

Every Tuesday, Rosaline and her friends meet in her room for storytelling hour where she uses her listeners as characters. It's all just for fun at first, until the bad guy from her story merges into real life and is after them.

**What the Storyteller Brings - Book I:
Waters of Virtue - Third Edition**

By Robyn Y. Demby

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What the Storyteller Brings

*Book I:
Waters of Virtue*

THIRD EDITION

Robyn Y. Demby

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THIRD EDITION

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Deep Creek High School was a new building built of chocolate-colored bricks. Purple steel doors that guarded the main entrance contrasted against the building's rich color. Beyond the purple doors stretched an expansive hallway covered with white tiles. To the right was the cafeteria and administrative offices. To the left stretched hallways like avenues off of a main street. Lockers, separated by classroom doors, stood silent in groups of reds, beiges, pastel greens, and yellows.

The bell rang. Teenagers bustled out of classrooms. Most of them wore t-shirts, jeans, and sneakers. A few girls were dressed as if they were ready to walk down the runway in a fashion show, while a group of guys wearing Converse sneakers pushed each other around. Another group of guys wearing purple and white Nike sweatsuits walked behind them. They exchanged high fives. "Gonna dunk on you at basketball practice," one of them said as they passed two girls in front of a beige set of lockers. The girls were watching another girl who had curly brown hair pulled back into a short ponytail. Cherrelle Kaigen, the school's track star, stared at a brown cardboard box that had been left on the floor in front of her locker.

"I like her track suit," one of the girls said.

The other girl said, "It's cool how the yellow streak trails down her sleeves and down each pant leg. They match her running shoes."

Cherrelle pretended not to notice them, until they lowered their voices and began whispering about her. Hazel eyes turned stormy, and she glared at them. They looked alarmed and turned away.

Cherrelle focused her attention on the box again, then glanced around at the people in the hallway. Perhaps she could tell who left the box by the looks in their eyes. Noone seemed to be paying attention to her, and the girls who had

been whispering had moved on. She watched them disappear into the crowd of students and wondered if they knew anything.

She glanced at the box again. With a cardboard lid fit neatly over the top, it looked like a shoebox, only larger. She gently pulled off the lid to discover a pair of very expensive running shoes, a nice jogging suit, and a poem:

*I smile when I see you
From afar
But I withhold my feelings, enclosed safely
In a jar
One day I will let you know that it's me
But I fear you will then treat me differently*

Her eyes scanned the students in the hallway again, then she slipped the poem into her pocket and picked up one of the sneakers. She turned it around in her hands, admiring the stitch work and how the red, black, and white colors contrasted against each other. She nodded. These shoes could make her soar above the stars.

An entourage of three pretty girls rounded the corner from the main hallway. They all wore high heels that looked dangerous and short skirts that made teachers frown. Accustomed to giving them space, people eased away from them, parting like the Red Sea. Their leader was Lana Brandon, the Principal's daughter. Her chestnut-colored eyes blended with brown hair that was cut into a sassy bob. With flawless skin, Lana was stunning. And she knew it.

On one side of Lana was a smartly dressed girl sliding lipstick across her mouth as she walked. Her hair was styled just like Lana's, as if they had gone to the hair salon together. Confident that no one would bump into her; Lipstick Girl's full attention was on the makeup mirror she had positioned in front of her face.

On the other side of Lana was Skye. Her most stunning feature were her eyes, which were the color of the sky on a crisp, sunny day. She spent a lot of time frowning at people with those eyes, as she judged them from head to toe, appalled at the lack of style among her peers. Also confident no one would bump into her; Skye's full attention was on the worst dressed girls she passed in the hallway.

Cherrelle was still admiring one of her sneakers when a pair of high-heeled shoes appeared in her line of vision. Cherrelle's eyes traveled up long legs, a

short skirt, a floral blouse, and an even prettier face dressed with a sarcastic half-smile.

“You know,” said Lana Brandon, chewing bubble gum as she spoke, “me and my friends were wondering what you are. Black? White? Half-breed?” Lana stood, her hand on her hip, with a snarky gaze in her eyes. Her entourage stood behind her.

“None of your business,” said Cherrelle. “And for your information, a half breed is an animal.”

Lana held her gaze. “You mean like a dog?”

Cherrelle drew in a deep breath. She exhaled slowly. “Look, Miss Whitey and The Shoe Crew, why don’t you just keep it moving?”

“Hmph.” Lana reached into the box for the jogging suit. “Nice stuff, but too mannish for me.” The entourage snickered behind her. As if rehearsed, their perfectly manicured hands rested on their hips. Lana pulled the jogging suit out of the box and tossed it over her shoulder. Lipstick Girl caught it. Its matching jacket fell to the floor. “Naaaa. I don’t want these.” She tossed the pants to Skye.

Skye snickered. “The Get Fresh Crew wants their jogging suit back.”

Lana grabbed one of the sneakers from the box.

Cherrelle snatched it from her. “This is mine!”

“No. This stuff is public property,” Lana said.

“It was in front of my locker!”

“In a *public* hallway!” Lana said. “That makes it free for grabs.”

Students paused and gazed at them with interest. A small crowd began to form a circle around them. The guys wearing matching purple and white sweat suits looked excited. They rushed to join the circle.

Cherrelle reached for her shoe again. “Why are you always bothering me? Don’t you have some tricks to turn?”

Both girls tugged at the sneaker until Lana lost her grip. She fell backwards and landed on the floor with a grunt.

Cherrelle towered over her. “You want this shoe?” She waved the sneaker in the air. “You want it?” She straddled Lana, then wacked her in the eye with it.

One of the guys in the purple and white sweat-suits looked impressed. “Ohhhh!” he exclaimed. “Get her, Cherrelle! Get her!”

Lana screamed and raised her arms to protect her face. “Get off me! Get off me!”

