


MARGUERITE KAYE

A man in a dark tuxedo with a white shirt and a light-colored bow tie is embracing a woman from behind. The woman has short, dark, curly hair and is wearing a pink, sleeveless, lace-trimmed dress. They are both looking at each other with a romantic expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

THE AWAKENING
OF
POPPY EDWARDS

Undone!

Marguerite Kaye

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Аннотация

Los Angeles, 1924 Broadway producer Lewis Cartsydyke has come to Hollywood with a business proposition for starlet Poppy Edwards. But as he's watching her sing in a downtown club, dressed in a man's suit that skims her lush curves, a much more wicked proposal comes to mind. Poppy has fame, wealth and an aversion to love. Lewis offers the kind of passion she craves—delicious, sensual heat without complications. Night after night she abandons herself to sensation, promising she won't lose her heart the way her sister did. But for Lewis, uncomplicated is no longer enough—and soon he won't be satisfied until he's claimed all of Poppy in blissful surrender.

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[Chapter One](#)

Los Angeles, January, 1924

Lewis

The club was downtown under a Venice Beach grocery store, and a very far cry from the harem-like decadence of the Cocoanut Grove, where I'd had dinner the night before under the palm trees. Bunty's this place was called, according to my source, though there was no sign of any sort over the door. A fug of smoke so thick it stung your eyes hung low like a dirty bit of lace over the roped-off dance floor where six girls dressed in some exhausted-looking silk flowers were doing an unenthusiastic hula.

My backhander bought me a table at the front along with a glass of something they called bourbon, which was probably

about as authentic as the dancers' costumes. I took one sniff and put it to the side. Above me, on the balcony, men were leaning over and catcalling. In Harlem, a place like this would be stuffed full of wannabe sophisticates out to claim their stake in history by taking part in the Jazz Age. Whatever that is. Fitzgerald and his like have a lot to answer for. I met him in Paris once. Unlike most of his acolytes, he struck me as the real deal, dead set on taking the road to destruction just as fast as he can travel.

I was thinking about him as I sat, not drinking my drink, watching the dancers in that louche little club making their dates with their exit. I was thinking I could be just like him if I let myself. Not the writing, but the self-destructing. I was thinking that I had a hell of a lot more reason than Fitzgerald, too, because to my knowledge he'd never seen what I'd seen.

But that's a path I'll never take. What happened in Europe, what I saw, it could have destroyed me, but I won't let it. That's the difference between me and the others. That sounds smug. I'm not smug, but I'm darn sure I'm not gonna let myself wallow, either. I know I'm one of the lucky ones. I owe it to the rest to make the most of my luck, and that's what I'm doing. If I'm not happy, then I ought to be. I'm good at what I do. I like it, too. I have any number of people happy to claim I'm their friend. Any number of women, too, though I'm not one of those guys who *needs* anyone except myself. I'm not lonely; I'm self-reliant. That's what the war taught me more than anything, that the only person you can depend on is yourself. I'm happy. Why shouldn't

I be happy?

I'd taken a sip of the bourbon. It was just as bad as I'd thought it would be. Thankfully, my thoughts were interrupted by the MC announcing the next act. I didn't recognise her at first. I was expecting a blonde, and the person who walked onto the stage had black hair. I was expecting the soft curves and low-cut dresses she wore on-screen, not a man's dinner suit. I was expecting her to sing something bubbly, light, fun, flirty. I was expecting her to be sexy, vampy, maybe even cute. Like her movies. What I got—my God, what I got.

She sang a jazz number I didn't recognise, though it was, needless to say, about a woman done wrong. Her voice was husky, smoky, the sort of voice that makes your hair stand on end. She didn't milk it the way another singer might, and it was all the more believable for that, her song. She stood there in front of the band, in her too-big man's suit with her slicked-back hair and her face completely devoid of cosmetics, all big eyes and pale cheeks and sultry mouth, and I've never seen any woman so incredibly sensual in my life.

I'd been sceptical about her ability to act. That was why I'd come here, on a tip-off. I realised two things at that moment. She was wasted on the screen. And I wanted her.

