But we searched the living room from top to bottom,’ I said. ‘We looked everywhere.’

Mum shrugged. ‘Sam, love, all I can think about is getting her off to bed tonight. I don’t care where Raggy Annie was, as long as she doesn’t decide to go there again.’ She picked up a pile of clothes. ‘Now while you’re here, you can put these in your wardrobe.’

I carried the things into our room and put them away, then I went to the window and stood for a while looking out into the garden. The leaves were starting to come down off the trees, and they lay scattered across the grass and Lily’s bright plastic slide. At the bottom of the sycamore tree was the messy patch of shrubs where Joel and I used to find frogs in the summer, even though we didn’t have a pond. Beyond that was our fence then the field, and finally the edge of the woods. I stood there looking out until I realised it was going dark and my eyes were starting to ache but I couldn’t see a single footprint.