


KENYA D.
WILLIAMSON

DEPTH OF FOCUS
A NOVEL



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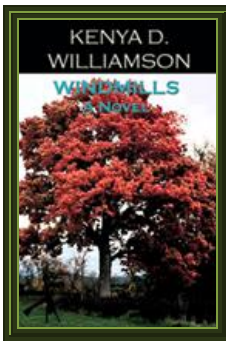
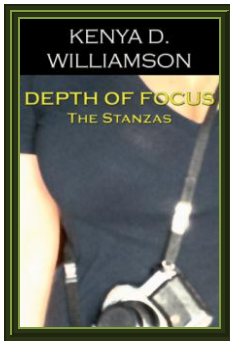
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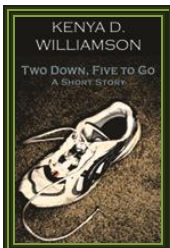
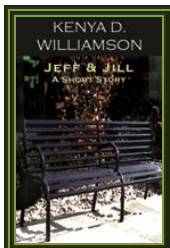
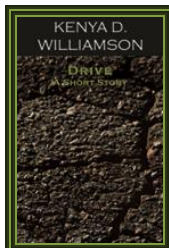
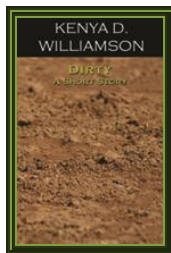
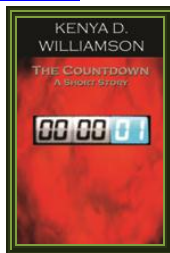
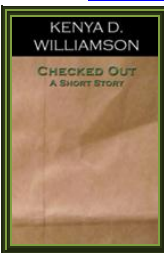
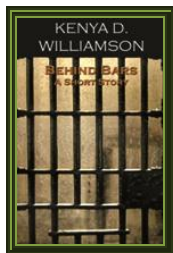
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This book is also available in stanza form. For more information on the author and her other titles, visit www.kenyadwilliamson.com.

Verse Novels:



Short Stories:



For my mother, Brenda

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. But, when Danni had snuck off in the chaos, he’d benevolently minded her sister. “So, where’s your mommy?” he inquired.

"I'm their mother," Jackie offered. Her defenses were soaring. A strange man was talking to her nieces. And she didn't care to know the reason. She just wanted him to stay away.

In response to her brusqueness, Albert respectfully stood. Delighted to see his own nine-year-old son running toward them, Albert hugged him. "Good as new, sport?" he probed.

"Good as new, Dad," Cameron bragged.

Albert was proud – impressed by his spitting image's bravery and insistence on facing the doctor alone. Cameron tugged at his father. "Come on, Dad. Let's go." Following his hero to the front desk, the young athlete pretended as if he'd never encountered any pain. The six-stitch patch job on his right calf would only leave a small scar visible. But, the description of his winning soccer goal – to friends and family later – would be a fond memory for life. Danni coveted their closeness.

Retrieving a puzzle piece thrown by Grace, Jackie spied a tall, neatly-stacked pile that had been left by Albert. The wooden blocks had been patiently culled and replaced. Every time Grace had cast them, he'd given them back. Conscience-stricken, Jackie sat down, still holding the fragment. "Your mommy will be just fine," she claimed – more a wish than a fact. Their aunt had no craving for the

truth if it conflicted with her ideal. “A wonderful doctor’s with her right now.” She denied her tears once again.

Smoothing Danni’s hair, Jackie got up, leaving her purse on the tile. Approaching the front desk and Albert, she apologetically smiled. Returning her expression in kind, Albert signed the last of his paperwork. “You ready?” he asked his son.

“I’m waitin’ on you,” Cameron replied.

Watching the father and son leave, Danni walked to the big windows. Peering outside, she noted the twosome ambling, hand in hand. No longer wearing her birthday dress, she kept scrutinizing the parking lot. Certain another man would sprint to *her* side, she refused to believe anything less. But, Daniel Tuttle wouldn’t come to visit on that day or any other. No matter how long she looked and waited, he’d never wave from his car. There’d be no nod of consolation, no understanding between them. As an adult, she’d bemoan having that much faith in her loved ones.