Lipstick Girl rushed towards them. “You’ll mess up her hair!” she shrieked before twisting her heel. She stumbled to the floor.

Skye struggled with the crowd that had moved in front of her. “Somebody break them up!” she yelled. She squeezed between two of the guys in the purple and white sweat suits. She reached for Cherrelle. Two teachers had shouldered their way through the crowd and were close behind Skye. Skye grabbed Cherrelle’s ponytail and pulled at it, trying to pull her off of Lana. Cherrelle rolled off of Lana and got to her feet. She glared at Skye. With fists clenched, she charged at her. As Skye shrank away and covered her face with her arms, one of the teachers intercepted and grabbed Cherrelle firmly by the shoulders, breaking up the fight.

Lana and the Shoe Crew sat outside of Principal Brandon’s office. Lana held an ice pack against her eye. A counter top separated the three girls from Cherrelle on the other side, who was pacing the floor like a caged animal. Behind Cherrelle were offices behind glass windows. Mrs. Tye, the school secretary, leaned against the doorway of one of the offices with her arms crossed and her lips pursed. She watched Cherrelle over reading glasses that teetered on the edge of her nose. No matter how much Mrs. Tye moved her head, those glasses would not fall.

Everyone’s gaze followed Cherrelle: back and forth...back and forth. Lipstick Girl rubbed her ankle. “You’re in *big* trouble,” she said to Cherrelle. “You just wait until Lana’s dad hears about this!”

“That’s right!” Skye added. “He’s the principal, so once he gets hold of this, you’ll get suspended! No—expelled!”

“And then you’ll get arrested because my brother is a police officer!” Lana said.

“That’s enough, girls,” Mrs. Tye said firmly. Behind her, a phone buzzed. She disappeared into her office, then returned and motioned for the girls to follow her to another door behind the counter. “Principal Brandon is ready to see you.” She opened the door to his office.

As Lana and the Shoe Crew passed her, Lana frowned at the secretary’s shoes. “Where’d you get those hideous clumpers? They’re rude.”

Mrs. Tye frowned, but then looked down at her own feet: the comfortable, black shoes had thick, brown, rubber heels. She stared after the girls as they made their way into Principal Brandon’s office.

Principal Brandon, a tall, redheaded man in his forties, sat at his desk. Plaques, degrees, and pictures hung on the wall behind him. In one photo, a man stood at the top of a huge boulder. His fist was shoved in the air in victory as if he had just completed a rock-climbing mission. Under the picture, bold

letters spelled *EFFORT*; and underneath that was written: *Some people dream of worthy accomplishments, while others stay awake and do them.*

Principal Brandon motioned for the girls to sit down, then glared at Cherrelle who was still standing. “Do you have any idea what the punishment is for assault?”

“Sir,” Cherrelle raised her palms in the air, “I was just defending myself.”

Lana’s eyes widened. “By beating me with a shoe?”

“Lana,” Principal Brandon said in a firm tone, “let me handle this.”

“But I didn’t touch her stuff, Daddy!” Lana exclaimed. “It wasn’t hers! It was just a box sitting in the hallway!”

The principal narrowed his eyes at Lana, then glanced at Cherrelle.

“And I was just trying to warn her that it could be a bomb! Then she got mad and pushed me for no reason!” Lana glanced around at her friends. “Right, girls?” They all nodded in agreement.

“She’s lying,” said Cherrelle.

Lana sat up straight in her chair. “Daddy, I think you should suspend her.”

Accusing eyes settled on Cherrelle—all except for Principal Brandon, whose eyes dropped down to his desk. He straightened his desk calendar. He grabbed a very expensive pen from a redwood pencil cup, fidgeted with it, then placed it back. “I’m not suspending anybody,” he finally said. “But this *is* a warning. If I catch you two in my office again, you’ll be in a world of trouble.”

“But I didn’t do anything!” Lana exclaimed. “It’s always her fault, but you take her side every time!”

Principal Brandon gave his daughter a stern look. “I’m not taking her side. Now go back to your classes. Cherrelle, I need to talk to you.”

“Uuuuuugh!” Lana got up and marched out of the office with her friends close behind her.

Cherrelle stared after them. As if to complete their dramatic exit, Lipstick Girl grabbed the door knob as she pranced past it, as if she was about to slam the door. She paused and glanced at the principal, then back at the doorknob in her hand. She then slowly closed the door behind her.

After the sound of The Shoe Crew’s heels faded away, Cherrelle shifted from one foot to the other. She looked down at her fingernails. She then glanced up at the principal. He motioned towards the chair where Lana had been sitting. Cherrelle sat down, shifted in her chair, then crossed her feet at the ankles and studied her sneakers. Her eyes rested on his clean mahogany desk. “Do you do any work? Your desk is too neat.”

He narrowed his eyes, as if trying to decide whether she was being disrespectful or not. “My desk is clean because I spend way too much time talking to kids like you.”

“I guess you would believe your own daughter over me, but she keeps provoking me when I didn’t do nothing to her.”

“Didn’t do *anything*. Look, Cherrelle, I’m not taking sides, but I know your temper. Did you really hit Lana with a shoe?”

She looked down at her sneakers again. “Well...kinda.”

“Do you want to stay on the track team?”

“Yes sir.”

“So, let’s start by *kinda* not resorting to violence every time you have a problem with someone. Now can you work with me on that?”

“Yes sir.” Cherrelle glanced up at the picture of the man standing on the boulder with his fist in the air.

“You like that picture?” he asked.

Cherrelle looked down and shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe you’ll stand on a rock somewhere and shove your own fist in the air like that one day,” he said.

A smile reached her hazel eyes. “Yeah, maybe.”

