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BEGARS ABBEY

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BEGARS ABBEY

V.L. VALENTINE

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For Sylvan, Mom and Dad

BEGARS ABBEY

Prelude

5th February 1954, York train station, England

A gust of gritty wind and Sam closes her eyes. The scene comes forth, unbidden. The grate and metal whine of the trains transform into the lilting flurry of a winter's ball. Ancient, dark-panelled walls close in. A chandelier lowers like a midnight sun. The air is warm – teasing her with its spicy scents of juniper and pine boughs, the Yule log on the fire.

Sam sees the swirl of old-fashioned heavy velvet and wool skirts mixed with those as light as air – chiffon, silk. She puts a hand to her head to try to slow it all down. The movement of the dancers is so swift around her, she can't see the too-heavy rouge, the blistered fingers, the ragged nails. The fiddler is so lively, the great hall so crowded, that the frozen smiles are unseen, the forced laughter covered. Her forehead starts to pound at the rhythmic click of the shoes kept and polished beyond their years; the unsteady clink of crystal and cutlery by the table of jellies and pies. The younger guests can't stop staring at the table; they take only small plates of food, but she knows they want more. The eagerness and hunger in their eyes, the fear that makes them hold back, it makes her feel

sick. She knows their giddiness, their desire to lose themselves in the moment, to forget.

She wants to look away but she can't. She feels their longing, feels them pull her in. She wants to sweep up her hair and slip into a dress of never-ending tulle. Dab her neck and wrists with her grandmother's jasmine perfume. She wants to take one of the delicate little cups of punch, sip it slowly, then take the hand of that smiling man and be led onto the dance floor. But over there, by the arched entrance to the hall, Sam sees the young lady of the house. A girl of about seventeen. Dressed in a black silk sheath threaded with metallic green and gold, she smoulders in the candlelight. One moment dark ash, then with the slightest movement, an ember come ablaze.

Sam sees one of the guests studying the young lady, trying to read the frown on her face. Sees the young lady rub her arms as if she were cold; the guest matches her frown and quickly leaves the ball.

Sam shakes her head and mercifully, the vision is gone. Instead, she sees Alec, standing by the train that will take them to London. He's frowning, too. He's always frowning, always impatient. He waves a folded-up newspaper at her. He wants her to hurry up. She can't tell if the clouds of steam are coming from him or the train idling behind him. She smiles. He's reassuring even when he's annoyed.

Sam Cooper is twenty-six. She forced them to bring her here, from America to York. Arrived at this very train station on 2nd January.

Alec calls to her again. She pauses, pretends to check the back of her nylons for a run, just to annoy him more. He blows out an exasperated sigh, pulls the brim of his fedora

down even further over his dark brow. He wants a cigarette, she can tell.

'By god, if you don't…' he hisses through his clenched jaw.

She does a slow little two-step as she walks towards him then gives in, reaches to take his outstretched hand. Stops cold. Behind Alec, down the platform, Sam sees someone rushing towards them. Her wool coat is plain, like Sam's; the dress underneath is probably not her own. Sam knows her. She is clutching a wine-coloured carpet bag, the pattern faded, muddled.

'Miss, may I come?' she asks.

1

Two Months Earlier, 5th December 1953, Brooklyn, New York

A goddamn miracle worker. How had Sam's mother done it? How had Vera Cooper kept them alive all these years? Sam chewed on her thumbnail as she stared at the light bulb in the shadeless lamp by her mother's bed. The bare bulb made the walls – yellowed from decades of her mother's cigarette smoke – seem even dirtier. Sam and her mother used to whitewash the rooms every few years. But the stains from the cigarettes quickly built back up, almost as if they had just seeped through the paint. Eventually, her mother gave up.

This two-room walk-up in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn was the only home Sam had ever known. She slumped down the wall onto the sticky linoleum floor, pulled her knees to her chest. Vera Cooper was gone now. She had died nearly a year ago. Wherever she was, Sam hoped she couldn't see her, crouched next to the dresser. She spit out a bit of fingernail, rubbed at an eye and got on with her search.

The dresser drawers were laid out around her. They were almost empty; Sam wasn't proud and tried not to be

sentimental, so right after her mother's death, she'd taken for herself any blouses or nylons that were in decent shape. What was too holey or threadbare she used as rags. The pink button-up vest with prancing circus ponies she cut up and stuffed into the cracks around the windows. Vera's tiny, tacky red feathered fedora she stuffed around a pipe under the kitchen sink, hoping the cheap glue would prove toxic to the visitors gnawing a hole there.

