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# Two Penn'orth of Sky

Katie Flynn

## Chapter 1

June 1919

'Emmy, time's getting on, queen. I know they say brides always ought to be a bit late, but you don't want to leave poor Peter standing in the church, thinking you're not coming.'

Emmy heard her friend Beryl's voice coming up the stairwell and smiled at her mother, who had been fussing over the pearl beads which she had lent for the occasion. That was the 'something borrowed'; 'something blue' was the garters, which held up Emmy's silk stockings. She took a last glance at herself in the mirror. Her ash-blonde hair was almost hidden by the floating white veil and the wreath of tiny white rosebuds that held everything in place, but she knew she was looking her best. Her dress had been made by her mother; Mrs Dickens was a noted needlewoman and the gown was perfect, showing off Emmy's slender figure to best advantage. Downstairs, Emmy knew, her bouquet waited for her: cream roses, gypsophila, and a few sprigs of sweet-smelling myrtle, chosen because her mother considered it lucky.

Mrs Dickens finished fastening the beads and stood back, eyes misting. 'You look radiant, my dear,' she said softly. 'The most beautiful bride Nightingale Court has ever known. And this is going to be the sort of wedding that folk will remember. Not one person has refused the invitation and we've enough food and drink to feed an army. Oh aye, people will be talking about this day for years to come.'

'Oh, Mam, if they do, it's you I've got to thank,' Emmy said sincerely. 'You've been the best mother in the world and I'm a lucky girl, I know I am. Why, Peter loves you as much as I do, or he would never have suggested that you should come and live with us in Lancaster Avenue. Oh, Mam . . .'

Beryl's voice came closer; clearly, she was mounting the stairs. 'Come on, Emmy!'

Emmy went out to the head of the stairs and found Beryl Fisher halfway up, smiling at her. Beryl was her oldest friend, a tall, well-built young woman, four years Emmy's senior. At first glance, one might have thought her plain, for she had a broad face with high cheekbones and rather small, twinkling eyes, but a second glance would show that her thick brown hair was naturally curly and when she smiled her face was transformed. Beryl would have been Emmy's bridesmaid, except that she had been married to Wally Fisher for three years and had a small son, Charlie. Emmy had suggested that Beryl might be matron-of-honour, but her friend had laughed and told her not to be so daft. 'You have me niece, Susie,' she advised. 'You won't have to buy her a dress 'cos the pink one you wore when you were my bridesmaid will fit her nicely.' So now Susie waited in the kitchen downstairs, pretty as a picture in the pink silk dress, her dark hair and eyes a foil for Emmy's fragile fairness.

'The car's arrived,' Beryl said, retreating down the stairs. 'My, you look good enough to eat! Wait till you see the crowd in the court. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse before you leave . . . them that can't come to the church, that is. So mind you go slowly so's they can all get an eyeful.'

Emmy smiled. For years, her mother had been saving for this day, because she had always been certain that her daughter would marry well. 'A good marriage is the only way to shake the dust of Nightingale Court off your feet,' she had said, as soon as Emmy was old enough to understand. 'When I married your dear father, we told ourselves we'd give the court a year and then move on to somewhere better. He was ambitious, was Sam, and would have gone places and taken us with him. Only then he got consumption and couldn't work full-time and you were born . . .' She sighed. 'Your poor dad! But you'll do better, I know it in me bones.'

Since Sam Dickens had been dead a dozen years, Mrs Dickens was going to give her daughter away, so now Emmy picked up her bouquet and placed her hand lightly on her mother's arm, and the two of them went out of the front doorway, into the court. Beryl had been right. The place was crowded, and as the two women appeared a ragged cheer went up. Emmy glanced quickly towards the arch which led into Raymond Street; yes, she could see the June sunlight out there, so she was to have good weather on this, the most important day of her life so far. Satisfied, she allowed her blue gaze to sweep the crowd and for a moment she was all smiles, until she saw the tall young man who stood nearest. Johnny Frost! He was staring at her steadily and she could read the hunger in his dark blue eyes, and the pain.