Khara Gavalon, a dark-skinned girl with beautiful, almond-shaped eyes, rounded the corner and entered the main hallway. With baggy clothes to cover her shapely figure, she made her way to the restroom. Too busy looking at the floor, she didn’t see Lana Brandon and The Shoe Crew headed her way. She bumped into Lana and dropped her black-and-orange-glitter notebook.

“Watch where you’re going, heifer!” Lana exclaimed.

“They need a cow crossing sign here,” Skye said. They laughed and Khara’s face warmed.

Lana looked down at the notebook on the floor and read the words across the cover: “Bumble Bee Journal. What the hell is a Bumble Bee Journal?”

“None of your business!” Khara snapped. She reached for it, but Lana planted a high-heeled foot on top of it.

Khara straightened and looked Lana square in the eye, then she frowned. “What happened to your eye?”

Lana looked alarmed, then embarrassed. Her hand fluttered over the bruise. She backed away from Khara and said to Lipstick Girl, “Let me see your mirror.” Within seconds, her friends were hovering around her.

Khara snatched the journal from the floor and tucked it under her math book. She hurried off to the restrooms. Once inside, she stood in the mirror. Khara wasn't much heavier than other thinner students, but her curves gave her body a thickness that made her look more mature than them. Dark, almond shaped eyes gazed back at smooth, chocolate skin and a puffy, black braid that hung in a thick plait over one shoulder. She turned sideways and looked at her stomach. It was flat, but she frowned at her rear end. Why did it have to stick out so far? The attention she received from seniors always made her tense when she passed them in the hallways. She wasn't quite sure how to feel about her dark skin, but knew she was tired of being compared to food. Some guy called her a chocolate lollipop one day and asked if he could lick her. She frowned. "Guys are disgusting," she muttered.

Her eyes settled on her breasts and she sighed. For months, she'd been wearing a bra that was too small because she was in denial about her ample bosom. She was convinced Lana was right about her body. Maybe if she lost weight, guys would stop their nasty comments and Lana would stop the fat jokes.

When Khara could no longer hear The Shoe Crew's voices outside of the restroom, she made her way back down the main hallway to the cafeteria. This area of the school offered an element of surprise for anyone who might be looking for it, for all one had to do was follow the main hallway and there it was: an open space situated in the middle of the building, supported by dark brick columns that rose to the ceiling. To get to the cafeteria, Khara passed a courtyard surrounded by glass windows. These windows offered the cheeriness of natural light into the building, so there was no need for the fluorescent lights that lined the cafeteria ceiling. In the courtyard, seniors sat on purple benches at matching purple tables. The glass doorway leading to the area had a purple hornet painted on it. Khara wasn't allowed to eat out there, because splashed above the hornet were words that read, *Senior Courtyard*.

People sat at rows of tables neatly situated across the shiny floors of the cafeteria. Some ate in silence, some nibbled on sandwiches or chips while rushing through last minute homework, while others whispered and judged classmates who walked by.

Random laughter and loud conversations trickled to Khara's ears as she sat down at a table alone. She began to read her Bumble Bee Journal:

Girls' and guys' brains are built differently when it comes to sex. Most girls seek monogamy and relationships, while most guys have a more casual attitude towards sex. Although guys do have feelings and they fall in love just like girls

do, many don't seek relationships at this age and if they end up in one, it's by accident.

Guys, especially teenage ones, have raging hormones and they need an outlet. They will say anything to get relief. These hormones will motivate them to lie and trick a girl into sex. Based on guys' tactics, they can be categorized into different types. This is one of them:

Mr. Not Right:

You'll see many red flags in the Bumble Bee Journal about Mr. Not Right, but what about the things you don't see like that nagging feeling about him? Instinct and common sense play a key role in steering you away from Mr. Not Right. People may call it picking a guy apart, others may call it paranoia, but listen to that pesky feeling you have that tells you something's not right and go the other way. If he seems like the perfect guy and you suspect that you are being too hard on him, just give him that valuable thing called time. Be patient and you'll find out what's been nagging you about him after talking to him for about four months. Waiting always pays off...

Loud laughter broke Khara's concentration. She looked up to see a tall, lanky guy with a warm smile approach her. He wore an oversized t-shirt, stonewashed jeans, and white, high-top sneakers. Big, dark brown curls rose from his fade. She had mixed emotions about Sam. Being around him screwed around with her heart rate. Sam was cool, Sam was fine, and he was a major distraction from Khara's goal of graduating from high school with her virginity intact.

"Hey there beautiful," he said as he pulled up a chair; he flipped it around and sat on it backwards. "I was wondering if you want to come over this weekend for a movie. I can rent something. Have you seen *Stir Crazy*?"

"How about the movie theatre?" Khara suggested. "There's this new one out called *Coming to America*. We can meet up."

"But I want to get to know you better," Sam said. "You know—have some private time."

Khara shrugged her shoulders. "This is kind of like private time. Private time in public, right? Maybe we should just start having lunch together."

"I thought it would be better if we could be alone. We could talk about stuff...cuddle..."

She moved her head from side to side. "I don't know about that." She saw Cherrelle approaching them in the distance with a frown on her face.

“Why not?” His eyes rested on Khara’s notebook. “Nothing will happen. We’ll just be chilling.”

Khara closed her notebook. She looked left, then right. She leaned towards Sam and whispered loudly, “My mom told me I’m going places in life if I stay away from boys in secret places.”

Sam burst out laughing. “What? Secret places?”

“Yeah—being alone together.”

“What’s wrong with being alone together? Khara, how can you have fun if you listen to your mom all the time?”

Cherrelle approached them. She scowled at Sam. “Really? Are you trying to get Khara over to your house again by pretending like you just want to talk?”

Sam sat straight up in his chair. “I’m going to need you to mind your own business. This is a personal conversation.”

“Not anymore,” Cherrelle said, “‘cause you’re in my seat and my feet hurt. Now don’t you have a bathroom stall to jerk off in?”

