

Stick Figures

Secrets are a commodity when you're in the spotlight, and it was only by calculated effort that few in a handful of close friends, let alone anyone in the entire Brookstone AG Equipment Empire, knew of the cherished daughter for whom Brett and Savannah lived.

But Willy Windwalker knew better than anyone for he'd been Savannah's caregiver since before she was ever pronounced Princess of their tribe and had been gratified to come along with her when she married Brett. The beautiful child that Savannah bestowed upon the world substantiated his belief in Savannah's spiritual royalty.

Willy never doubted Brett's love for Savannah, he was good to her and made her laugh – until the day he was accused of her murder.

Once all the detectives, forensics experts, and photographers had at last left the Brookstone mansion, Willy began a desperate search for little Sara. He'd found her in a closet off the grand foyer, wrapped in her mother's favorite sweater. The child had never called out during the exhaustive investigation because, although she'd been born without the ability to speak, and Savannah had taught her to sign quite well, the child had been too frightened.

It wouldn't be long, Willy knew before others would come; those who would be looking for Sara - to take her away. With no time to spare, Willy gathered Sara and all she wished to bring along, into his old ford pickup and headed for New Mexico. Sara would be safe with her mother's family on the reservation.

He'd driven all through the night and half the morning but was back at the mansion when the next barrage of investigators arrived. All he knew, he'd replied repeatedly, was that the child

was “with family.” Willy knew he’d miss the majestic Santa Catalina Mountains, but it was time to move on.

One last look around the expansive and well-appointed kitchen unnerved him enough to drop his keys. Bending to retrieve them, he discovered a flashlight tucked under the oven. It was one of those heavy-duty, beacon-like models, weighing nearly 15 pounds and emblazoned with the Brookstone company name and logo. It was the one Savannah used when she and Sara played shadow games. A keepsake, he reasoned, as he tossed it into his glove box and slowly drove away from a life gone by.

The sensational news rocked the entire west coast it seemed, as he watched from his bunkhouse on a ranch in Colorado. Rumors flew, and speculations snaked across newspaper pages and television newscasts. The portrait the detectives had commandeered for “evidence” was plastered on any and every available media outlet. A picture of love, togetherness, Willy thought. Brett, debonair in his dark suit, boyish grin, eyes the blue of a sparkling stream at sunset. Savannah, regal in a deep red gown that accentuated her dark eyes and hair, and the treasured cashmere sweater Brett had given her on their first anniversary, the one with the 1/2-inch square emerald buttons. The same sweater Sara had chosen to bring along from the closet when he’d whisked her away from the mansion.

The prosecutors seemed unaffected by the picture, for it was deemed an “Open and shut case” almost from the start. Blunt force trauma had killed Savannah in her own kitchen. Never mind the fact that no weapon was ever found, it was rumored that Brett drank, had an explosive temper, a hefty insurance policy and there were malicious whispers of a less than monogamous marriage. It was all Willy could do not to throw the remote through the window of the

bungalow. He knew none of it to be true but was at a loss as to how it could be proven. His beloved Savannah was gone, and the life of a decent man and adoring husband and father was on the line. Willy tasted the detestable sour of powerlessness.

In the latest of telephone conversations, Indian mother Shima had reported with concern that the child had been having nightmares and in his haste to get back to the Pueblo, he hadn't bothered to leave word with his new boss before throwing a few articles of clothing into his truck and heading out. As he drove through the winding mountain pass, the radio faded in and out and though not unexpected, Willy was stunned to hear the authorities had already gone public in their search for the child of Brett and Savannah Brookstone *and* the Indian caretaker who was suspected of theft and child abduction! Fuming, he tromped the accelerator and flipped on the hi-beams in the deepening darkness and left the radio on, casting repeated glances in the rear-view mirror.

His tires crunched loudly on the gravel drive which led to a modest adobe Hogan where he abruptly stopped and slapped the headlights off. The radio was coming in clear again. Authorities had evidently allowed reporters to elaborate on the theft charges, and it seemed the discovery of one of the emerald sweater buttons led them to believe the rest of it had been stolen. As far as Willy was concerned the sweater was with its rightful owner, and surely they wouldn't throw him in jail for taking a flashlight, would they? Willy wondered uneasily. He motored the old ford slowly up to the door and got out.

If he'd needed any confirmation of the nightmares, it was alarmingly evident as he walked in on the scene of one. Shima tried desperately to calm the child as she thrashed beneath a light woven blanket. Her lovely face wet with tears; Willy thought not for the first time how

frustrating it must be not to be able to cry out loud. He rushed to her side and took her in his arms.

“Shh,” he murmured softly. “It’s okay, Sara.”

Her eyes flew open, and she hugged him hard, her small face crumpling with the threat of new tears. Willy held her until she calmed and began signing rapidly. Dismayed, for he just never grasped the language well, Willy looked to Shima for translation.

“A large light on a tall metal box,” She reported.

Willy shook his head in bewilderment. But the child had grabbed his hand and was urging him to follow.

“She draws in the dirt,” Shima explained as they followed Sara into the dark night.