Poppy

I don't know what it was that made me notice him. Usually when I'm singing I don't notice anything or anyone save for the band. He was alone, which was unusual, but it wasn't that. It was

the stillness of him. The way he was watching me, so focused, utterly intent. I let him catch my eye, something I never do because it gives men all sorts of wrong ideas. And some women. In the early days, when I first started singing here, when I first realised that I had to sing somewhere, even if walking on stage alone brought back such painful memories, back then I used to—sometimes. I tried both, men and women. Neither worked as well as I hoped. Maybe because I thought they wouldn't.

But this man. I'd never seen him before, that much I was sure of. He wasn't good-looking enough to be in films. His hair was cut short, no floppy bit at the front to slick back, but really short, as though he didn't want to be bothered with it. There were lines on his high forehead. He was clean-cut, no fashionable moustache. A strong jaw that a camera would love. Deep-set eyes. I couldn't see the colour in the fug of the club, but I could feel them on me. Boring through me. Watching.

I sang two songs. Songs that would have surprised Daisy, shocked her, even, but I can't sing the old stuff, and this new jazz, it suits me. I don't just mean my voice, but the lyrics, the mood. So sad. As if they were written for me. When the dancers came out at the end of my slot, I could have edged backstage as I always did, but I didn't. Even though he made no sign, I went over to his table and sat down opposite him. His eyes were blue. He was younger than I'd thought, maybe thirty. And he had that indefinable air about him, of wealth or power or both.

'You were staring,' I said, by way of introduction.

‘You were extraordinary.’

‘I can hold a tune.’ I shrugged, but I was pleased, and that surprised me, because my singing, it’s very personal. You’ll say that’s a contradiction, because if it was so personal then I wouldn’t do it onstage. But no one knows me here—or if they do, it’s the kind of place where they choose not to say. And Bunty’s, it’s like no place I’ve ever performed before—there’s nothing to remind me of those times. When I sing here, the songs are for me. Just for me. So like I said, I was kind of surprised to be pleased, because usually I don’t give a damn.

‘Is there somewhere we can talk?’ he asked me.

Did he mean *talk*? I was pretty shocked to discover I hoped not, though he made me nervous. Or I made myself nervous. The way I’d noticed him. The way my body noticed his, such a contrast between us, in the way he filled his dinner suit. There was a kind of ruggedness in him that I liked. He wasn’t smooth or debonair or any of those movie-star qualities I saw day in, day out on-set. His appeal was much more basic—and I don’t mean like that phoney, *Tarzan of the Apes* kind of basic, either.

I led him to the bar. It was empty because the show was in full swing, and anyway, it had a class that the floor space didn’t. They had real booze on the glass shelves, not hooch, and the ceiling was beaten copper, a strange, wavy design that was echoed on the bar top. Like a stormy sea. I liked it. We sat on the high stools and ordered highballs. He had long legs. Not scrawny, either. And he didn’t smoke.

‘Do you have a name?’ I asked.

‘Do you?’

The way he said it made me wary. No one from the studio knew I sang here. Ridiculous to think—I reminded myself that he couldn’t really see inside my head, even though he gave that impression. I took a swig of my drink. ‘You heard them announcing me,’ I said. ‘I’m Very Simply Vera.’

‘Vera. Right,’ he said, and I told myself it was just my imagination, the doubt I heard. ‘Well, I’m Lewis. Pleased to meet you, Vera.’

‘Lewis.’ We clinked glasses and stared at each other. I was feeling decidedly edgy now. Part of me wanted to run. I just about managed to stop myself from checking that my wig was in place. It wouldn’t move—I’d fixed it painfully thoroughly. My breath was coming in short little huffs, as if I’d been running, and I couldn’t get it under control. My heart was racing, as if I’d drunk way too much of the stuff the studio calls coffee. We were sitting side-on to the bar, so our knees were touching. When I reached for my glass, even though I didn’t want to drink, he caught my hand in his.