Sam stood up. He mumbled something under his breath and walked away.

Cherrelle scowled at Khara. “Stop looking at him like that.”

Khara snapped out of her trance. “Like what?”

“Like he’s a warm pizza with tasty toppings.” Cherrelle straddled the chair like Sam had done. “I know you’re fighting some feelings, but you told me you’re trying to stay focused on a goal and the last thing you want to do is let this guy see you sweat. Now get a hold of yourself.” She looked off in the distance. “You should be more worried about that goofy cousin of yours.”

Khara’s eyes followed Cherrelle’s where her cousin, Rosaline, stood in the cafeteria line. She was a tall, slender girl with long braids that hung down to the middle of her back. One lone braid hung past her dark brown face. She flipped it across her shoulder and smiled at Jimmy Veagin — a golden-skinned boy with curly, brown hair the color of cinnamon. His light brown eyes were almost the color of his hair. When he walked past her, the smile and the hopeful look in Rosaline’s eyes faded.

“Did you just see that?” Khara asked Cherrelle.

“Yep. Drooling over Jimmy Veagin, but he acts like Rosaline doesn’t even exist. I don’t blame him. She’s weird.”

“Don’t talk about my cousin like that,” Khara said.

They watched as Rosaline started to walk in one direction; and then, as if confused, turned and headed towards the cafeteria line again.

“On second thought,” Khara said, “you might be on to something. She does seem to have this weird sense of...of...”

“Desperation going on?”

Khara nodded her head. "That's it! Desperation."

As Rosaline stood in the cafeteria line behind The Shoe Crew, she eagerly listened to their conversation. They were talking about the dance on Friday. "I can't make up my mind on what I want to wear," Lipstick Girl said.

"I'm wearing my new purple pumps Mom just got me," Skye said. "All I need now is some beige ones and I'll have a pair for every outfit."

Rosaline finally summoned up the nerve to talk to the most popular, beautiful girl in school: "What time does the dance start, Lana?"

"Nine o'clock," Lana Brandon muttered and turned to her friends again. "I was thinking of going with Jimmy Veagin. He can dance but he's starting to get on my nerves. Steve is all right but he snorts when he laughs."

Rosaline laughed, but was startled when it came out too loudly. "Jimmy Veagin is fine!" she added breathlessly. "And I like the way he dresses!" Her voice trailed off when she noticed the disinterested looks on the girls' faces as they made it obvious they didn't want her in their conversation.

Lipstick Girl gently touched Lana's eye. Lana drew away. "Ow!"

"Sorry," said Lipstick Girl. "It's red and a little swollen. It's starting to look bad."

"She belongs in jail," Lana muttered. "I can't wait until my brother hears about this. She's going to get locked up for putting her hands on me."

"Let's not talk about her," Skye said. "Let's finish talking about the dance!"

After getting her food, Rosaline spotted Cherrelle and her cousin at a corner table a short distance away. Strolling over to sit with them, she stiffened when Lana made a comment: "Look at her shoes."

Skye and Lipstick Girl placed their trays on the table. "It's just plain rude to leave the house wearing no names," Skye added.

"She must be related to the school secretary. I bet you they shop at the same store too."

"You mean the one on the corner of Goofy and Clompers Ave?"

"No, the one in the mall. You know, Shoes for Hairy Feet?"

Trying to appear good-natured, Rosaline forced a smile. When they burst into laughter, she averted her eyes. She stared at her plate as she sat down with Cherrelle and Khara, who had gone through the fast-food line. They were already eating an assortment of artery clogging goodies.

Cherrelle glared at Lana Brandon. “Why do they have to sit at the table right next to us?”

Khara looked alarmed. “Sssshhhh! They can hear you!”

“I don’t give a—”

“Please don’t start this again,” Khara said. “Can we just have a nice, peaceful lunchbreak for once?”

Rosaline watched Lana and her friends begin eating. She gathered her braids and pulled them over one shoulder. “You ever felt like you didn’t fit in?” she said to Cherrelle and Khara. “I mean, don’t you wish that people wanted to be like you? Like be popular, have a fine boyfriend who all the girls want, or just have someone come up to you and say, ‘I like that! Where’d you get that cute skirt? Where’d you get those shoes?’ You know, like be the best dressed or something? I wish I were like them. They get all the attention.”

Khara paused before demolishing a french fry and raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “Roz, I’m going to be making all kinds of money this summer with my lawn care business; Cherrelle and I are going to be getting in tip top shape, and you’re worrying about being like those conceited things over there? Why?”

“They wear such nice clothes.”

“They look uncomfortable,” Khara said.

Cherrelle was watching Lana’s table too, yet envy wasn’t in her eyes. “I’m itching to catch that bitch alone one day. I want to choke her until her head pops off.” She pressed a ketchup packet between her fingers until red sauce exploded from a tiny opening at one end.

The girls stared at Cherrelle.

“But nice things would get me noticed and make me popular,” Rosaline said. “Clothes are everything!”

“No, they’re not,” Khara said. “Obsessing over fancy clothes is stupid and it’s a bother. It takes too long to get dressed.”

Cherrelle took a bite of her burger and the side of her mouth jutted out as she chewed. “I dress for purpose. If the cops come after me, I’ll be out of here so quick they’ll think I was a figment of their imagination.” She shifted and easily swung her foot onto the table, letting a very impressive track shoe slam down on its surface. Silverware clattered on Rosaline and Khara’s tray. “I believe in nothing but comfortable, sporty shoes. My secret admirer doesn’t care about cost. He probably considers it an investment. We talkin’ scholarship, baby! And you see this yellow streak?” She moved her hand along the side of her shoe as if she were advertising it in a commercial. “Makes me run faster.”

Khara chuckled. “Seriously? Cherrelle, your secret admirer is probably some stalker who’ll want to cash in on his investment when he finally reveals

himself to you. Guys don't just give you stuff without expecting something in return."

