

*LOGAN: June, 1994—Hill Country, Texas*

The last stretch of road to my brother's place seemed endless, a writhing beast of hills, mud, and regret. I yawned, a lion's-roar that made my jaw ache. *Cover your mouth, boy*, my father used to say. *Don't let the demons in.* Too late.

Wind and rain whipped through the window, a wet slap against my face, and Tchaikovsky rattled the speakers. I crested a hill, flying in the wet half-light, forty miles an hour, fifty. Cymbals crashed, violins screamed, trumpets blared. A child ran in the middle of the road.

She was a smear of white in the dark, one arm up, frantically waving. I stomped on the brakes, spun the wheel. The tires slid. Rain obscured the windshield. A lurch, a slam.

"Fuck!" I jammed the gearshift into park and jumped outside. A scrap of fabric clung to the wet road, half-pinned beneath the driver's-side tire. I dropped to my knees, my chest squeezing tight. I could hardly breathe.

"Don't be dead." My hands shook. "Jesus Christ, don't be dead." I forced myself to look.

A dead tree lay wedged against the front tires, one frail bough stretched out like an arm, swaying back and forth. Tattered material flapped in the wind, half-twisted in the gnarled branches; it must have flown in on the wind, and in my sleep-starved haze, I'd seen a child, running.

I stayed crouched in the rain, eyes squeezed shut. "Jesus," I said again, only now aware that water filled my shoes and soaked my clothes. I rubbed my face, week-old stubble rough beneath my fingers. Music still blared from the truck—*Francesca da Rimini*, lovers in hell. "A fucking tree," I muttered, dizzy. It had seemed so real, that flash of human or ghost in the illuminated dark. Blame it on thirty-six sleepless hours and way too much caffeine. Or was this how it started, I wondered, getting to my feet with a groan, knees popping. Had my father rationalized his delusions at first, too?