

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a camera. The person is wearing a dark red, possibly velvet, garment. The camera is a silver and black DSLR-style camera, held in a way that the lens is pointing towards the bottom right. The background is a deep, rich red color. The text is overlaid on this background in a gold, serif font.

DEPTH OF
FOCUS

The Stanzas & A Novel

Kenya D. Williamson

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THE STANZAS & A NOVEL

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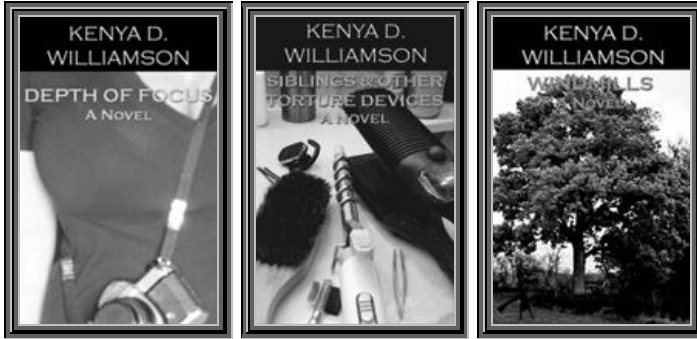
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This book is also available in paragraph/prose form. For more information on the author and her other titles, visit www.kenyadwilliamson.com.

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For my mother, Brenda

DEPTH OF FOCUS

THE STANZAS

Chapter One

The Seeds of Hating Chocolate Cake

Children's
cheers and giggling vitalized the normally
quiet
Tuttle
dining room. It was the fifteenth —
Danni's birthday. The balloons
were
filled.

Streamers were hung.
Preschoolers played.
New friends were made.
And
in the backyard, an exuberant game
of tag was being waged.

Five-year-old Danni got up on her tiptoes —
sporting the new,
powder blue dress her mother had insisted she wear.
She
stretched for the manual camera
which was

always
just out of reach.

On the top of the dresser, its boxy shape beckoned
to be explored.
More tantalizing
than the promise of any
gift-wrapped
toy,
what happened *inside* the metal,
silver and black contraption intrigued her.
Black and white portraits and color snapshots —
often of *them* or from her father's sudden
travels abroad — had been hidden
from almost everyone's view.
Only a few had been framed.
The rest were quickly destroyed.

“Don't, Danni. You'll break it,”
Marnie shooed her away. The former homecoming queen's
premature worry lines and wrinkles, poorly
hidden under overpriced moisturizer and makeup,
only made Danni's
mother appear
much older than her thirty-one
years.
Suspicions of multiple extramarital affairs
had
depleted her.
And ideas more somber than those
had consumed her waking hours.

“Now, you just turn the ring
until everything
you see
looks
clear.”

In the habit of ignoring his wife's cautioning,
Daniel held the camera to
the eye of his elder child.
Danni's small hands
gripped it
hungrily.
If nothing else came from his marriage,
Daniel knew he had a child who was like him —
almost as good as a son,
he thought,
but not
quite.

He was already
following in
his father's footsteps.
The late nights, the disappearances, the
lies, the denials.
Even though he wanted to protect his children from
hardship,
deep down, he feared that he couldn't.
He wasn't willing to stay
faithful. And he was afraid
to admit his transgressions.

Every time he looked into
his
little girls' eyes, he saw tiny reminders
of the conduct he'd hated.
He
saw their trust and adoration.
But, he knew he was repaying it with
kindness that only softened
betrayal.

By the
age of eleven,
Daniel had almost grown numb to the sounds

of
his mother's crying.
But, the sight of her cascading tears always drove him
to fury. He blamed *her* for
staying in a
dead-end relationship. He both hated and loved his
father and saw him as a tragic, misunderstood
figure.

The similarities in their behavior
hadn't escaped Daniel's notice.
And
as he considered
the effects of
what he planned to do
next,
the
unwitting child nuzzled between his arms
abruptly fidgeted.

Danni's
new garment's tags
were
once again chafing her neck.
The
spreading rash on her nape testified while
her father sympathetically steadied his heavy Pentax K1000.
Tomboyish, Danni
wasn't a dress girl. But, she was
very
interested in trying to make her mother
happy.

Shifting the camera an inch,
Danni framed a much more affable subject.
Marnie's
younger sister was much beloved, but equally
exhausted.

More
 emotionally
 stable
 at a mere twenty-eight,
 Jackie hid
 well-earned resentment beneath
 layers of often called-upon familial duty.