"More wisdom from Mommy in the Birds and the Bees Journal?" Cherrelle asked.

"Bumble Bee Journal," Khara stated.

"Whatever it is, it sounds like an after-school special."

Rosaline wasn't paying attention. She was listening to The Shoe Crew's conversation at the other table.

"Does my hair look bad?" Lana Brandon asked Lipstick Girl. "My hairdresser spent two hours on it yesterday and now it's all messed up! I think Cherrelle should pay for it. I'm calling my mom so she can come get me."

Lipstick Girl fussed with a lock of brown hair that swooped over Lana's eyebrow. "You don't have to go home. It looks fine. Didn't we agree that we weren't going to talk about psycho Cherrelle anymore?"

Rosaline tensed. Her eyes slid to Cherrelle, who was still admiring her running shoe. She leaned towards Cherrelle. "Did you get in a fight with Lana?"

"What?" Khara dropped her fork.

Cherrelle moved her foot off the table, sat up, and grabbed a french fry off her plate. "What was that you were saying about clothes, Roz?"

Khara was glaring at Cherrelle. "Please tell me you did *not* get in a fight with her!"

Cherrelle swirled her fry around in her ketchup.

Khara sighed loudly and leaned towards Cherrelle. "You need some anger management classes."

"Or maybe one or two yoga sessions," Rosaline chimed in.

Cherrelle dropped her fry and gave them both fierce looks. "Yoga is for weirdos, and anger management classes are dumb. People just need to stop pissing me off."

Rosaline and Khara exchanged looks. They spent the rest of the lunchbreak in silence.

2

The late afternoon sun beamed from the sky, blazing its yellow heat down on Cherrelle and Khara as they stood stretching. They were preparing for a run at the Dismal Swamp Trail. Above them towered a life-sized statue of a wooden bear that stood on its hind legs. Khara stopped stretching and looked up at it. “What’s with the statue?” she asked.

“It’s called Swamp Bear,” Cherrelle said. She placed her hands on her hips and lunged forward as she bent one knee, stretching the other leg straight behind her. “It was sculpted with a chainsaw by some dude named Jay Bowman. Isn’t it cool? He’s like an artist or something.”

Khara looked around them at the trees and the bushes. She even studied the trail—the straight, asphalt road behind the statue that disappeared into the woods.

Cherrelle straightened and stood beside Khara. She shielded her eyes as she followed Khara’s gaze. “Did you know that the Dismal Swamp Trail is eight miles long and runs alongside the Dismal Swamp Canal?”

“Interesting,” Khara said. “So, what’s at the end?”

“Never ran that far. Maybe it’s like a dead-end road.”

“Or maybe it ends at a cave where bears hibernate,” Khara said. “Have you heard of any bear attacks out here?” Cherrelle shrugged her shoulders. Khara turned and looked at the old, crusty sedan that had barely gotten them there. Over the years, the paint had morphed into a kaleidoscope of rust colors, faded red spots, and grays. It might have once been red. “What if your parents find out about you taking the car?” Khara asked. “Do you have your driver’s permit?”

“Stop all the worrying,” Cherrelle said. “Look, I’ve been driving since I was thirteen. I even taught my mother how to drive.”

“Stop lying.”

“Seriously!”

Khara frowned. “Look, maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

“What are you talking about? You said you wanted to lose some weight, which I’ll never understand because I would kill for a booty like that.”

Khara’s mouth dropped open. She tried covering her butt with one hand.

“You’re going to need more than one hand to cover all that,” Cherrelle said.

Khara backed away from her. “Stop looking at my behind!”

Cherrelle laughed. “Come on. Let’s go.”

The pair slow-jogged as they passed Swamp Bear and began running down The Trail. “Look at us,” Khara exclaimed. “We’re running bear bait.” She slowed down. “I’m going back to the car.”

Cherrelle reached out and grabbed Khara’s arm. “No you’re not. Now stop being a weenie. This was your idea. It’s the perfect running route, so we’re gonna do this!”

Khara let out an exasperated sigh and sped up her pace. Cherrelle had a smirk on her face. “What’s with the grandma shorts? You should be wearing spandex.”

Khara looked offended. She glanced down at her shorts, then at Cherrelle. “No way. Remember those snug fitting jeans you talked me into wearing to school? I got no peace that day.”

Cherrelle laughed. “That’s true, but Khara, maybe you take it a little too far. Some of your outfits are frumpy.”

“My clothes are not frumpy! They’re comfortable! I’m just tired of guys making nasty comments when I walk past them.”

“All I’m saying is that you could at least wear clothes that fit, Khara. And if guys still have something to say, then they’re just perverts.”

“True. But I think that most of the time, we can control the way they look at us. Tight and revealing doesn’t mean a woman is easy, but it makes guys think we are. So if a woman wears stuff like that, she needs to be ready for the crude stares and rude comments.”

“Guys don’t say crude things to me.”

“That’s because they’re scared of you,” Khara said. “I got to get a breath.” They stopped running. Khara leaned over and rested her hands on her knees. She heard a noise. She gasped and stood up straight. “What was that?” Before Cherrelle could answer, Khara darted off the trail and hid behind a tree.

Cherrelle started laughing. “Khara! Get back here!” She pointed at a pine tree. “It was a branch that fell off of that tree over there!”

Khara peeked from behind her hiding place. She squinted at the patch of trees from where she heard the noise. “That was a bear, Cherrelle!”

“I’m leaving you!” Cherrelle resumed running. Khara looked alarmed, darted from behind the tree, and caught up with her again.

“We’re gonna get mauled,” Khara whispered.

Cherrelle snickered. “Why are you whispering?” Khara kept looking back at the patch of trees. “Look,” Cherrelle said, “this is a popular exercise spot. On a really nice day, you’ll see joggers, people walking, and some rollerblading. It’s a great, scenic way to exercise. Don’t you think they’d have warning signs all over the place if it was dangerous?”

