

Chapter One
Ian, June 1992

My dad tills the mucky garden with his spade, throwing the soil and striking with the back of the blade to break the sod, all one smooth practiced motion. Sweat bleeds through his shirt leaving dark patches on the rain-damp material.

“You’ll do it,” he says without breaking rhythm. “For the stealing. For the lies.”

My face burns at the accusation, and the shame of it all gurgles up anew. Nothing had gone as planned and nothing had been worth it in the end.

“I didn’t steal,” I mutter.

He drives the spade into the boggy ground and turns a half step to look at me, still taller than I, broad and stern.

“Money not used for what it’s given is stolen,” he says. “Same as if you nicked it from my pocket. Not telling a truth, keeping it secret, is the same as lying.”

I glare at my feet, rolling a stone back and forth with the toe of my shoe. David, my baby brother, plods through puddles nearby. When I glance at the house, my mother is watching through the kitchen window. Her eyes dart down to the dishes when she sees me looking, and I let my gaze drift back to my father to pretend I hadn’t noticed.

“Can I bring my bike?” I ask as he turns back to the spade.

He pauses mid-motion and stares for a long moment. Something breaks in him, a doubt creeping in, like he knows he’s gone too far but is trapped in his dictums. For one brief second, I believe he’ll thaw and let me stay.

“It won’t fit in the car, son,” he says, exhaling, looking down, sagging. “Ride it up, and I’ll bring your duffel later. All right?”

#

Perfume hangs in the damp air as I ride north; foxglove, woodbine, and wild roses hide among trees and ferns. Rain overflows the cups of petals, dripping to the ground, seeking the sea. To my left, clouds smother the Slieve Bloom Mountains, skulking through green valleys to splay over Mountmellick; I’ve seen them every school day from the seat of this bicycle. Some say a clearing will one day brighten the Bog Of Allen and cross the Irish Sea to bigger things. But rain owns this land and will stay as it pleases: coursing gutters and eaves, gullies and spouts, wallowing in pools, waiting. The rain persists as I ride through Killeigh and on to Tullamore.

#

My grandmother's house squats in a gray terrace on the main Dublin-Galway Road through Kilbeggan; the kind where you need to know the number or you'll walk right past it, inconspicuous amid all that mediocrity. A roar of traffic fills the air: diesel engines bellowing as they crawl through the gorge of stone-walled, slate-roofed houses. Fumes burn my lungs and make breath visible as if the air is frozen. My soaked clothes are caked with gritty mud splashed by cars passing too close through potholes.

"Ian!" Granny exclaims as I walk through the unlocked front door into her small kitchen. "What a nice surprise. I'd hardly know you you've got so big. Put the kettle on, we'll have tea."

I wash out the teapot and slide the kettle onto the range. Everything seems lower than it had been, the room tighter, the ceiling closer.

"Where's your father?" she says, throwing confused looks at the door. "Gone out to Úna's again? You'd think he'd have the manners to see his own ma before heading out to Goatstown. He's been useless since he met your mother."