“MARNIE, THE GIRLS would like to see you today.” Blankly gazing out a streaked pane, Marnie tuned out the notification. It was more pleasant imagining no one else existed. Her resurrection, she theorized, was both punishment *and* gift. “What do you want me to tell them?” Jackie pressured. Expectantly listening, the girls stood in the

hospital corridor. Clad in their mother's favorite dresses, they waited quietly – well-behaved – sure their behavior would merit reward.

But, swollen lids draped Marnie's inaccessible eyes. Desperation had taken its toll. And the drugs meant to *free* her were only making things easier for her to slip away into a place she felt comfortable enduring without fault.

“Okay, guys. Your mom's so busy. We have to go home,” Jackie alleged to confused faces, sweeping Grace up in her tired arms. Leading Danni by the hand, she didn't acknowledge their protests. And as she raced them through the lobby, they quit opposing withdrawal. “We'll see her again when she's all better,” Jackie bartered for their concurrence. While Danni looked over her shoulder, her chance for atonement dissolved. The rose pink frock she'd worn that morning had been esteemed by nurses and interns, but had gone unnoticed by the person who'd denied her entry at the door.

Chapter Two

An Army Green Jacket and a Getaway

HER FATHER'S ARMY GREEN jacket had never kept Danni very warm. But, it was hers. Pennsylvania winters required lined gloves, hats, coats and layers. Boots and extra socks were necessities. But, the damp chill of January and February overmatched Danni's limited bundling.

As a child and an adolescent, she'd worn the jacket to protest her father's absence. But, at twenty-four, she donned it out of routine. Sometimes, she would wonder if she should've let her mother burn it — like she'd threatened to do some two decades before.

An attractive child, Danni had grown into an even more appealing woman. Dark, wavy tresses, much like her mother's, hid muddy green eyes — just like her dad's. Their

daughter's vision had never allowed her to estimate her true beauty. Sight showcased weaknesses and imperfections — insecurities and flaws.

Most of the teasing Danni had endured during her youth only deepened her assumption she'd mirror her parents' infractions and faults. The only person who seemed secure in Danni's success and transcendence was the relative who'd sort of become a second mother — her aunt. Pulling the large, white envelope from her dresser's top drawer, Danni set it beside her father's old, manual camera. The catalog — from New York's prestigious Adelson School of the Arts — looked so small and pointless under the shadow of the digital SLR camera Jackie had bought.

It had been the road intensely *wanted*, but not traveled — a dream Danni had surrendered to circumstances beyond her control. Her freshman year, she'd been accepted on an impressive, full scholarship. Her bags were packed early that Sunday when she'd had to turn it down. Her mother's condition had suddenly worsened — just before the 7:20 train departed on-time. And Grace would do anything to avoid most direct interaction — like feigning mental collapse — if it would get her out of the chore.

Jackie hadn't the ability to care for Marnie alone. Fifty-hour weeks meant very few dates and a limited social life, as things were. So, Danni decided school would have to wait.

She just didn't know until *when*. Every time she got even remotely close to leaving, her mother would take another abrupt, downward turn.

"DANNI!" GRACE BELLOWED from downstairs. Impatient, she wanted more alone time with her new boyfriend, Keith. Her beau of six weeks, the young transient was eager for sex. His other girlfriend was on vacation – *and* on somebody else.

"What?" Danni disliked Keith immensely. Any time he lacked a chauffeur or was horny, he would call. And Grace would run. The animosity between them pleased the younger sister greatly. She blamed her elder for family crises. She *owed* her, Grace argued when fielding the odd pang of guilt.

"What do you want?" Danni echoed. Irritated, she closed her Adelson catalog. Community college hadn't killed her desire.

"Isn't it time?" Grace called out with full knowledge of the day's agenda. Their mother was moody and defiant – and overdue for her next dose. It was Grace's last chance to elude the unwanted duty before evening. Danni's extra shifts at the market made her assistance a requirement, not a request. For many years, Grace had gotten away with refusing to help, claiming it had depressed her. But, through unspoken glances, Grace had gleaned Danni was their mom's favorite –

only, she maintained jealously, because they'd had more chance to bond.