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Hastily, Emmy turned away from him and began to walk towards the archway, beyond which the wedding car waited. She tried to tell herself that Johnny had no right to come and stare at her, no right to be in the court at all. He had not been invited to the wedding and lived a couple of streets away, so he had come deliberately, knowing that his presence could only embarrass her.

She had been very close to Johnny Frost once, had truly meant to marry him. Oh, there had been no engagement ring, no public promises, but they had been childhood sweethearts and she knew Johnny had taken it for granted that they would wed one day. But Johnny wasn't ambitious, had no desire to better himself. Marriage to Johnny, she thought bitterly now, would have meant a baby every year, a flat over a grocer's shop, and herself taking in washing to make ends meet. Her mother had warned her, but being a headstrong girl of seventeen she had taken no notice - until Peter Wesley had come into her life, that was. Peter was a dozen years older than she and First Officer on a liner. His parents were well-to-do people living in Southampton. Mr and Mrs Wesley, senior, had come up for the wedding but had refused Mrs Dickens's shyly offered hospitality and had booked themselves rooms at the Adelphi instead.

The little party had reached the car, but it was not until the uniformed chauffeur set his vehicle in motion that Emmy felt safe from Johnny's burning gaze. Her mother was fussing with her dress again, smoothing down the rich material, whilst Susie leaned forward and tweaked the veil, which had caught on her headdress.

'Not long now, Emmy, and you'll be Mrs Wesley, livin' in a posh house,' she said encouragingly. 'And it ain't as if you'll be alone there when Peter goes back to sea, because you'll have your mam, won't you? My, we're goin' to miss you in Nightingale Court.'

Emmy smiled affectionately at her mother. Mrs Dickens had promised faithfully to move herself and her belongings to Lancaster Avenue a month after the wedding, and Emmy knew her mother was as excited as a young girl over the prospect of moving house. Emmy was doubly grateful to Peter, for was he not rescuing both of them from Nightingale Court?

Sunshine never penetrated as far as the courts, because the tottery, three-storey houses were too close to each other, and too tall, to allow much natural light to enter. Mrs Dickens was fond of remarking that all you got in Nightingale Court was two

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penn'orth of sky, and in order to see that, you had to stand in the middle of the court and tilt your head back, staring up till your eyes watered.

All the houses in the court were in constant need of maintenance. The landlord was mean and greedy, never reducing the rents but always promising repairs and renovations, though he never did anything which was not absolutely essential. Consequently, the paving was uneven, the paintwork peeling; doors never fitted, letting in howling draughts in winter; and roof tiles were missing, so attics were often damp. And then there was the grime from the surrounding factories and from the smoke which belched, blackly, from every chimney.

Some of the inhabitants of the court kept their homes nice and did repairs themselves, but others were feckless, living in conditions of total squalor. Mrs Dickens had always tried to keep herself to herself and Emmy, even as a small child, had known better than to mix with what Mrs Dickens called 'the lower elements', though with Beryl - then Pritchard - as her friend, she had really needed no other.

Beryl was the youngest of a large family, most of whom had left home long before Emmy's birth. Despite the difference in their ages the two girls had always got on well, Beryl being protective towards the blue-eyed, blonde-haired scrap from the first moment Emmy had managed to toddle out into the court, attracted by the presence of so many other children.

'Here we are then, Emmy,' Mrs Dickens said, as the car drew up in front of the church. 'Today you are starting a new life; a wonderful life which will give you all the things you want and deserve. Peter is a fine young man, though I'm afraid his parents think we are . . . rather ordinary, but after seeing you today they'll be bound to realise how very, very special you are. Why, if your father could see you now, his heart would burst with pride.'

The car had halted and the chauffeur came round to open the nearside door for them. One of Peter's fellow officers, clearly deputed for this task, came forward to help the three women out of the car. He was tall and handsome, though not as handsome as Peter, Emmy reminded herself quickly. Peter was six foot tall, with thick, tawny hair and eyes of exactly the same colour. He was very tanned and had a crooked grin which showed off his white teeth, and he had a charm to which most females were susceptible, and an air of command and of knowing exactly what he wanted, which had been lacking in all Emmy's previous admirers.

