

The Willow Keeper

by Mark Whitaker

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Chapter 1

It was dark and someone was shaking me awake. I tried to get up but my shoulders were held flat against the bed and a voice said, 'Shhhh!' The breath that wafted across my face smelt of salt and vinegar crisps.

'Joel?' I said. '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?'

'It's about half one,' said Joel. He let go of my shoulders then and I twisted round to see the clock. It said 1:24 AM.

'What are you doing awake?' I asked.

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

A shudder ran right through me. 'What,' I said, hardly even whispering now, just saying the words with my breath, '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?'

'Who?'

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

'No, of course it's not.' 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, ‘looking up at me and glowing, like when you see 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, big brave Sam, want to have a look?’

I hated being Joel’s little brother. 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. Cold air swirled under my pyjamas and made my skin prickle with goose bumps. 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 I 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.’

‘Leave me alone. I’m going to sleep.’

‘I’m telling you, 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 and I'd still fallen for it. He loved doing that kind of thing, it was like it was his hobby. Now I'd have to convince him that I didn't really believe him after all, otherwise 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,' said Joel, coming over and sitting on my bed. 'You know, your new teacher at juniors.' I nodded. 'The thing is, she's got a false leg.'

'Really?'

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 only just covered her knees. As she sat down behind her desk I just caught a glimpse of two bare legs poking out underneath and it was amazing because, in that split second at least, they both looked completely normal. This was going to be tricky, but I could imagine what would happen if I went home and told Joel I couldn't tell a false leg from a real one. And so for the rest of the day I took every opportunity I could to have a really good look.

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,' he said. '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.' He patted his trouser pocket. 'Solid oak right up to here.'

I just stared at him in amazement.

'You know how Mum has a razor next to the bath?' he said. '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 she only ever sat down behind her desk, and it had a bit at the front that hid her knees from the class. I smiled to myself then because I was the only one who knew why she only sat down there, and stood up everywhere else: it was because of the hinges of course. I needed to do was get down on the floor and have a quick 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 started 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 winked at me and smiled.

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 was grinning 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. We used to go to school together all the time when he was still in juniors but he was at the high school now, and even though they were right next to each other he never wanted to walk in with me any more. He preferred to meet up with his mates instead, and it was like being seen with me meant he was still a little kid. I was in Year 6 now and I sort of hoped that next September, when I moved up too, things might go back to how they were. But I suppose deep down I knew they wouldn't.

That morning Joel was striding along as fast as he could and I had to half run behind him to keep up. 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 about the Willow Keeper. I ran for a bit and caught up.

'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.'

He spun round and grabbed me by the shoulders.

'Are you saying I made it up?' 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.

I waited for my legs to stop shaking and then 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 his friend Gav and there was 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 Gav when he saw me. 'Catch up, slow coach.' I shrugged and we set off along the pavement. Joel was walking normally 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 school 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 Gav 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 Gav 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.

Gav 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 Gav’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 Gav a high five. Gav 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 Gav. 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 Gav. ‘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 Gav, ‘I told you it was rubbish.’

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

Gav 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 Gav.

‘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 Gav, ‘it’s only nutters who see him. Try asking Sam.’

‘Shut up, Gav,’ I said.

Gav 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 with this huge smile on her face. 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 that 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 she'd 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?'

She 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, pointing across the room, '*dat* chair.'

‘Do you mean the sofa?’ I said, even though by now I knew she didn’t. Lily never called the sofa a chair, she called it the *dofa*. But there was only one other chair in the room and it couldn’t be that one.

‘No!’ she said impatiently. ‘*Lily chair*.’ She tottered across the room and slapped her hand on the little wooden chair next to her dolls’ house. It was like one of the ones by the dinner table but Lily-sized and 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 and I could hear my voice trembling a bit. 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, trying to sound normal. ‘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 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. I couldn’t see a single footprint.