Opening her mother's mirrored, medicine cabinet door, Danni removed three small, plastic bottles. The prescriptions' quantities had been slowly declining. Recent slight signs of progress had inspired confidence in Marnie's critics. Her incessant lows weren't nearly as devouring. And more than a year had passed since the family's last emergency room jaunt.

Maybe her mother's shrink had finally gotten the mood-stabilizing cocktail just right, Danni hoped. As she closed the cabinet, she spied her patient's reflection. The sullen woman was restlessly watching from bed – bluffing defect. Keeping her children close was the reason. Healthy or not, Marnie would fake total dependence if it kept everyone near.

Danni recognized the look in her mother's eyes. She'd seen it several times before. Even when the so-called sufferer wouldn't confess, her lucidity heralded its arrival. As was Danni's practice, she counted the leftover pills – one less than her previous tally. Remembered nightmares plagued her as she placed three pills in a tulip-covered, paper cup. Her mother didn't need another sleeping pill, she felt. But, Danni was certain Marnie would insist on one, given her newly-discovered levels of cognizance and agitation.

Stimulated by the promise of further intoxication, Marnie sat up. With reservations, her doctor had prescribed her original weapon of choice. As long as she was “good,” Dr. Harris would continue to allow the former method of exit. Danni didn’t have time for a fit or a tantrum. She was running late. And arguments were impossible to win.

As the 1:10 train’s whistle blew, Danni took her mother’s juice glass. Mission accomplished – no pills were hidden under the film-coated tongue. Danni had twenty minutes to get to work. But, she wanted desperately to be boarding that departing coach. She knew exactly where Amtrak was heading. She’d studied the schedules for six years. But, her expertise had never been used.

Setting the empty, unbreakable tumbler on its tray, Danni returned to the bathroom to double-check the night’s pill bottles. Each one was clearly labeled so Grace would easily know which ones to serve and when. Placing two of the day’s containers back on their shelf, Danni closed the medicine cabinet. And with a guilty look to her mother, she wedged the third bottle into her pocket and fled.

“I LOVE YOU, MOM,” Danni had whispered while leaving the master bedroom to pack. Her catalog. Some clothes. Both cameras. And meager savings she’d been accumulating in secret, all cash. One blue ribbon. Vinyl

portfolio. Family photos. And undeveloped film – black and white. Her desktop computer would have to wait – along with tripods and prizes. There wasn't room in her bags. She'd have to send for them later. Assuming she'd be forgiven, she'd request them boxed up and mailed – first class or whatever she could afford. If no one else would, she knew Jackie was her biggest supporter – a voice of reason amongst the unreasonable – and the most likely cause that she'd turned out as well as she had.

Slipping the rattling bottle of sleeping pills into her suitcase, Danni vowed to explain everything later. Once she'd rented an apartment in New York, she would call, she decided. In the meantime, a note would suffice. As she taped the handwritten letter to the shared bathroom mirror, apologizing, she guaranteed herself Marnie was doing much better. Leaving the family alone was devastating to her conscience. But, the concept of staying was worse. She'd wind up hating her mother.

All the lies and manipulation – inextricably intertwined with the truth – glutted Danni with pain, doubt and anger. She was loath to trust her judgment. For most of her twenty-four years, she'd gullibly gazed into the eyes of someone who'd calculatingly deceived her. Each failed deception, launched to keep their treacherous sorority together, hollowed trenches deeper than candor could.

“Quit it,” Grace giggled, squirming. As slender fingers tickled her sides, her impulsive partner drew closer. Abandoning Grace with her boyfriend was a necessity Danni conceded. Whether she left the house or the *state* that day, the two would no longer be under her restrictive surveillance. Keith could hop from one friend’s couch to a relative’s basement without hearing relayed criticism. What Danni had said – to protect Grace from heartbreak – had been recited with vitriol instead of helpful advice.