Indeed, there were drawings in the dirt, but a million more stars could not have lit the dark night well enough to see them. Willy went to his truck and took the Brookstone flashlight from the glove box. He was not prepared when Sara collapsed on the cold, hard ground, and fresh tears streamed down her face. Shima crouched by her side as Willy wondered *now what?*

He hadn’t long to wonder before Sara suddenly leaped to her feet, wrenched the hefty flashlight from his grasp and dropped it with a thud on the ground near one of her carefully drawn stick figures. Willy’s heart sank with sadness as it seemed clear the child had witnessed the death of her mother. He instinctively reached to comfort her, but Shima stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Look.” The old woman nodded toward Sara, who had pulled the flashlight upright on a large square, drawn beside the figure she’d first dropped it by. Her delicate fingers flew as the

child frantically signed her story to Shima, watching intently with widening eyes. With a deliberate swipe of her small hand, Sara then knocked the flashlight over so that it landed on the figure beside the square. Her dark eyes implored the Indian mother's understanding until Shima nodded with outstretched arms.

Gathering Sara in her arms, Shima beckoned Willy to follow, and the three returned to the warmth of the Hogan. Willy added wood to the ebbing fire and tried to piece together what little he'd gleaned from Sara's story. From a carved wooden box in the corner, Sara produced her mother's sweater and climbed into Willy's lap while Shima heated soup at the stove.

Sara had fallen fast asleep before the soup was ready and after placing her back in bed, Willy joined Shima at the table.

"You must go back and tell them, Willy." Shima implored as he put a first spoonful of soup to his lips.

Observing Willy's raised eyebrow, she continued "You must tell them the light fell from the box, striking her mother. Sara saw this. And she saw her father's suffering and was unable to comfort him."

"How can I ever prove this?" he asked. "I won't put Sara through that!" He said with conviction.

"Then you must think of her father." Shima's eyes bored into his.

"I'll be back." Willy pushed his chair from the table and went outside.

His thoughts swirled on an urgent spin cycle, too fast to grasp, too heavy to let go. Retrieving the flashlight; preparing to heave it as far as he could into the darkness before the

word “Weapon!” screamed in his mind. He had inadvertently found the *murder weapon*! Willy quickly threw it back in the glove box of the old ford and took out his seldom-used cell phone, the number of which he honestly had no idea. But there was one number placed on speed dial. He leaned heavily against the truck and thumbed number one.

Before dawn the next day, Willy hugged Shima and peeled Sara’s arms from around his neck before stepping into a dark gray SUV that sat idling in front of the Hogan. The weight of the flashlight in his bag seemed to have increased tenfold.

From behind the wheel, a large man with even larger blue eyes set in the pleasant face of a sunbaked rancher offered a thermos of coffee, the robust aroma of which permeated the interior of the SUV. Willy offered a half-hearted smile but shook his head. He hadn’t expected Pete himself, to come collect him. It was an incredibly risky thing for his new boss to be doing since likely half of all police forces were lurking just outside the reservation borders. As if reading Willy’s mind, Pete spoke up nonchalantly.

“No worries, Will. Got all the paperwork we need, here in my briefcase.” Pete patted the expensive leather fondly. “Just do *not* speak unless I say, alright?”

Willy nodded, thinking of Sara.

They rode in silence for a while as Willy recollected all he’d heard at the chow table at the ranch about the owner being a high-powered attorney from Denver. Willy knew he’d taken an enormous – and desperate – chance asking Pete for help. He knew nothing about the man, but it somehow felt right. Terrifying, but right. And as they came upon the first roadblock, Willy prayed it would be.

“Aw, not as big a show as I expected,” Pete remarked as they slowed to a stop amidst upwards of twenty officers from varying enforcement agencies. The knot in Willy’s stomach expanded to his chest as he averted his face from a camera flash right outside his window.

“We’ll be picking up a ride-along here.” Pete said, and Willy’s hand flew to the door handle.

“Easy, Willy. It’s all part of the bargain, the *conditions*.” Pete patted Willy’s closest arm as the back door of the SUV opened, and a lanky, gray-haired man with a large backpack climbed clumsily into the back seat.

“This is Detective Delsey.” Pete gave a backward nod. “He knows you’re innocent too, Willy.”

“Absolutely,” Delsey confirmed. “Got the proof on tape too.”

Willy spun in his seat to stare at Delsey as Pete gave a few nods to the officers, and the SUV began moving again with three black and whites close behind.

“Yes.” Delsey went on. “I’ve been trailing you since you first snuck the child from the mansion. I found one of those expensive sweater buttons and figured you took that too. But now it all makes sense. She can’t speak, but the child can sure tell a story.”

“No!” Willy began, but Delsey raised a bony halting hand.

“The child won’t have to testify. Besides, the story she tells in the dirt explains it all. As I said, I’ve got it all on video. Her father has proclaimed your innocence all along and knew that you had his little girl in good care – somewhere. And I must say the smell of that soup last night nearly brought me out of hiding.” Delsey offered a sheepish smile.

Willy had almost settled back in his seat when the detective spoke again.

“Oh, and I’ll need that flashlight, Willy. Evidence, you know. It’s just a tragic freak of fate, Son. And I’m real sorry for your loss.”