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Walking slowly up to the church, Emmy remembered how they had first met, though it was an uncomfortable recollection, for she had been with Johnny at the time. They had gone to the Daulby Hall, as they often did on a Saturday night, and had been twirling around the floor when a young man had tapped Johnny smartly on the shoulder, given both of them a brilliant smile, and said, 'Excuse me,' in a deep, amused voice. Johnny had opened his mouth to argue – not seriously, just in fun – but by then she was already in the officer's arms. After the 'Excuse me' dance had finished he had asked if he might walk her home, and when she began to explain that she was with Johnny he had suggested she might like to give him her name and address.

She had laughed and complied, and from that moment on she had been swept off her feet into a whirlwind courtship, because Peter had only taken a fortnight's leave of absence and had told her, on their very first date, that he meant to have her promise to marry him before he returned to sea. She had laughed again but had felt her pulses flutter with excitement at this frank avowal and, very soon, Peter filled not only all her time, but all her thoughts as well. He was so romantic, so different from shy, unassuming Johnny. He made her laugh, paid her the prettiest compliments, took her to theatres, and to dances in smart hotels, and invited her to dine in restaurants she had not known existed. He hired a motor car and they had a long weekend touring Wales. Despite having lived in Liverpool all her life, she had never before seen the glories of Snowdonia, or visited the beautiful coastal resorts of North Wales and the Lleyn Peninsula. They had spent the nights in small hotels or guest houses and Peter had been a perfect gentleman, never even kissing her good night when they parted outside their separate rooms.

At the end of his fortnight's leave, as he had promised, Peter asked her to marry him and when she accepted gave her a beautiful sapphire ring because he said the stone was the same colour as her eyes.

Now, Emmy entered the church on her mother's arm with Susie holding up her long, silken train. Ahead of her she could see Peter, incredibly smart in his uniform, with his best man, Second Officer on board SS Queen of the South, standing beside him. Emmy glided forward, reached Peter and turned to smile up at him. It was no longer a dream. This was really happening; the wonderful life which Peter had promised her was about to begin. She handed her bouquet to Susie and just touched Peter's fingers. He gripped her hand warmly, reassuringly, and the two of them moved forward to where the priest in charge waited.

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‘Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here, in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honourable estate . . .’

Emmy listened to the words which would make her Peter’s wife in a daze of happiness. He was the best, the nicest man she had ever known and they were going to be the happiest couple in the history of the world. When the time came for her to make her vows, her voice rang out, as clear and confident as his. ‘I take thee, Peter Albert, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I give thee my troth.’

Peter took the ring from the bible, and placed it on Emmy’s finger. ‘With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship . . .’

Emmy felt the warm blood steal across her face and, for the first time, she remembered that weddings are followed by parties and parties by honeymoons. Tonight, she and Peter would share not only a room, but a bed. For a whole week, they would live in a smart hotel, sharing everything. Yet now that she thought about it, she had only known Peter for a few short months, and most of that time they had been separated by many miles of ocean. Loving him was all very well, she told herself, but what would living with him be like? They had kissed, and even cuddled, but he had never seen her with her hair hanging loose down her back, never seen her in her brand new white lawn nightgown with its low neckline threaded with pale blue ribbon, and its tiny sleeves made of creamy lace. Heavens, would he expect to see her out of it?

Suddenly, Emmy wanted to turn and run. Peter was wonderful, of course he was, but he was unfamiliar country. His upbringing had been totally different from her own; his parents seemed to despise her own mother, and his home was actually called Epsley Manor and was situated in the village of Epsley, somewhere on the South Downs. She glanced wildly to right and left, aware of the cold of the gold ring on her finger, feeling suddenly lost, alone.