He was the first guy who’d ever made Grace feel that he cared – about her thoughts and emotions. He was quite the con man. She needed someone who would pledge his devotion. And he did – without reservations – to get what he liked.

Skinny legs. Greasy hair. Smoker’s breath. Crooked teeth. Grace didn’t mind Keith’s looks as long as she had him all to herself. Blatant lies. Useless calls. Empty oath. Broken sheath. She didn’t realize their fun that evening would impact the rest of her life.

“See you guys later,” Danni contended, quietly setting her bags on the front porch. The cab she’d called was already waiting. Following orders, the driver hadn’t honked. Danni looked at the house. It was the only one she’d known beyond its surface. As she stalled in the doorway for the courage to

be forthright, she buckled. She wouldn't return for six months.

Danni had to trust Grace would be just fine without her. She'd have Jackie, Danni reasoned. And her boyfriend. Their mom. Danni's car sat in the driveway. The keys were on the hall table. It was a small sacrifice to leave them. But, she knew the family would need them more.

"Whatever," Grace responded, hastily pushing for Danni's exit. Her abruptness made it easier for the elder sister to go. Danni longed for the space to think and to determine what should be her next step – a chance to explore and to grow on her own terms – to rise to the occasion or individually crash and burn.

Chapter Three

Commuters, Drifters and Thieves

GATHERING HER BAGS CLOSE, Danni peered out the window of her subway car. Soon, she'd be arriving in Brooklyn. The final leg of the trip seemed like seconds compared to the journey which had ended at Manhattan's Penn Station. Online and on paper, the trek had looked simpler. But, in practice, her timing was considerably off. Slowed by luggage and concerns that drained her of vigor, she firmly calmed the relentless murmur that constantly whispered to *run*.

Avoiding eye contact, Danni kept watch over presumed businesspeople and tourists – students and vagrants alike. None were exempt from suspicion. Busily consumed, many read, mused and maintained their secrets – which suited

Danni just fine. Her mother, Marnie, had warned her about criminals and danger. “In the city, people aren’t friendly. They’ll hurt you at every turn.” But, after six years of planning, Danni had chosen where she’d live based on research and budget. And she would not be deterred.

Her biggest pain came from the message she’d left her aunt, Jackie. From a greasy payphone, she’d apologized and promised to keep in touch. Humbly, she’d thanked her for her encouragement – both in good times and horrid. But, her admission and bid for atonement were markedly only words.

She’d make it up to her somehow – Danni swore as she stepped off the subway. But, three bag straps digging into her right shoulder brought her attention back to earth. The chafing of rubber sewn on synthetic fabrics had caused more damage than uncut tags. She’d ignored the sting of the growing abrasion. But, another alternative was preferred.

Mounting the stairs, Danni set down her suitcase. The view was overwhelming – threatening and exciting at the same time. Carefully removing the camera straps from around her neck, she set them on her opposite side. She hadn’t much farther to go. Sitting loose on her left shoulder, the two bags were vulnerable – and far too attractive for Lewis to resist. Sensing his good luck, the gaunt teen scanned

the street for police officers. Finding none, he snatched the satchels. He'd barely eaten that week.

"Wait! Stop. Thief!" Danni chased him. But, accustomed to heavier baggage, the boy sprinted easily. He'd assumed she wasn't carrying much cash. And while she struggled with her suitcase, he put more distance between them. "Somebody, please," she implored to faces that quickly looked down. They were grateful it'd been *her* and not them. Over-confident, the smug thief looked back — before he hit the ground, hard. Watching his newly-lost bounty slide away from him, Lewis saw only one bag pop open. A camera emerged from its shell.

The old Pentax flipped up against the thigh of a surly-looking, seated man. Caked with days of dirt, he silently growled. Recognizing Phil as the transient who'd beaten his friend — a *would-be* rapist — nearly to death with a broken tree branch, he ran. Grabbing the more-valuable, digital camera, Lewis took off. Unharmful, he savored living to filch another day. He had a newborn to feed. But, he also had his bad habit. For him, the former came in second. So, first he had to get high.