Jackie was more like a mother to Marnie's children
 than an aunt.
 But, her
 uncertainty of what might happen without her active
 supervision would never allow her to say no —
 no matter what
 time, day or night.
 When the phone rang,
 safeguarding her nieces from trauma became
 Jackie's number one priority.

But, mostly she wanted
 Danni and Grace to know and love their mother.
 She wanted them to know her soul and not the shell —
 the woman
 Marnie
used to be who was still clawing for freedom.

Moving on, Danni
 focused on three-year-old Grace.
 Tattling, the cherub-faced toddler
 cried out
 wanting
 equal time with their father.
 Jealously objecting to her high chair's
 oppressive restrictions, she tried to climb
 out, but was quickly returned to her seat.
 "Then, you push the button," Daniel instructed.

Framing her traitorous sibling
 out of the photo, Danni complied,
 releasing the shutter. Candy-coated, grateful lips greeted
 Daniel's cheek, kissing him, as he reset
 his camera on the dresser
 and turned to face his firstborn.
 Thrilled by their shared affection and secret,
 Danni ran back into the dining room – scarcely bothered
 by the guests she'd seen in passing,
 but
 hardly knew.

She wrapped her arms around her mother's leg.
 "All right, you guys.
 I need you to be good," Marnie requested.
 "In a minute, it'll be
 cake time for the birthday girl!"
 The children cheered.
 Inching
 closer,
 neighborhood kids eagerly
 snatched
 paper plates and plastic utensils from the table.

Watching her festive display
 being
 reduced to disarray,
 Marnie forced a strained smile, agitated.
 "One at a time,"
 she gently guided.

Scanning the living room, shaking,
 Marnie grew angrier by the second.
 With her
 husband
 nowhere in sight, she began
 balling her fists. He was ruining the party – both
 for *her*

and
 for Danni – was all the mother of two
 envisaged as
 Jackie returned bearing treats.
 “So, who wants ice cream cake?”
 Jackie teased as more cries of approval
 welcomed her and her thawing confection.

Saucer-like eyes
 and greedy hands
 waited
 all around the table while their
 second-in-command
 hostess
 led the group in “Happy birthday to you.”

Freeing herself
 from Danni’s grasp, Marnie left the chorus
 behind
 and
 entered the living room. In his
 usual hiding spot, Daniel
 hurriedly tipped back his bourbon.
 Extinguishing
 his
 cigarette, he grabbed his camera and briskly
 walked past his wife.
 “Make a wish, Danni,”
 he encouraged, focusing his lens on
 a trio.

With a cautious look to her sister,
 Jackie smiled – sandwiched between
 Danni and Grace.
 Facing the living room wall,
 seething,
 Marnie
 spun around furious – in time for her daughter to

blow out her candles
 and the camera's
 bright
 flash.
 He'd
 deliberately excluded her again —
 this time, from future
 memories — was the only firm conclusion
 she
 drew.

Slapping her inconstant lover,
 Marnie froze, humiliated.
 The diamond ring she'd turned to hurt him had
 left a scratch on his face.
 Remorse quickly
 overwhelmed her as crimson
 dripped from his jawline.
 Braving the disdain of their children and
 houseguests,
 Daniel's attacker saw a myriad
 of frightened eyes
 before she fled for the stairs.

"I'll be right back," Daniel reassured them.
 Taking
 Jackie's offered napkin, he blotted at the blood on
 his
 cheek.
 Calmly setting down his camera, he squeezed the birthday
 girl's
 shoulder.
 A wink later, he was in the hallway.
 His
 wife was perched on
 the middle step.

Daniel had seen
glimpses of Marnie's
vulnerability.
Her emotional meltdowns and irritability had
been a part of their past.
But, regardless of how many times
she went to see
her psychotherapist,
when times got tough, she would grow silent
and then explode like a blast.

It was a moment that Marnie had never wanted in public.
She'd
dreamed
of seeing her husband beg absolution veiled by
locked
doors.
That day, her home
had many witnesses – with humble mouths,
but
big voices. Word of her actions
would fly like lightning. And all the rumors
would
return.

Marnie
ached to *be* that girl he'd married.
If he'd known the true depths of her battle, she feared he'd
never have asked.
He'd wanted the prom queen who
graciously handled her problems.
With a smile, she'd hide darkness.
And with a kiss, she'd possess.
But, many years
of masquerading had left her body
prostrated. She'd prayed to put her foot down
lightly.
Instead, she'd stomped through the floor.

Maybe if she
 hadn't gotten dirty, Danni suspected, her parents
 wouldn't be fighting. And everything would be fine.
 She'd advisedly stayed off the grass,
 reveling – avoiding stains from roughhousing.
 But, a playmate had spilled juice on her hem.
 “I cut the biggest
 slice for *you*.” Jackie hoped to distract her young niece
 with a plate close to Danni.

