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Chickenfeed

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Kensal Rise Methodist Church, north London – winter 1920

THE SKIES WERE DARK with ice-filled clouds the day Elsie Cameron first spoke to Norman Thorne. Perhaps Elsie should have taken the gloom as an omen of what was to come. But could any girl predict that a man she met in church would hack her to pieces four years later in a place called Blackness Road?

Outside, the wind and sleet beat against the Gothic spire of the Kensal Rise church. Inside, the flock huddled in their coats and listened to the preacher. He thundered against the demon of drink, which stole a person's moral sense. Cursed would be the man who hit out in temper. Or the woman who had sex before marriage.

Elsie Cameron, a small, plain 22-two-year-old with chewed fingernails and thick glasses,

barely listened. She had heard it all before. It was a message of grinding despair to a lonely girl who suffered from depression. Elsie wanted to be loved. But the only love on offer in the chapel was God's, and His love came with conditions.

Her gaze slid sideways towards the young man who sat with his father and stepmother in a nearby pew. Each time Elsie saw him her heart beat a little faster. He was four years younger than she was – eighteen – but he was handsome and he always smiled if he caught her eye. His name was Norman Thorne and he worked as a mechanic at Fiat Motors in Wembley.

Norman's real mother had died when he was eight. At sixteen, he'd joined the Royal Naval Air Force to serve in the Great War. The war had ended three weeks after he arrived in Belgium and he never saw any fighting. But that didn't matter to Elsie. Any lad who stood up for his country was a hero.

She worried about the age difference because she had a fear of being teased. Would people call her a cradle-snatcher if she persuaded him to walk out with her? But his work as a mechanic had filled him out. No one would

guess he was only eighteen. Elsie bit nervously at her fingernails as she tried to think of a way to speak to him.

Her mother had taught her that only 'loose' women made the first move. Let the man come to you, she had said. But it hadn't worked. Elsie's brother and sister had no trouble finding girls and boys to 'walk out' with. But not Elsie. Elsie scared would-be husbands away. She was too intense, too swamping, too desperate.

She feared the things she wanted, and wanted the things she feared. She had nightmares about being left on the shelf – unwanted and unloved – but she couldn't bring herself to flirt the way other girls did. The perfect man would be content to worship her until he put a ring on her finger. And only afterwards would anything of *that* sort happen.

There was a stubborn streak in Elsie's nature that blamed others for her problems. It wasn't her fault that she was plain. It was her *parents'* fault. And it wasn't her fault that she lacked friends. Only a fool would trust people who gossiped behind her back.

Elsie worked as a typist in a small firm in the City, but her colleagues had long since grown

tired of her mood swings. They called her 'difficult' and grumbled about her mistakes. She resented them for it. She resented her boss, who took her to task for failing to do her job properly.

Once in a while – in the depths of despair – she wondered if her co-workers were right. Was she difficult? More often, she blamed them for making her unhappy. If people were nice to her, she would be nice back. But why should *she* have to be nice first?

It's on such little things that life and death turn.

Would either have died if Norman hadn't smiled?

As the congregation filed out of church, Norman Thorne was a pace or two ahead of Elsie. Deliberately, she trod on the back of his heel while pretending to search through her bag. His startled face turned towards her.

She gave a squeak of dismay. 'Whoops!' she exclaimed, clutching at his sleeve.

Norman put out his hand to steady her. 'Are you all right?'

Elsie nodded. 'I'm ever so sorry.'

'Don't worry about it.' He prepared to move on.

'I know who you are,' she said in a rush. 'Norman Thorne. I'm Elsie Cameron. We live quite close. My mum says you were in the war. That makes you a hero.'

Norman gave a shy smile. 'Not really.'

'*I* think so.'

The boy was flattered. And why not? He was young and no girl had ever looked at him this way before. Raised by a strict father, Norman neither drank nor smoked. He helped with the local Scouts, taught in the Sunday School and was involved in all kinds of chapel work.

His smile widened to one of welcome. 'Nice to meet you, Elsie.'

Norman's father wasn't pleased when his son told him he had a girl.

'You're too young for such nonsense,' Mr Thorne said. 'You should put your energies into working.'

'I'm not planning to marry her, Dad.'

'Then watch how you treat her, lad. We don't want any shotgun weddings in this family.'

Nor was Elsie's mother pleased. 'He's still a

boy, dear. You'd be better off with someone older.'

'He doesn't look eighteen.'

'Maybe not, Elsie . . . but he'll make you unhappy in the long run. He'll grow bored and leave you for someone else. Boys of that age always do.'

Mrs Cameron was bent over the kitchen sink, washing clothes. Her arms were deep in suds and Elsie stared at her stooped back with loathing. 'Why do you always have to ruin everything for me?' she asked.

'I don't mean to,' her mother said with a sigh, 'but Dad and I both feel—' She broke off abruptly. She was too tired for arguments that day, and Elsie never took her advice anyway.

She had lost heart over the girl. There were no grey areas in Elsie's life. Love must be total. Support tireless. Fault-finding zero. Mild criticism, designed to help her, led to tantrums . . . or worse, threats of suicide. Elsie could go for weeks without speaking to either of her parents. Other times she fawned on them.

Conflict played a part in all her relationships. At home and at work. She could like a person one day and hate them the next. But she never

understood why that turned people away. 'It's not fair,' she would say, bursting into tears. 'Why is everyone so *beastly* to me?'

Neither of her parents could see a happy ending for her. Mrs Cameron prayed she'd meet an older man who would put up with her moods. Mr Cameron said no such man existed now. If he ever had, he'd died in the war.

The war had killed so many men. It meant a generation of young women would not find husbands. For every Norman Thorne, there were five young girls begging to be noticed. And Mrs Cameron knew Elsie well enough to know that she was too needy to hold Norman's interest for long.

But, like her daughter's co-workers, she'd had enough of the petulant mood swings. 'Do as you please,' she said, drawing a pillowcase from the water and thumping it against the wooden washboard. 'Just don't come running to me when Norman Thorne lets you down.'