

Synopsis: *The Willow Keeper* by Mark Whitaker

Nobody believes in the Willow Keeper. It's just a local myth, like the Loch Ness Monster – a mysterious figure who is said to live in the nearby woods and return lost things. So when 10-year-old Sam's big brother, Joel, wakes him up one night saying he's seen the Willow Keeper outside their window, Sam doesn't believe him. After all, playing tricks on Sam is Joel's favourite pastime.

Sam is a lonely boy. Joel, who is almost 13, seems to wish Sam had never been born and spends all his spare time with his obnoxious mates. His Mum is always busy with his lively toddler sister, and his Dad, probably the best friend Sam ever had, disappeared without a trace almost two years earlier.

The day after Joel says he's seen the Willow Keeper, Lily's long-lost doll miraculously reappears. Unable to confide in Joel, Sam keeps his thoughts to himself, but before long his curiosity leads him to the willow clearing in the woods. He catches a fleeting glimpse of a figure crashing through the trees and sure enough, the next day, he opens his bedroom drawer to find a treasured photo of his Dad which he lost months earlier.

By now, Sam's Dad has become a substantial presence in the story, revealed to us gradually in Sam's dreams and memories. The day he disappeared, Mum told Sam and Joel that he'd lost his memory – that his car was at work but he was nowhere to be seen. Soon after, though, Joel told Sam that their Dad was dead but Mum didn't want to tell them the truth. Other people seem to have their own ideas. All Sam can do is cling onto the blind hope that his Dad is still alive and that one day, somehow, they'll be reunited.

The only person Sam feels he can confide in is his great-grandma Eleanor, who has her own story to tell about the Willow Keeper. Sam goes to visit her and hears the now-familiar and tragic tale of his great-grandfather, Albert. Albert went to war with his son's best toy soldier, Tommy, in his shirt pocket, but lost him in an act of heroism which left him damaged and haunted for the rest of his life.

That night, Sam wakes up to find Tommy under his pillow. It is then that he begins to understand the true extent of the Willow Keeper's powers, and to wonder if he could even bring Dad home. But Mum and Joel both have shocking revelations for Sam – revelations that will send him on one last, desperate quest into the woods...