Giving a big kiss, she paused,
 probing
 shadowy eyes –
 bottomless pools, satiated with unresolved questions.
 “Happy birthday,” Jackie bid her,
 resuming cake-doling duties.
 Amid the roar of her fellow
 children,
 Danni surveyed her favorite dessert. But,
 chocolate ice cream
 roused
 no appetite.

“No, Grace. Honey, give that to me,”
 Jackie chided. Removing a plastic
 knife
 from sticky, grabbing hands,
 she promptly replaced it with a
 far more innocuous spoon.
 “Your daughter and her friends are
 all waiting for
 you to return,” Daniel extended, angling for peace
 the next
 hour.

“And what about *you*?”
 Marnie asked sharply.
 He alertly indulged her.

Bypassing her
 contemptuous expression, he hissed, “Nothing
 could possibly make me happier.” “I’ll alert the
 media...and
 your mistress,” Marnie related.
 Verbally backed into a corner, Daniel
 faltered, surprised.

“Should I alert Jackie, too?” she continued.
 “Now, you’re just being unreasonable...and a selfish
 fucking bitch,” he countered. “For the first time
 in months, you’re just mad something’s not about
 you.”
 “Get out,”
 Marnie demanded in a
 fierce, biting whisper.
 The pure conviction of her tone and gaze sent chills of
 fear
 down Daniel’s spine.

“I’m
 not going *anywhere*. This
 is my house,” he objected.
 “And
 my *family*.”
 Chest tightening and pulse quickening, he
 stepped forward. “Why don’t *you* go?
 You can spend some more time with
 your sister.” “I said *leave!*” she shrieked, frenzied.
 Shoving him backwards,
 she
 rose.
 Scrambling, Daniel caught hold of the banister,
 stumbling.
 An inch between
 his head and a family
 portrait convinced him to go.

“I’m out of here, just like you wanted.” He
snatched
his army green
jacket.
Tempted to turn and take his children, he headed straight
for the door. “Wait!”

“Look
at what a mess you are, Gracie,”
Jackie
playfully scolded. Trying to corral
the children’s attention, she fruitlessly
directed all eyes to Grace’s
chocolate-
covered
face.

“Please don’t do this,” Marnie pleaded.
Giving chase, she clutched at Daniel’s sleeve. “Let
go,” he ordered.
“This isn’t working.”

Wriggling free, he left the cotton cloak, limp in her hand.
It was a frosty farewell – more than he’d
originally
wanted. But, his extrication was fundamental.
And Marnie had
given him the
out.
“Fine!
Leave!”
Marnie screeched, desperate, as Daniel
stalked out the front
door.

In his mind, he’d been rehearsing –
daily
working up the nerve to tell her
that he

wanted to go. But, retreat was much simpler.
 “We don’t need you!” she bawled. “Go back to your
 whores
 and your diseases!
 You’re worse than *nothing!*” she roared.
 Hurling a vase
 into the driveway, Marnie missed her moving target.
 The porcelain
 crashed,
 breaking into pieces – scattering wilting
 dahlias around Daniel’s antsy feet.

“Okay, everybody. It’s game
 time!” Jackie turned up the stereo and ushered children
 from the proscenium to
 the
 yard.
 No longer accepting indifference, she physically
 moved them, when needed.
 As Daniel started his car,
 Marnie collapsed to the floor.
 “*Now,*” Jackie exhorted, hustling
 Danni outside with the others.

As her brother-in-law
 drove out of sight,
 she handed Grace off and joined her sister in the hall.
 “I’m their mother, not you,” Marnie howled, falsely
 accusing. “Bring them back inside. They’re mine.”
 “I *won’t*. Get up!”
 Jackie
 helped Marnie to her feet. Sympathetic to her sibling’s
 delusions, Jackie guided Marnie back
 to the stairs and to the empty master
 bedroom.
 Marnie sobbed as she crawled into her bed,
 fully-dressed. “I’m sorry, Jackie,”

she confessed. “This time was child’s play,”
Jackie assured her.

As Jackie turned off the dining room light,
Danni ran to her room upstairs wrapped inside Daniel’s
green jacket. Unaware of
her niece’s acquisition, Jackie topped the staircase
and
sighed.
Further catastrophe had been avoided.
“I’m headin’ out,
Mar.
Do you need anything else?”
Lingering in the doorway, Jackie prepared for a
brief,
but instantaneous pardon.