The sound of a motor prompted an, “Eeeek!” from Khara.

They turned to see a guy on a motorized bike, complete with horns and shiny mirrors. He coasted by and tooted at them. “See?” Cherrelle said. “Do you think he’d be happy if he just saw a bear?”

“I’m not convinced,” Khara said. As they continued running, Khara kept glancing around them, squinting to see what she could find peeking at them through the bushes.

“If you don’t watch where you’re going, you’ll run into a tree,” Cherrelle warned. A man on a ten-speed bike whizzed past them from behind. Khara screamed again and stopped running. She looked down at her shorts where a wet spot had formed at her crotch. She looked up at Cherrelle in horror.

Cherrelle’s hand flew over her mouth. “Did you just—?”

“This is sooo embarrassing.”

“Okay, okay,” Cherrelle said. “Let’s turn around.” She snorted, giggled, then shook her head from side to side.

“Go ahead, laugh,” Khara said. “And after you get it out of your system, you have to swear to me you will take this to your grave.”

Cherrelle kept laughing the whole way back to the car.

The last day of school was fast approaching. Anticipation sizzled in the air. The energy among the students of Deep Creek High was electric. Eyes sparkled with expectation, an occasional whoop and a holler split the air, and the eager chatter of summer promises were made.

As Jimmy Veagin and his friends hung out in the main hallway outside of the cafeteria, they leaned against the wall. His light brown eyes scanned the crowd, looking for a cute girl worthy of commentary with one of his buddies.

Lana Brandon was rarely seen without her friends, but on this day, she shooed them away and motioned Jimmy Veagin over to her table. He glanced at his friend on the right, then he looked at his friend on the left. He pointed at his chest. “Me?”

She mouthed the words, “Yes,” and motioned him over to her again. He slipped away from his group of buddies and approached her. When he pulled the chair away from the table, it made an obnoxious noise as it scraped across the floor. He seated himself and leaned back in his chair. “What’s up?” he said. When Lana didn’t answer, he followed her gaze. They both watched Cherrelle a short distance away as she ate lunch with Rosaline and Khara.

“Look at them,” Lana began. “They don’t even look like they belong here. A bunch of rejects. Weird Rosaline, Psychotic Cherrelle, and that fat chick, Khara, who’s always walking around studying some Bird Bee Journal. She thinks she’s the Virgin Mary or something. Look at the way they dress. Their parents must be poor.”

“I don’t think Cherrelle’s parents are poor,” Jimmy said. “Have you noticed those jogging suits she wears? And she’s got a pair of Jordans that my parents wouldn’t even *think* about getting me. And Cherrelle is kind of fine.”

Lana glared at Jimmy. “No she’s not!”

He sat back in his chair. “Okay, calm down.”

“Cherrelle’s ugly and I can’t stand her!”

He raised his palms in the air. “Okay, okay...whew!”

Lana leaned towards him and rested her elbows on the table. “I want you to do something foul to her.”

Jimmy raised his eyebrows. “To Cherrelle?”

“Yes!”

“Something foul?”

“Speak English much? Yes! FOUL! I’ll pay you.”

Jimmy rubbed his chin and scrutinized the three girls from a distance.

“I heard that her and the fat chick go to the Dismal Swamp Trail after school,” Lana said. “On Fridays, there’s hardly anyone out there.”

“Why do you keep calling Khara fat?”

“She’s a cow!”

“She’s got a slammin’ body. Everything is in the right places and all covered in chocolate. And those nice eyes. Man, I could get lost in them. I could just see my reflection in them while I’m...” His voice trailed off as he stared at Khara.

Lana slammed her hand on the table. “Stop looking at her like that! Those girls are hideous!” She glared at them, but then her features softened as she thought for a moment. “You won’t get much of a fight out of Khara anyway. Maybe you could throw a horse blanket over her head or something to confuse her.”

"I don't know." He rubbed his chin some more, then frowned at Lana. "Why do you hate them so much, and why're you asking me to do this? Do I look like a criminal to you?"

"I heard what you did to Rayna Brady."

"It was consensual. You need to stop listening to gossip."

"I'll give you two hundred and fifty dollars," Lana said.

"How's a tenth-grader going to get her hands on two hundred and fifty dollars?" Jimmy chuckled.

"Don't you worry about that. If I give you one twenty-five up front, will you do it?"

"You've got that much on you right now?"

Lana nodded.

"Hell yeah!" he said.

Students and faculty alike began to trickle away from the lunchroom as they anticipated the next bell. Jimmy counted his money, then watched as Lana joined her friends on the other side of the cafeteria. He shook his head. "That girl is crazy..."

As they finished their lunch, Rosaline laughed at the way Cherrelle was describing Khara's antics at the Dismal Swamp Trail.

"I did *not* pee on myself!" Khara insisted. "Won't you just read that poem your secret admirer wrote, Cherrelle?"

"Stop trying to change the subject," Cherrelle said. "I'm going to start calling you pee-pee Khara."

There was more laughter.

"I hate you," Khara said.

Cherrelle took a deep breath. "Okay. Okay. I'll be serious." She slid a beautiful piece of stationery from between the pages of her notebook:

*I know green is your favorite color:
That soft sage which changes the hue of your eyes.
And as I watched you from a distance
And you opened your token of affection,
I smiled
Because my gift brought you joy
And it brightened my day
To bring delight to the one I love.*

“That was corny,” Khara said.

“No way!” Rosaline exclaimed. “It was beautiful! He’s a poet!”

“But I thought poems were supposed to rhyme,” Khara said.

“Not really.” Rosaline sighed. “As long as a poem has ambiance, it doesn’t have to rhyme.”

“What the heck is ambiance?” Cherrelle asked.