Then the priest ushered them away from the altar and into the vestry where they were to sign the register, Emmy using her maiden name for the last time, and suddenly it was all right. Peter was exuberant, beaming at everyone. His parents were smiling, his mother telling Emmy in a stage whisper that she looked truly

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beautiful, that Peter was a very lucky man. Peter's father harrumphed and nodded in agreement and Emmy's own mother simply smiled and smiled. Emmy felt proud of her. She was wearing a well-cut grey jacket and matching skirt over a blouse so white and crisp that it dazzled the eye, and the black court shoes on her feet shone like glass.

'Well, Mrs Wesley? How does it feel to be married to my old friend Peter, eh?'

Emmy turned to smile at the speaker. It was Carl Johansson, Peter's best man. She had met him only once before, but with his thick fair hair and slight foreign accent he was impossible to forget. 'It feels wonderful, Mr Johansson,' Emmy said, predictably; after all, he could scarcely have expected her to say anything else and besides, she now realised that it was true. All her silly fears had fled. She might not have known Peter for long but she felt she knew him better than almost anyone else in her life, apart from her mother.

Presently, when all the signing and official business was over, the bridal entourage formed up and re-entered the church to the swelling chorus of the Wedding March. Emmy and Peter began to walk towards the west door, smiling and nodding to friends and relatives as they passed them.

In the very last pew, Johnny Frost sat alone. She thought he was going to ignore her, to continue to stare straight ahead, but at the last moment he turned towards her, giving her a brilliant smile. Beneath his breath, as she drew level, he whispered: 'You look beautiful, queen, and I wish you everything you wish yourself.'

Emmy felt tears prick her eyes but banished them resolutely and whispered, 'Thank you, Johnny,' praying that he had heard her above the crashing chords of the Wedding March. She thought, remorsefully, that she had underrated her old friend; he was kind and generous, for she knew she had treated him badly and did not deserve the forgiveness which was implicit in his words.

But then they were out of the church and into the June sunshine. Above them the bells were pealing out their message of happiness and hope. All around her were smiling faces and Emmy saw a large group of girls from the big department store in which she worked, friends from school, neighbours from the court . . . even the wife of the butcher who had made all the pies and pasties for the wedding feast, wearing



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her best blue hat with the feathers, and beaming as though Emmy were her own daughter, instead of just a good customer.

And then they were throwing rice and Peter was pretending to threaten reprisals as it caught in his thick mop of hair and fell down the neck of his uniform jacket. Laughing and shaking the clinging little pieces out of her veil, Emmy climbed into the waiting car and pulled Peter in after her. Everyone else would walk because it was really only a step, but the car would drive three or four times round the block so that everyone could see the bride and groom, and to give everyone involved in the catering a chance to get back to the court and set out the long tables with white paper cloths and all the food and drink to which practically every woman in the court had contributed in some way, though the actual cost had been largely borne by Peter's parents. They had insisted upon paying for ingredients and so on, since they were in no position to help with either shopping or cooking, and Mrs Dickens had been very grateful. It had enabled her to spend some of her carefully hoarded money on kitting her daughter out for married life in a style which, otherwise, would not have been possible. Silk stockings, filmy underwear – including such items as camiknickers and camisoles – drawers decorated with pink and blue ribbon. And there were dresses in poplin and cotton, with the new double sleeve, and a white muslin gown with a long front panel and a pink sash, which would be donned on special occasions. There were pleated skirts and bright woollen jumpers which could be worn under an overall when she was doing her housework, or with some colourful beads, or a scarf round the neck, when entertaining.

'I say, look at that, Emmy!' Peter's voice sounded genuinely delighted. 'They've decorated the arch; doesn't it look grand? They must have done it whilst we were in the church.' Emmy smiled, but said nothing. Peter had not visited the court before going to the church because it was not the done thing, but in fact Emmy had joined practically everyone else to help with the decorating very early that morning. It was June, and flowers were relatively cheap, so the previous evening they had bargained cheerfully with the stallholders and flower ladies in Byrom Street and Clayton Place, and the boys and young men had trekked off into the country – or, more likely, into the local parks – and helped themselves to leafy branches. These, and the flowers, had been fastened on to the grimy brickwork, turning the arch into a thing of real beauty. The flowers and foliage had been sprayed with water so that they would stay fresh, and Emmy knew that the court itself was decorated likewise, with even the poorest families making some sort of show, since everyone, from the oldest grandfather to the youngest child, would partake of the wedding feast.