Their
childhood home had brought back memories, but
felt
extraordinarily empty
without their parents’ blithe presence.
“I can stay for a few more
hours,” she proffered.
Resisting the instinct to stroke her sister’s hair, Jackie
sat at Marnie’s bedside, reluctant. Striped,
gypsy tabbies expected her evening arrival.

Without her handouts, the strays
would
find food to eat elsewhere. But,
Jackie
longed for their affection – and the fleeting comfort they
gave.
“Marnie,
talk to me.” The house was clean.

The girls were both in bed. And the sun was setting.

“Everyone had *lots* of fun,” Jackie exaggerated.

But, dread filled her as she reached for the nightstand lamp.

“Wake up,” she demanded.

“We need to talk before I go.”

But, Jackie’s long-ago idol wouldn’t regain consciousness without assistance. The pain she’d been suffering for years felt ever-present and suffocating.

It clouded her judgment and made it impossible for her to conceive of a future without its dominion. The prescription bottle of sleeping pills, nearly empty beside Marnie, indicated her intention. Jackie’s heart began racing as she shook her. The situation was familiar, but one she’d wish she could forget.

“How many did she take?” a no-nonsense, emergency room doctor questioned, shining a light in Marnie’s eyes. He hadn’t slept in over twenty-six hours. And his patient’s

willful attempt
 on her life had revived indignation.
 He'd seen good people
 fight for their lives and succumb to violent, tragic death.

"I don't know," Jackie shared, helpless.
 "But,
 the bottle was empty when I got there. And she's also
 on
 anti-depressants." The hospital room
 reeked of harsh cleaning supplies
 and
 fresh
 vomit.
 "Which one? Has she
 done this before?" Jackie faltered. Fearing the inevitable
 consequences of disclosure,
 she
 admitted the details, knowing they might keep the kids
 safe.

As if she sensed what would be coming next, Marnie sprang
 into action.
 Limbs flailing, she fought with all of her might.
 They were
 trying to *save* her, she realized, double-crossed by
 her fallacious salvation. The drugs hadn't
 killed her. They'd simply left her
 weak. Inarticulate and
 uncoordinated, she hadn't a chance to prevail.

Guttural noises emerged from her throat.
 "A little help here," the doctor directed.
 Almost
 instantly, two nurses pounced. Marnie's entreaties fell
 on deaf ears. Even in her
 compromised state,
 her

strength was surprising. But, at the sight of Danni, horrified,
she stopped wrestling and
gave in.

Regret and defeat overwhelmed her as Danni
backed from the doorway.

Ashamed and fractured,

Marnie surrendered to unwelcome rescue.

“Someone please take Ms. Tuttle to the waiting room.”

“*Everett,*”

Jackie corrected

the doctor. “I’m not leaving you, honey.” Whether Marnie
understood her or not, she

wouldn’t go without giving an explanation. “I’m
right here...*We’re* here.”

But,

that was the last thing Marnie cared to consider – public
failure, her family’s

suffering,

having to recover and disappointing

them

all.

Escorted by a stern nurse,

Jackie

entered the hallway as Danni

ran

to where she’d been instructed

to

stay.

“You’ll be a bigger help to

your sister *later,*” Nurse Thelma

guaranteed. She had a job to do. And Jackie was

getting

in

the

way.

Deflated,
 Jackie observed from a safe distance — activated
 charcoal, an IV — all the
 necessary
 tools of resuscitation.
 Sixteen summers before, they had
 been on vacation. The hospital staff
 seemed
 more frantic. But, the procedure appeared
 much
 the
 same.

Rushing to a
 seat,
 Danni
 picked up a magazine. Whenever her father had
 wanted to be left alone, he'd always
 grabbed something to
 read.
 Or he'd lift up his camera. The latter,
 for Danni, wasn't an option. The hospital's resources were
 lean. And she was
 grateful for anything that
 might conceal her
 tracks.

Danni hoped that her father would come soon and visit.
 She knew something was wrong. But,
 she assumed he could fix it.

"I
 hope *you're* not sick, little girl," a voice teased.
 In
 blue jeans
 and a green button-down, the
 man seated across from Danni grinned. He'd been waiting
 for some time, for the most part, unnoticed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenya D. Williamson is a verse novel and short fiction author, poet, screenwriter, actress and occasional blogger from Levittown, Pennsylvania. Currently residing in Los Angeles, California, she writes scripts for TV, film and the internet and has acted in dozens of commercials, films and TV shows.

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When she's not writing or doing voice-over and on-camera work, she's usually reading, working on her website or rooting for her favorite sports teams and athletes.

For more information on Kenya's writing and acting, visit www.kenyadwilliamson.com.

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