"Damn it!" On the verge of tears, Danni caught her breath. "I thought they *both* were goners. Thank you so much." She forced a smile — or as close to one as she could muster. Danni had seen homeless people in Pennsylvania.

But, she'd often shuffled past them – afraid they'd harass her or hit her and partly because she feared seeing a familiar aspect, like in the eyes of her mother. But, Phil's attention was squarely focused on Danni's slightly-dented camera. "That camera's *mine*. The kid just took it." She begged her voice to sound strong to his ears.

"And possession's nine-tenths," Phil rebuked her, finally looking up at the exhausted, young woman. His heart broke. Her dark curls and green eyes. Lips bowed like his daughter's. If Phil hadn't known better, he'd have sworn his offspring had come back to life.

But, Jennifer and her beloved mother were long gone. He'd identified the bodies in shock – unable to accept their demise. He stopped his memory temporarily – avoiding finishing their story. "Replace the lens. It's fucking crappy." He slipped it back in its bag. Eleven years later, Phil's mind *still* couldn't withstand another setback. Shamed, he relinquished Danni's camera – averting his eyes. Grabbing her property, Danni slipped the strap around her neck's other side. She still had apartments to see, a police report to file and a hotel room to find.

As she walked away, Danni wasn't quite sure what compelled her to look back. She feared it was a mistake. But, if it were, Phil was making it, too. There *was* something familiar in his eyes that both comforted *and* unnerved her.

She'd glimpsed the person — not the con artist. And she thought maybe he'd glimpsed her, too.

Chapter Four

Screening Calls and other Mood Killers

FOR TWO YEARS, the duo continued to cross paths — each never learning very much about the other. Their small talk and greetings sufficed — as did Danni’s generous offerings. Working in a restaurant had its perks. And Phil was a willing donee. But, Phil’s face was the farthest thing from Danni’s mind in that moment. As she fumbled in the dark, she kissed an attractive young man. She felt in command in her apartment. It was the perfect location — with the exception of the neighbors. They hadn’t been a part of the plan.

Danni had a job. It wasn’t great. She lived alone. The walls were thin. She’d made a few friends — only two of whom she spoke to on a regular basis. But, that was mostly

due to her choosing. She consciously hadn't gotten close to many. Her fear of a distraction — capable of subverting her objectives — always nagged. She was too far from claiming her goals.

She needed more money for Adelson's classes — a *lot* more. And she still had no digital camera. As expected, the police department had never recovered her gift. She hadn't the heart to tell her aunt it had been stolen. The top-of-the-line Nikon had cost Jackie more than one thousand dollars. She'd saved for months. Danni *knew* because Grace had ruined the surprise. Getting her own financially-matching boon had done little to dissuade her. But, she was grateful when Danni had opened her gift-wrapped box, feigning shock.

Dating had been far less complicated for Danni than dealing with family. Hanging out or hooking up was often the preference — with little remorse. Her first six weeks living in the city, she'd managed to completely avoid all contact. But, her colleague and partner in crime was her best friend, Sherry. She happily applauded Danni's altered conviction — at half the bars and clubs in town. The lack of intimacy bolstered their confidence. And the alcohol consumed briefly conjured merriment. But, in the stark light of day, Danni regretted many choices. Getting attached was out of the question. And some made it easy to walk away.

Then, there was Joe. He was different. With him, there *was* no power struggle. No imaginary battle of the sexes or deception. He was a nice guy and a passionate lover. Strong, cute and smart, he liked Danni for who she was not *despite* it. So, for her, it was just a matter of time – before she figured out why and how to skillfully sabotage it. But, as the phone rang – and Joe stopped kissing her – all schemes of dismissal came to an end.

“What are you doing?” Danni objected. Close to ripping his clothes off, she straddled him, aroused. With sofa cushions pushing into his back, Joe looked up at her amused.

“I thought you might wanna get that,” he replied. Waiting a few extra minutes wouldn’t bother him.

“Please, stop thinking,” she requested. Kissing him again, Danni quickly unbuckled his belt. No matter how much Joe touched her, she rarely wanted it to stop. It was a strange thing to her, really. But, she didn’t fight it.

