

*Chapter One*

JIMMY

HEART'S BEND, TENNESSEE

JULY 1948

*J*immy's journey began with a photograph. One of two girls standing next to a slender bride gripping a weak cluster of flowers, the shade of a stone chapel falling over their faces.

"My cousins." Clem's heavy exhale pushed him down to the family's brand-new sofa. "From England."

"All of them?" Jimmy remained planted in the same spot he'd been standing when Clem passed over the picture. In a warm swath of afternoon sunlight falling through the square front window.

"Nooo, golly geez, just the two flower girls, or bridesmaids, whatever you call them. *They're* coming to live with us." Clem whistled low and slumped down against the couch cushions, his dark hair buzzed in a close crew cut. "If all three of them came to live with us, I'd have to move out. And you know Mama wouldn't cotton to losing her baby boy."

Jimmy's eyes watered. Dang. He was too old for tears. He cleared his throat, then said, "She'd hunt you down."

“You don’t say.” Clem made a wry face, but Jimmy knew their joking etched around the truth. Clem was now his mama’s *only* boy. Big brother Ted had died on Iwo Jima just a week after his twentieth birthday, and the family had never been the same.

Though more than three years had passed since the telegram arrived, Jimmy’s soul still vibrated with the echoes of Mrs. Clemson’s wailing as her husband read the news. Everyone in Heart’s Bend had loved Ted. No exaggeration. *Everyone*. The whole town shut down for his memorial.

Jimmy jerked around, glancing at the stairs, for a moment imagining he heard the big guy’s thunderous footsteps.

“Come on, lazies, let’s get up a game. Jims, you staying for dinner? Mams, set an extra place for dinner . . .”

“. . . but what’s a fella to do?” Clem’s question brought Jimmy out from the shadows. “They lost everything in the war. Their folks, their home . . .”

Right. The cousins. Jimmy studied the picture again. “They’re orphans?” His heart moved with understanding.

“Yessiree, and they’re coming here to live.” Clem leaned toward the radio console and upped the volume, the velvet voice of Doris Day giving energy to the sunlight.

“Gonna take a sentimental journey / to renew old memories.”

“So why’re you showing me this?” Jimmy held up the photograph. Did Clem want him to decode something between the shades of black and white? “Might be kinda nice, Clem, having kids around. The house won’t be so . . .”

*Lonely*. He wanted to say it, but the tone sat sad in his ears. If Jimmy knew about anything, it was loneliness: the hollow shadows of a dark house, the chill of walking into a cold kitchen, the loudness of silence.

“Lonely?” Clem made a dismissive *phffbt* sound and waved

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Jimmy off. “What’re you talking about? I just got things the way I want around here. Got the whole upstairs to myself.” He flipped his hand toward the stairs, feigning more protest than Jimmy believed true. “Now I’m going to have girls hanging their stockings and *unmentionables* in the bathroom—*my* bathroom—and getting their powder and rouge all over the sink.”

“Girls get their powder all over the sink?”

Clem sat forward, jamming his thumb over his shoulder toward the neighbors. “Bradley told me everything about living with sisters.” Clem shook his head. “Just when we thought the war was over and things were getting back to normal, I got to have *girls* moving in.”

“Big deal . . . So what, maybe they’ll bake or something. I bet they’ll do the dishes and cleaning.” At least he’d heard that’s what womenfolk did around the house. But in the Westbrook men-only home, Jimmy did most of the “girl” chores.

“I’d gladly do the dishes to have the upstairs to myself.” Clem glanced away, a glossy sheen spreading across his eyes.

“I’d not want anyone to take Ted’s place either if I was you,” Jimmy said quietly, taking a final glance at the girl cousins before passing the photo back to Clem.

Clem took the picture, running the heel of his hand over his eyes, and with a final gander dropped it onto the coffee table.

“Can’t stop missing him.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

But Jimmy’s gut told him Albert “Clem” Clemson, his best friend since Miss Tuttle’s second-grade class, was wrong about these girls. They were special. He didn’t know how or why, just that they were more than powder-spreading inconveniences.

Besides, they were *pretty*. Especially the one on the right with her sweet, heart-shaped face and head of curls.

Jimmy recognized the look in her eye as she squinted through the shadows. It was the sad glint of losing a parent. And he sure as spitting knew what that felt like.

“If they do the housework, you know what that means? Dad’ll have me putting in more hours at the store.” His jaw set, Clem was determined not to be consoled. “Did I tell you he’s pert-near ready to open a third store in Ashland City?”

“What’s her name?” The words came out, *slipped* out, without Jimmy’s consent. But there they were, hanging in the air. He dropped to Mr. Clemson’s well-used leather easy chair as the image of the girl with the curls and tender gaze made him feel all hot and fluttery inside.

“Of the store?” Clem curled his lip. “You think it’s a she?”

“No . . .” Jimmy grimaced, making a face. “Th-the cousins.” It was hard to act casual when his pumping heart made his voice all quivery.

“Which one?” Clem reached for the photo on the coffee table, then regarded Jimmy for a moment.

Jimmy ducked his head, fearing he’d be discovered. He could sense a red heat flushing his cheeks. If Clem ever told the fellas . . .

“Um.” He cleared his throat and rose from the chair. “Either, I guess. Man, it’s hot in here.” Jimmy glanced toward the window and its stream of July sunlight.

“Guess it don’t matter ’cause I don’t know their names.” Clem popped up, reaching for the football wedged between the couch and the end table. “Let’s get up a game. We need the practice.”

“You don’t know your own cousins’ names?”

Jimmy had one cousin, April Raney, who was off to college now but the closest thing he’d ever had to a sibling. He liked her a lot, and every year he saved some of his earnings to buy her a birthday and Christmas present.