I should have pulled away but I didn’t. His skin was warm. His fingers were rough. He didn’t say anything, but it was clear, in the way his eyes seemed to blaze at me, how much he wanted me. I felt an answering heat. I can’t remember the last time I’d felt like that. Not in a long time. Never so strongly. I was crazy to even consider it. The man was a total stranger. We’d barely exchanged

half a dozen words. But I was already past considering. And the fact that he was a total stranger was kind of the point. I didn't need complications. I certainly didn't want them. But what I wanted, really wanted, was this man.

Is that shocking? I don't know why it should be. I'm twenty-seven years old, not seventeen, and no matter what the studio would have the world believe, no matter how well it suited us for the world to believe, *that* was never going to happen between Randolph and me. Years ago I had to stand by and watch the mess love made of Daisy. It didn't so much destroy her as empty her out. She was there, and not there. The war. It wasn't just the men in the trenches who died. When her husband was killed, he took Daisy with him. I couldn't get her back. I tried, but there was nothing left to of her to retrieve. She lost Anthony and she lost her voice. I lost her and our act. That's why I'm here—I couldn't stay. Neither of us could bear it. Together we'd just have kept reminding each other of what had happened. With an ocean between us, we can pretend it didn't, which is what we do. Pretend I chose to come here. To go along with her story that it was the chance she'd been waiting for to go out on her own. I thought maybe after a year she'd join me or ask me back.

Five years, it's been. Which is fine, because life is good here, it really is. I've worked blooming hard to make sure of that, to change myself from one of the Edwards Sisters to Poppy Edwards, star of the silver screen, and sometimes Very Simply Vera. I'm here and I've every reason to be happy and it's all down

to me, and me alone, and that's the way it's going to stay. So you can see, can't you, why I don't, won't, will never do the hearts-and-flowers stuff.

The problem though, was that while I'm more than immune to romance, I do like the—now I'm going to be shocking again, but there it is—I like the sex, and what's more, I don't see why being anti one means I should be deprived of the other. So maybe it had never quite lived up to my expectations, but that just meant I should persevere, right? I mean, that's what you do, isn't it? If at first you don't succeed, and all that. And I had a feeling that with this man it would be good.

So I drained my glass quickly and slithered to my feet. 'Ready?' I asked him.

He looked taken aback for about a second, and for about a second I felt as if I'd got the upper hand. I realised I'd have to keep it like that, too. This was not a man who would take kindly to being messed about.

'Where to?' he asked, throwing a note down on the bar, catching up quickly enough.

I couldn't take him home, obviously. 'You tell me.' I gave him one of my seductive smiles. They worked well on-screen. They worked very well on Lewis. 'I'm at the Ambassador,' he said, ushering me up the steps of Bunty's.

That gave me pause. Like every so-called Hollywood star, I'd been there. The Cocoanut Grove was *the* place to be seen, and the venue of choice for pretty much any studio event. But we

weren't going to the nightclub. And it was late enough for anyone staying in the hotel to be in their rooms. If I was careful, and if I left early...

I whistled a passing cab, laughing at the look on his face as I did so. My sister taught me how to do that. Not that I had much cause to use it these days, with a car and driver at my disposal and another car of my own sitting in my garage at home. Where I should be, tucked up in my ridiculously big bed getting my beauty sleep. Instead of that, I was in a cab with a stranger heading uptown to spend what was left of the night doing—I looked at him in the dim light, and shivered. Whatever we were about to do, I knew it would be good.

Chapter Two

Lewis

I did struggle with my conscience, but honestly, it wasn't much of a battle. I'm not proud of that, but I'm trying to tell the truth. I wanted her. I wanted her more than I'd wanted a woman in a long time. She moved me. That's not an excuse, either, just the plain truth again. She looked so absurdly feminine in that suit. Strong, too, but vulnerable. And that moved me. You'll say that makes it worse, that I felt like that, and that I still took her back to my hotel without telling her I knew who she was and, yeah, I guess if someone had told me this story, I'd maybe have said the same. But this wasn't a story, it was happening to me, and nothing like this had ever happened to me, so I didn't say anything. Besides, she didn't want me to know. Vera, she called herself, not Poppy.