Rosaline shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. It just sounded like a cool word to say.”

“So, do you ever notice anyone looking at you in the hallway when you open these boxes?” Khara asked.

“Not really,” Cherrelle said. “Just other students leaving their classes. And I only find them after first bell. That’s the only class I have that’s right beside my locker.”

“The timing makes sense,” Khara said. “There’s less of a chance someone will mess with it then. He probably puts it in front of your locker right before the bell rings so it won’t sit out in the hallway for too long before you find it. Now we know when we can catch him.”

“I’m not sure if I want to know who he is,” Cherrelle said. “What if he’s eight shades of ugly?”

The next day, Khara decided to get out of science class early so she could try and catch Cherrelle’s secret admirer. Right before the bell rang, she gathered her things and approached her science teacher. “Can I please go to the rest room?” she whispered.

Mr. Billings looked annoyed. “The bell is about to ring. Can’t you wait?”

Her eyes darted to the left, then to the right. She leaned towards him. “It’s female stuff.”

He looked alarmed, then uncomfortable.

Khara hurried down the hallway, passed Cherrelle’s class, and went outside to the bus ramp. She sat down outside one of the windows that framed an exit door. All she had to do was lean forward, peer inside the building, and see down the hallway. The third door down was Cherrelle’s classroom. While she waited, she took out her Bumble Bee Journal and began to read:

Mr. How Far:

This guy denies a lot of stuff, like the real reason he wants to get you alone. He says he wants to rent a movie, cuddle, talk, or cook you dinner. He claims he wants to get to know you better and insists nothing will happen. He’ll get

defensive when you tell him you don't want to do that because you know where it will lead. Mr. How Far says things like, "We can just lay here," or "We can just sleep beside each other. Nothing will happen." His actions don't match his words. He says he won't try anything, yet once you are together, he keeps touching you and insists he won't go any further. Mr. How Far thinks the word "no" means he should keep trying...

The bell rang. Startled, Khara looked up from her journal. She leaned forward, looked through the window and down the hallway, yet didn't see a package in front of Cherrelle's classroom. "Oh well," she sighed, "Maybe I'll catch him next year..."

The July heat was intense, and the Dismal Swamp Trail seemed abandoned that day. Only two people were stretching near the entrance and getting ready for their run, and one was Cherrelle. She enjoyed running in the heat. She wore her lime green spandex shorts and matching sports bra. She glared at her watch. Where was Khara? She was twenty minutes late. Cherrelle's adrenaline was already pumping. She would give her ten more minutes...

Ten minutes later, Cherrelle's Nikes were pounding the smooth pavement of The Trail. On both sides of her was the forest, and just behind the trees on her right flowed the canal. She was tempted to run the whole eight-mile stretch just to see what was at the end.

Hot, rhythmic air pulsated around her. Nothing was in her way. Blue sky was her only limit. The air whooshed under her feet. A sheen of sweat dampened her body as she ran smoothly to the electric beat of her own self-discipline.

As Cherrelle ran, she thought of all the mean things she planned to say to Khara: *First of all, you're a coward who's afraid of your own shadow. Secondly, you let the stupidest person we know make you feel bad about yourself. And thirdly, when you decide to do something about it, you won't even stick to it because you're scared of everything. I bet you're scared of gnats too, aren't you? And another thing, why do you even care what Lana thinks about your body? We should be running for our health, not because of what some scrawny person thinks about how we look.* "Yep, that's what I'll say to her," Cherrelle told herself.

As she slowed her pace, she heard a cracking noise behind her—almost like the sound of a tree branch breaking. Cherrelle stopped and turned. A man wearing a mask emerged from the trees. Fear leaked into her veins. He stood

there for a moment; brown eyes watching her. He rushed towards her. Cherrelle gasped and quickly backed away. She turned and broke into a sprint, dodging off the paved road and into the trees. She stopped. *No*. Reaching tree branches might claw at her and pull her back. She shot a terrified look over her shoulder.

The fresh blue expanse of sky overhead mixed with the anticipation of storytelling hour made Khara feel euphoric. Her walk to Rosaline's house was peppered with briskness as she treaded along the grassy side of Galberry Road. Small patches of forest were interrupted with a few houses here and there. These houses were surrounded by expansive yards covered with carpets of beautiful grass. Behind the homes, pine, gum, and maple trees continued on forever, giving the neighborhood an isolated and country feel. Only a trickle of cars passed by Khara, for her neighborhood was nicknamed "the boonies." She waited at the railroad tracks for Cherrelle, but saw Rosaline running towards her instead. "What happened?" Khara asked her. "Aren't we supposed to meet you at your house?"

Rosaline was breathless. "I couldn't wait. I've got something to tell you. Where's Cherrelle?"

"I hope she's not mad at me," Khara said. "I stood her up. We were supposed to meet at the Dismal Swamp Trail. I thought she'd be back by now."

"I saw Jimmy Veagin in Wal-Mart today! There ought to be a law against being so freakin' fine!"

"What? Really!"

"Do you think I'll get bigger over the summer?" Rosaline straightened and stuck her skinny chest out. "Maybe he'll notice me in the eleventh grade."

Khara's eyebrows shot upwards. "That'll do it! Get some cleavage. Then prance around in tight and revealing clothes. That'll draw his attention, but only temporarily. Then come the lies, you believe him, then he'll use you, and he'll move on. The only thing tight clothes, a short skirt, and a revealing blouse will get you is a broken heart."

"Wow, Khara! That was intense! Are you sure you weren't some bitter, betrayed woman in a past life?"

Khara laughed. "No way. That was some wisdom from Mama Bee. My mother knows everything!"

"So, was all that stuff in the journal based on her experiences?"

"Some, and the rest was the experiences of girlfriends, sisters, and other women she knew."

"Why do you call her Mama Bee?"