The car drew to a halt and Emmy and Peter climbed out, Emmy holding up her skirts, for though the court had been cleaned down and whitewashed the pavement outside was as filthy as ever, and she had no desire to walk around for the rest of the day in a gown with a stained hem. Susie, who had arrived well ahead of them,



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rushed forward to pick up Emmy's long rucked train, and the small procession moved into the court. Beside her, Peter bent his head to whisper into her ear. 'What would have happened, sweetheart, if it had rained? There's far too much food - and far too many people - to cram into any of the houses.'

Emmy giggled. She had wondered the same herself, wondered it many times when she had attended as a guest on similar occasions, but for some reason weddings seemed to be especially blessed, so that even if the sun did not shine, neither did the rain fall. She said as much to Peter, adding that her mother had once told her that the church hall would have to be hired if it rained, which was probably why, when someone in Nightingale Court married, they chose to do so in late spring or summer.

'I see,' Peter said gravely. 'And I thought this weather was a special dispensation from above to show us that God and all his angels think we're doing the right thing.'

Emmy laughed again. 'Who's to say you're not right?' she said, rather challengingly. 'I suppose God - and the priests - must want people to marry instead of living tally, so that's why we get the good weather.'

Peter's eyes widened in pretended surprise. 'Living tally indeed? It's called living in sin where I come from, so don't you forget it, young lady. My mama would be shocked to hear such an expression on your lips.'

Emmy glanced at him suspiciously, not sure whether he was joking or serious, but then her mother came over and led the young couple to a beautiful bower of lilies. 'You must greet your guests now, my dears,' she said instructively. 'And you must introduce everyone to Mr and Mrs Wesley, though Peter will have to perform the introductions for his shipmates, since you can't possibly know them all.'

'They'll just want to meet the pretty girls,' Peter said, grinning. 'Carl, my best man, has already got his eye on Susie.'

But Mrs Dickens had already bustled away to fetch the Wesleys to take their place in the receiving line. The first guests began a rather awkward, shuffling approach, but Peter soon put them at their ease and presently Mr Cubley, who was presiding over

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the beer barrel, began to hand out foaming mugs of ale and the covers were ripped off the food. Immediately, shyness was forgotten. The adults picked up plates from the pile laid out ready and began to move slowly along the laden table, helping themselves as they went. Soon everyone was seated, the children carrying their plates to the various doorsteps, the adults taking their places on the long wooden benches. Emmy chuckled; the court had been positively raucous until the food was served, but now a comfortable hush fell on the company as they enjoyed the sort of food which was not often seen in Nightingale Court.

She and Peter were seated side by side at the top table, flanked by their parents. On a small separate table stood the wedding cake, a masterpiece of the confectioner's art, all glistening white icing, the purity of it enhanced rather than broken by the miniature bride and groom on the top tier, standing in a bed of sugar flowers. When the meal was over, she and Peter would cut that cake, and after it was eaten and the tables cleared away, the musical trio her mother had engaged would appear and the dancing would begin.

Not that we'll see much of the dancing, because our train leaves from Lime Street Station at three o'clock, Emmy reminded herself. Most brides aren't lucky enough to have a proper honeymoon and just go away for a night somewhere local, but we're off to Llandudno, to stay in a real hotel for a whole week! And then we'll come back to the beautiful house in Lancaster Avenue. She could see it clearly in her head: the tree-lined avenue, the neat little garden, bright with flowers, the gleaming windows and cheery red brick façade, the four well-whited steps leading up to the green-painted front door. Oh, I'm such a lucky girl! Mam said this was the start of a new life and I mean to make it the sort of life I've always dreamed of.