Even though it was past two in the morning, the Ambassador's huge neon front entrance was lit up. It looks like a flying saucer. Poppy looked as if she might run, then she just tossed her head back and walked in, as if she didn't care who saw her. I admired that. Furtive, now *that* would have got her noticed. In the lobby that reminded me a bit of Grand Central, she waited, leaning careless as you like by the elevator while I claimed my key. The night clerk gave her barely a second glance; he was too busy trying not to embarrass me.

In the suite, though, she looked nervous. If she'd said something then, I would have had second thoughts. I hope. 'You want a drink?' I asked her.

She shook her head and wandered over to the window, which looked out over the Ambassador's Crystal Plunge swimming pool.

'You want to go home?' I said, joining her.

'I've thought about it.' She looked up at me, all big eyes and white face, and smiled, a soft smile that made her look lost. 'But so much has changed, it wouldn't be home any more.'

'I didn't mean England, I meant...'

'I know what you meant.' She turned away from the window. 'I'm in a strange mood.'

Any other woman, I'd assume she was looking for reassurance. The usual compliments. This one—she wasn't any other woman. 'I'm in a bit of a strange mood myself,' I told her. 'I didn't exactly plan this when I went to that club tonight.'

‘Would you have sent me one of those little notes backstage if I hadn’t come over and talked to you?’

‘I doubt it.’ Which was the truth. ‘I’m glad you did,’ I added, ignoring the sneaky little voice that asked me if I’d think so in the morning, when there was business to be done.

She nodded, giving me a lop-sided smile. ‘I hope you will be.’

I pulled her up tight then. She was slighter than I thought, under that suit. There was hardly anything of her. ‘I hope you will be, too.’

And then her smile changed, as though she’d switched it for someone else’s. ‘The only reason I’m here is that I don’t doubt it.’

Poppy

I wasn’t acting. At least, it didn’t feel like acting. Yes, okay, when I smiled at him just before he kissed me, that wasn’t my smile, but I’m not sure I have a smile to call my own any more. It’s second nature to me to cover up. I’ve always done it, from when I was a child. Daisy, too. At the orphanage, we learned pretty quickly that it was a mistake to show how you really felt, what you really thought. That’s not acting. That’s just one of the rules of survival.

And even if I was acting at first, when he kissed me, I soon stopped. It was a gentle kiss. That surprised me. Cautious? A bit. He wasn’t showing it, but maybe he was nervous, too. He didn’t seem to me to be the type of man to be nervous—quite the opposite. But when he kissed me—like I said, he seemed on edge.

How to describe a kiss? I can say it was perfect, and it was, but my idea of perfect probably isn't yours. His mouth fit mine. It felt—right. He kissed just right. Not stagy. Not a screen kiss, all posture and fluttering hands. Gentle, like I said. But not reassuring, you know, not the kind of kiss where you think there's nothing else. I was very sure there was more—and I wanted more. That kiss had an edge to it. An appetizer of a kiss.

He slid his hands under my dinner jacket. He didn't grab, he stroked, as though he was trying to find out my shape under my shapeless clothes. I liked that. I liked the way we were both wearing the same thing, but he looked so different in his. His suit fit him. An expensive, made-to-measure job. Mine wasn't even off-the-peg; it was out of the prop department. And it didn't fit at all. What it did, though, was make me feel so much more female beside him. A real cliché, I know that, but there's a reason why such things become clichés.

He liked it, too, the way we looked. And he liked looking. I didn't usually. I see far too much of myself on-screen to want to look when I don't have to. There was a mirror on the wall. One of those fancy ones, all jagged edges decorated with coloured glass. He stood me in front of it and put his arms around me, opening my jacket. My body was pressed back against his. I could feel he was hard. He was much taller than me. Much broader. The contrast between the two of us and the way we were dressed the same—it was arousing. Odd, but arousing.

He slid my jacket off and began to unbutton my waistcoat.

I watched his hands on me in the mirror. His mouth on my neck. His breath on my cheek. My waistcoat slid to the floor. He opened his palms and cupped my breasts through the starched front of my shirt. Tanned hands. White shirt. My nipples were as hard as he was. Throbbing like he was. As he stroked them, I rubbed my behind against the ridge of him, and watched his eyes close in response.