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“Why should I? I never met them. Their mom is . . . *was* . . . my mom’s sister, but they only saw each other once in twenty years. When Mama went to England.” Clem tossed the football between his hands, then fake pumped to Jimmy. “Mama says they’ll be in our class.”

“They’re twins?” Jimmy leaned to squint at the picture, his interest more in memorizing the face of the girl with the curls. He took up the image and flipped it over. Maybe her name was on the back. But the only imprint was the date: *May ’48*.

“Naw, not twins. That I know. Just in the same grade. Something to do with the war and being shipped to the country to live. Then they got orphaned.” Clem tossed the ball toward the ceiling, jumping to catch it while moving toward the door. “Let’s go, Westbrook. I’ll holler at Bradley. We can pick up Spice on the way.”

“Coming.” Jimmy dropped the photograph onto the table just as the breeze skipped through the open doorway, skidding the picture across the coffee table’s smooth surface into Mrs. Clemson’s collection of *Saturday Evening Posts*.

*Can’t wait to meet you . . .*

Outside, Clem jumped from the porch, slapping the rafters, the ball tucked under his arm. “Braaadleeey Green, we’re getting up a game. Need to practice if we’re going to make first team. Let’s go. I’m working this afternoon so it’s now or never.”

Jimmy jumped from the porch onto the grass, trying to shed the strange sensations lingering in his chest. *Get over it. It’s just a photograph.* But confound it, Clem’s goofy girl cousin made him want to hug her, protect her. He’d always promised himself he’d not go moon-eyed over a gal. He’d learned from Dad that women weren’t worth the effort.

His ole pop seemed pretty clear on the fact that loving a woman caused a man a whole heap of trouble. And his father was a swell, stand-up fella who told the truth.

Besides, what did Jimmy know of girls? Nothing. Other than Nana and April, he had no experience with women *whatsoever*.

Bradley ran out of his house, still tying his sneakers. "I called Spice," he said.

Sure enough, from across the street and three houses down, Spice Keating hurried out of his house. His old man was a boozier, a bit rough. But Spice was all charm and smiles.

Jimmy didn't know how he managed it.

"Coach said we could practice at school if we promise not to tear up the turf," Clem said, walking backward, tossing the ball to Jimmy.

But Jimmy missed. *Missed!* The ball slipped through his hands and hit the pavement.

"Westbrook, is that how you're going to play this fall?"

"Shut up, Clem." Irritated, Jimmy scooped up the ball, ran down the middle of the street, and spiraled it back to his quarter-back. "You get it to me and I'll catch it."

See what girls did? He was already distracted and he hadn't even met her. That was the trouble with girls. They could mess up a guy in all sorts of ways. Humiliate him.

"Hey, fellas," Jimmy said, a teasing melody in his voice. "Clem's having girl cousins move in."

"Girls? What kind of girls?"

"Westbrook, you big mouth." Clem fired the ball at Jimmy.

"Ah, what's the big deal? They were going to find out sooner or later." Jimmy caught the ball and shoved into Spice. "What do you mean, 'What kind of girls?' There's more than one?"

"Yeah, sure, pretty and ugly." Spice laughed, shuffling around Jimmy, reaching for the ball, a saucy grin on his face, his dark hair flopping over his eyes. "So which is it? Pretty or ugly?"

"Yeah, Jimmy," Clem echoed. "Which is it?"

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“They’re your cousins.” Jimmy tossed the ball to Bradley, who dropped it.

“Exactly.” Clem scooped up the ball, twisting around, barely missing Mrs. Grove as she turned the corner in her big new Cadillac. “I ain’t got no skin in this game.”

“Nice car, Mrs. Grove.” Young or old, Spice tried to charm them all. “Anyway, we could use some new girls round here. Pretty ones.” He glanced back at Mrs. Grove’s driveway. “Young ones too.”

“Well, if you’d quit loving ’em and leaving ’em, you’d have more choices.” Jimmy ran long for Clem’s pass, catching it in stride, feeling the lingering grudge he had against Spice. They were friends all right, but last year Spice knew Jimmy was keen on Rebekah Gunter. He moved right in anyway, even though he had no intention of ever going steady. Love was just a game to him.

“Ah, don’t be bitter, Westbrook. You know you didn’t have the guts to ask Beka out.”

“Take that back, Keating.” Jimmy shoved him, hard.

“See, girls are nothing but trouble.” Clem stepped in between them, waving the ball. “Focus. We’ve got a season to win. That tail-back from Memphis who ran through our D line last year? Heard he bench-pressed three hundred in the spring.”

Bradley moaned. He was a defensive lineman.

“Yeah, we got some work to do.” Clem sprinted forward, then whipped around, sending the ball in a high arc toward Jimmy. Man, he could throw a shot. Jimmy caught it and ran through Bradley’s soft blocking.

If all went as planned, Clem would start as quarterback and Jimmy as halfback. They were juniors but the best ones for the job. So they hoped.

With the ball tucked in his arm and the sun peeking in a patch of blue sky, Jimmy left the street, the football field in view, cutting

through Mrs. Whitaker's backyard where Spice chased the old lady's cat up a tree.

Jimmy raced ahead, the end zone in sight. Clem ran a close second, Spice and Bradley lumbering behind.

Jimmy spiked the ball as he crossed the goal line.

Yeah, this was what he needed to clear his head. To be on the field. Looking forward to the season. Fixing on his goals.

Dad was looking forward to his boy starting this season, and Jimmy didn't want to let him down. He liked to brag on his son's football talent to the fellas on his crew.

Jimmy would do his dad proud. He'd not allow a girl to get him off track.

Nevertheless, when he lined up behind Clem for the first practice play, his pulse thudded in his ears. Not from racing with his friends to the field, but from the lingering image of the girl in the photograph.