“My father always called her that, since her first name is Belinda.”

Rosaline paused in her step. With the tip of her sneaker, she tried to loosen a rock from the dirt. “Does Cherrelle know about her?”

Khara stopped and looked back at her. “What do you mean?”

“You know.”

Khara narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about, Rosaline?”

Rosaline concentrated on the rock some more. “Um...nothing.” She resumed walking. “Soooo, what were we saying about Jimmy? He’ll be a senior soon. Those types of guys go for the popular girls anyway, and the popular girls wear the fancy clothes.”

Khara rolled her eyes to the sky. “Are we on that again?”

“You ever saw a popular person who couldn’t dress?”

Khara began counting on her fingers. “There’s Cherrelle, but her clothes are a little tight for my tastes. She always dresses like she’s ready to take off running or do a couple of back flips or something. Then there’s Lisa Turnkee. She wears just about anything and no one cares.”

“That’s because Lisa Turnkee is a basketball player!” Rosaline exclaimed. “You know how everyone is about sports. I’m talking about someone who has no talent and no athletic ability. Now look at Lana Brandon. She’s pretty and everything, but do you think people would notice her if she didn’t have such beautiful clothes? The latest hairstyles? People are impressed by nice looking things.”

Khara shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not impressed. I don’t see what the big deal about clothes is anyway.”

Rosaline sighed again. “But it’ll make me feel so much better—build my self-esteem. Maybe even make Jimmy realize I exist.”

“Jeans and a t-shirt will suit me just fine,” Khara replied. “Look, Roz, just because we’re not cool or beauty-cuties doesn’t mean we’re nobodies. Being cool, the best dressed, or even the most beautiful will not make you a better person. I have Cherrelle on one side getting all these expensive clothes from her secret admirer, and you on the other thinking that clothes will make you popular. You guys are so materialistic.”

“No we’re not. We just like nice things.”

“What’s the difference? And can we please stop talking about clothes?” She sighed loudly. “And where the heck is Cherrelle?”

The distance between Cherrelle and the masked man was shrinking. She pushed herself forward. The parking lot was only a hundred yards away. She

heard him exclaim in pain, then turned to see him on the ground holding his ankle. She kept running. And running.

And running, and finally, she reached the parking lot. She got closer and closer to the car. With shaking hands, she reached for the door. She dropped the keys. She swiped the keys from the ground but dropped them again. She glanced behind her, grabbed the keys again, shaking and looking behind her again and again and again. She slipped the key into the lock. The door opened. She looked behind her once more, then scrambled inside. She locked the doors.

The back windows were slightly open, so she crawled into the back and rolled them up. She jostled herself back into the front seat again.

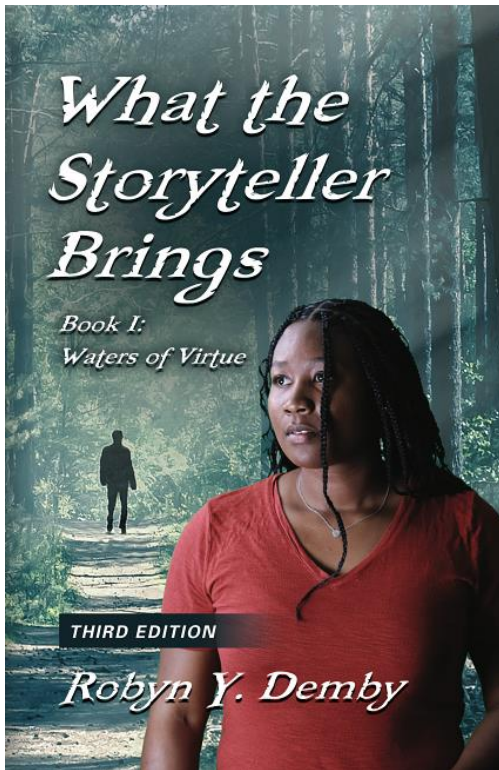
Panicked thoughts raced through her mind: *Where is he? Is he really hurt? Is it a trick? Is he waiting for me to do something stupid, like get back out of the car? Maybe I'll run him over!* She reached for the car keys in the passenger seat, but they weren't there. She checked the floors and the glove compartment. She checked her sports bra. She ran her fingers along the waistline of her spandex shorts. Nothing. She ran her hands along the floor under the passenger and driver's seat. She scrambled into the back seat again. Nothing.

And that's when she saw them: hanging from the lock of the driver's door were the car keys.

The temperature in the car had risen. Sweat dripped into her eyes. She needed oxygen. She inched the window down; breathable air came in. She watched the entrance of the Dismal Swamp Trail, as if expecting to see the man come bursting out.

Seconds dragged by. Oh, boy it was hot. Sweat drenched her. Her back was wet. She kept wiping the perspiration from her forehead. She rolled down the window just a little bit more...just a little more...just a little more air.

The bear sculpture stood tall and silent. She squinted at it and leaned forward. Did its lips just move? Was the bear trying to warn her that the man was approaching? Cherrelle's eyes widened when the man emerged from behind it. Her eyes darted everywhere, praying to herself that maybe a jogger or a biker would appear and scare him away. Somehow, she felt the protection of the car was not enough. What if he used a rock or some other heavy object to break the window? What would she do then? She placed a trembling hand over her mouth and watched him. He stood there, hands at his sides, motionless, watching her. From the back seat, she leaned forward and glanced at the keys hanging from the lock. She knew that if she stayed inside the car, he'd simply turn the key in the lock. She needed to get out and grab those keys. With sweaty hands, she rolled the window all the way down, her hands trembling, her breathing ragged, fingers stretched, reaching for the keys...the keys.



Every Tuesday, Rosaline and her friends meet in her room for storytelling hour where she uses her listeners as characters. It's all just for fun at first, until the bad guy from her story merges into real life and is after them.

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