He pulled my shirt out of my trousers. They call them pants over here. Even after five years, that still sounds terrifically rude to me. He touched me, with just the silk of my chemise between us now. His hands sliding flat over it, spanning my waist, up to my breasts again, teasing them into such an agonising delight. Then one hand down, sliding past the wide waistband of my trousers, under the silk of my knickers, and it was my turn to close my eyes. Just for a second. Then I opened them. I wanted to watch.

I was amazed at how wet I was. He slid into me so easily. Stupid, but my knees really did buckle. His hand on my breast supported me. Then the assault began. On my nipple and inside me, sliding, stroking and teasing. And I watched, fascinated, as if it wasn't me. My face was flushed; my eyes seemed huge. His were fixed on me, watching, intent, as he touched me, as if he knew exactly how to touch me, just as he'd known exactly how to kiss me.

I wanted it to go on forever, that hot wet slide, that mesmerising stroking, so soft, so sweet, such a contrast with the sharper tightening when he teased my nipple, and the spark

seemed to run all the way down through my belly to the spot between my legs, which started to throb. More insistent now. Did he read it in my face, that I wanted that? I don't know. I was watching, but I wasn't thinking as he touched me, stroked me, making me pant and clench and heat, as though I was melting around the hot core of me that he touched, and when I came my eyes closed and I heard myself, a harsh cry, and I felt him picking me up, and I clung onto him like some helpless maiden, the kind that's always getting rescued from train tracks in the movies.

He set me down on the bed. 'Have you got...?' I asked, and he nodded, leaving me briefly to get the preservative from the bathroom.

'You sure?' His face was set. Flushed like mine.

'Yes.'

His hands were shaking as he dragged off his clothes. Mine, too, as I fumbled with what was left of my own, kicking off my trousers, my shoes, my stockings, my underwear, shivering, my fingers icy, all of me icy except inside.

Naked, he looked even more impressive than with clothes on. Hard-packed muscles that rippled under the skin. I'd remember that later, when I replayed it all in my head. The contrast of tanned arms and pale shoulders. The rough hairs on his chest. I touched all of him. Ran fevered hands over all of him. I must have, or I wouldn't have remembered. But at the time it was all hot skin and rough and smooth textures. Hard, and silky soft. I wrapped my fingers around his erection. Stroked. But only for a

moment. I wanted him inside me. Same as he did.

‘Ready?’ he asked, and I smiled, or laughed or something, because he smiled or laughed, too, and it made my insides clench again, that smiling-laughing thing, and made me realise that it wasn’t over, far from over, and he must have seen that in my face.

I fell back on the bed. He entered me slowly, but not too slow. Sliding. Opening me up. Making me cling to him, and my clinging making him groan. In and in he slid, and when he thought he was done, I wrapped my legs around his waist and he slid in farther, his eyes widening, his mouth curling. Not smiling. Curling. He held me like that and I held him, just looking at him, for seconds. Then he began to rock. The smallest movement, just rocking, and I began to clench, and I didn’t want it to be over, so I dug my fingers into his shoulders.

‘You like that,’ he said, and it wasn’t a question.

I tilted under him. ‘You like that,’ I said, and that wasn’t a question, either.

He kissed me, his tongue sliding into my mouth, and he thrust at the same time. A tiny movement, but almost enough. Almost. I dug my fingers in farther. ‘Yes,’ I said, though he hadn’t asked me anything.

‘Yes,’ he said, and I knew what he meant.

Another kiss. His tongue. The hard, hot thickness of him thrusting. And ‘Yes,’ I said again. And ‘Yes,’ this time the words a hiss of pleasure as he thrust harder. ‘Now.’

It wasn’t an order—it was a plea. He ignored it. ‘Wait,’ he said,

and that was an order, his hands sliding under my behind, tilting me higher. ‘Not yet.’

I moaned. I clung. I tensed. I could feel it and I didn’t want to resist it, though I didn’t want it to happen. ‘Not yet,’ I echoed, like a prayer.

He kissed me again. There was sweat on his chest. His eyes were so dark, his face strained. He tasted of salt. Of heat. Of sex. I kissed him back, touching my tongue to his, and he gave a long groan. ‘Now,’ I whispered, insistent.

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