“This is Danni,” her answering machine played. “I hope you know what to do with it. ‘Cause if I have to tell ya, what’s the point?”

“Hey, Danni. It’s April. I guess I missed you,” a trusting voice cheerfully conceded. Trying to recoup her focus, Danni groaned and ran her hands down Joe’s sides. “You’re probably out on the town – partying, as usual. Grace told me to call earlier. But, I didn’t want you to think I was a nag.”

“Are you sure you don’t wanna get that?” Joe offered. Knowing how badly Danni wanted to have sex, he enjoyed seeing the shoe awkwardly worn on the other foot. It was an empowering position.

“I’m sure,” Danni retorted, clearly onto his game.

“Anyway, I just wanted to remind you I’ll be there at nine. My interview’s not until Monday,” April continued. “So, I was hoping maybe we could hang out.” She stalled. “Yes, I know. Get to the point. What I really wanna say is thank you. And don’t forget. Nine o’clock—” The answering machine beeped — as if responding to Danni’s thoughts — cutting her off.

“What time is she arriving? I don’t think she ever mentioned,” Joe teased.

“I like you *so* much better when you don’t bother to talk.”

Pressing his lips together firmly, Joe instantly pulled off his shirt, muzzling a grin. “Better?” he asked.

“*Closer*,” Danni acknowledged. She loved looking at him, clothed or unclothed. As she kissed him again, the phone rang. “Are you kidding me?” she grumbled.

This time the answering machine picked up right away. She’d been needing a replacement for months. “What the hell did you do to your machine?” The all-too-familiar voice

resumed, “Danni, I’ve been leaving you messages three weeks.”

“*Days*,” Danni corrected.

“And even though you’re being rude and making me go out of my way, I’ll go ahead and leave you this last one.”

“Right. *Last*.”

“Come home and clear out your stuff before Mom gets back from Aunt Jackie’s. If you don’t, whatever’s here is going straight in the trash.”

Beeping, the answering machine accepted another unwanted directive. Grace and Danni’s mother would be returning the following Sunday – as planned. Her previous breakdown had been too much for her young custodian to comfortably handle. Marnie had refused food for forty-eight hours. And Grace sat by – helplessly at her wit’s end.

“I’m sorry. Where were we?” Danni bluffed, swiftly burying the memory. “Now, I remember.” Wrenching Joe’s belt free, she tossed it across the room. Her aunt had requested that she stay put – even while they dealt with the dilemma.

“Sounds like a packed schedule,” Joe contemplated – unaware of Marnie’s health.

Danni had the habit of never speaking about her family beyond small talk. “Should I ask where *I* fit in?” Joe asked suggestively and watched his sweetheart’s lips curl. But,

before Danni had the chance to reciprocate her lover's double entendre, the phone rang again. Impulsively, she hurled the attention-seeking technology at the wall.

"Call forwarding?" Joe joked.

"Cutting-edge technology," Danni confirmed, already disenchanted by her haste.

"Hey Danni. It's Brian. Long time no see, stranger," her answering machine recorded. Not long enough, both listeners deemed. "What's up with you? I haven't heard back from you in a minute. You must be busy – missing me, of course. But, who could blame you? I'm the man."

Having heard enough, Joe led a cooperative Danni into her bedroom. Every so often, his lover's past became a little too *present* for him to ignore. But, with no grounds to ask about the caller – no commitment in their arrangement – he simply closed the door, hoping the cocksure voice would soon be obscured.

Danni could've revealed she hadn't shared her bed with another man for several months. But, that fact was a barrier she'd been preserving – to safeguard her own sanity.

"That aside, I hope you know you can't avoid me," Brian taunted from the living room. "It's that time of year again, my dear. And guess what? I know where you live."

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.

With a passion for writing comedy, drama and suspense, Kenya began her professional writing career as a screenwriter. After many years of performing – in TV shows, movies, plays, musicals, choirs and orchestras – she relished the opportunity to work behind the scenes (and eat a few carbohydrates).

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.

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