

Chapter 1

Harold Reinman had an itch.

Standing on the library steps, shielded from the rain by the extended roof, he felt an odd, annoying tickle somewhere inside his skull, in his brain. It was an unreachable, impossible-to-satisfy itch — the same one he always seemed to feel before something happened. So he waited. He waited and wondered what would happen.

From behind him it came, from back near the police station and post office, past the craft store and Millie's Milliner. It rumbled and squealed around the corner, faces peering through the dark, tinted glass streaked with rain; faces watching him watching them.

He watched the bus grind down Main Street as the itch in his brain grew more intense. He watched it pass the pharmacy that sold candy out of glass jars, pass Landers Hardware and the butcher, pass what used to be Emmett's gas station but was now an empty shack with rusted pumps, and pass Hattie's dress shop. He wondered where it was headed, his finger absently rubbing a spot on his skull, and then he remembered: Amos. The bus stops at Amos' store.

The brakes of the bus let out a high-pitched squeal, the strained whine of transition from open throttle to stillness, of a child forced to come inside before he is ready. As the door hissed open, Delilah paused at the top of the steps, listened to the “click, click” of the windshield wipers beating a seemingly syncopated rhythm to that of her heart.

“Are you getting off here or not?” the driver asked, his words verbal prodding she could feel in the small of her back.

That was the question she now asked herself, *‘Am I getting off here?’*

For days she had watched highways pass, sucked beneath the bus' front bumper and spit out the rear window while time vanished in a blur of roadsides and white lines, the endless rumble occasionally interrupted by the hypnotic hum of tires against grooves cut into the road. She grew mindless watching.

Gears grinding, belching exhaust, the bus had roared through backwater towns where children idled in muddy front yards behind rusting fences—a girl with her finger in her nose, a boy drawing pictures in the dirt with a stick, others sitting solemnly on steps and curbs, popsicle juice running colored tracks to their elbows so if they stood together, arm to arm, they'd make a faint, murky rainbow. She stared out at old women with blue hair and brown orthopedic shoes sitting on benches along local routes, gazes distant, full of longing; at women pushing strollers through pedestrian crosswalks, babies lolling in oblivious slumber; then highways and more highways, all speeding by, bleeding together in the world beyond the tinted windows. She'd watched it all through sleepy and curious eyes.

“Hey, c’mon — are you getting off or not?” The driver asked again, his voice suddenly distorted in her ears like a recording played too slowly. She felt her heart beat — once, twice — and the answer came not as a string of certain logic, but as an instinctive, resounding “yes” that prompted Delilah to take the steps down and out into the steady rain. She glanced up, the northeast, spring sky so low with angry black clouds that people walked with their shoulders hunched and heads bowed for fear they’d collide with the belly of the storm.

The rain came down cold, biting at bones, carrying the last, remaining nip of winter. She watched vicious gusts tear at umbrellas, raking at them as though full of a personal vendetta that left skeletal carcasses of bent metal and torn nylon discarded in garbage cans.

People ran for cover, ducking into shops and under awnings or inside the combination quickmart and lunch counter where conversation paused, heads turned toward the window to take note of the newcomer as she stood in the muddy drive.

The backpack over her left shoulder, her left hand holding a brown paper bag that quickly grew dark and wet in the downpour, she stood a moment, as those inside returned to their lunches and the bus ground into gear and hissed back onto the road. Cascading rivulets caught around the hood of her sweatshirt, dripped from her fingertips, turned her faded blue jeans deep indigo. As a child she was often left alone with no one to chastise her for running out into the summer rain, soaking her dress, her shoes, arms outstretched in delightful acceptance of the refreshing wash of water that soaked her to the bone. It was a pleasure she never outgrew.

When she finally stepped through the door of the quickmart, her long, copper ringlets of hair already dripping, her paper bag abruptly gave up the ghost, spilling its contents onto the tile floor where a puddle had already begun to form around her.

Again, heads turned toward her as she wiped the rain from her eyes, her hair off her face, and glanced down at the pile of her insignificant belongings — a few books, a brush, her bus ticket. She felt several pairs of eyes on her as she sighed, met the gaze of the man behind the counter, and asked, “Would you have an extra bag I could have? Perhaps a plastic one so that I don’t have a recurrence of this little mess?” Then she smiled, as beyond the windows tentative sunshine suddenly glowed faintly through thinning cloud cover and winked off remaining raindrops as they slid from leaves and awnings.

The man smiled in return, grabbed a bag from beside the cash register and moved toward her extending his hand. “I think I can spare one. My name is Amos Harrison, by the way. And you are currently puddling the floor of my store.” He laughed.

“I’m sorry.” She took the bag from him, pausing to notice his eyes, how their deep, mahogany color nearly matched the rich, dark complexion of his skin. He was taller than she first thought, and although his navy t-shirt pulled tightly across his expanding girth, he did not move like a man heavy with excess weight, but rather like a man who is comfortably solid in stature. “Delilah. I’m Delilah.”