All that was left in the drawers was a hatbox, some purses and three stained blouses. Sam had meant to see if she could get the stains out so she could wear those too. Vera had been the same height as her, both unusually tall for women; Sam felt like a giraffe when she passed the Italian grannies in the dark halls of their tenement. She and her mother had been roughly the same weight, too; if anything Sam weighed more, because her mother had eaten nicotine for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They were both pale, with dark, deep-set eyes and thick black brows. Sam's were more arched though, with a noticeable point like the wispy tufts at the peak of a kitten's ears, or so her mother used to say when Sam was little.

Their similarities had ended there. Her mother had smoked, Sam chewed gum – or her nails. Her mother had hated to go into Manhattan; Sam spent as much time at the Met museum as possible. Vera's dark hair had been thick and unruly; Sam's dead straight. In the New York summer, the humidity had made Vera's hair bush out to three times its size. When Sam was a kid, she thought she'd die from embarrassment walking next to Vera; her mother stood out in their neighbourhood. 'Eccentric,' the neighbours – always polite about Vera – had

put it. More like a bag lady, Sam had thought. It wasn't that Vera was dirty or mumbled to herself; though she did talk differently than everyone else – she was from England.

She had just never tried to fit in, and her outfits were so god-awful loud. Vera would wear a heavy pink knitted cap on a sweltering summer's day, or she'd go outside in January in nothing more than a floral print house dress, hand-knitted woollen socks her only nod to the cold. Her mother had loved splashes of colour, but did not care about coordinating her outfits, or the cut, or dressing for the weather. She had worn camouflage rain boots found at some army surplus store no matter the time of year. Who other than a crazy bag lady would have gone out in such get-ups?

Sam, astoundingly, had been alone in this view. One day, when she was about twelve and standing at the street corner with her friend Donna, she saw her mother coming home in a particularly embarrassing outfit – a yellow raincoat and a polka dot rain hat. There wasn't a cloud in sight. Sam had muttered, 'Christ. Room for one at the funny farm, please.'

'You don't know shit,' Donna had replied, taking out a wad of stale bubble gum and sticking it to the stop sign they were standing by. 'I'd give my baby brother to have your ma.' Donna held out her hand for another stick of gum.

'That's not much of a trade.' Sam slapped her hand away.

'Fine. My Shirley Temple doll then.'

'You tore her hair out.'

Donna Sedano was Sam's best friend; she had always been about a foot shorter than Sam, with a head of close-cropped black curls. When they were little, Donna had reminded Sam of a bowling ball. As Donna got older, a wrecking ball.

'You hear that thump yesterday? Sounded like a bag of books hitting something?' Donna continued. Sam nodded. Donna lived one floor down but the walls in their tenement were about as thick as toilet paper. 'That was my old lady. I'm just sitting at the table, doing my homework' – Sam snorted at this ridiculous claim – 'and out of the blue, she throws the Bible at my head. Said she was trying to get Jesus into me. Said if she didn't do something quick, I'd be knocked up by fifteen. I laughed, only because I was thinking about the boys around here, and how I'd be crazy to get with any of them, and then she did it again. Now your ma, she don't even own a Bible does she?'

Sam had rolled her eyes, not following Donna's logic, but didn't say anything. She had been surprised that Donna was sticking up for Vera – or anyone's mother – because trashing parents was a favourite pastime in the tenement.

Donna's family was Italian, like most of Sam's neighbours in Bensonhurst; Italian or Irish immigrants. As Sam got older, she realised they saw something in Vera that she didn't. Sometimes she'd pass by the women, smoking cigarettes on the front stoop before their husbands got home from work, and they'd smile at her and say what a nice lady her mother was. Sam could tell by their tone they meant it with a capital L – not the whiny twang the delivery boys gave the word when they thought you were being a pain in the ass. Sam had asked her mother once why everyone called her a Lady; her block was not a place where compliments were heard much. Vera had frowned and said, 'They don't know what they mean.' Sam had agreed. She'd been to the movies enough to know that real ladies don't wear the things her mother did or give their kids powdered milk to drink.

'So why do they say it?' she'd persisted, chewing harder on her thumbnail, thinking she was about to learn something profound.

'I'll tell you when you're older, darling,' Vera had said – her most common response to Sam and something Vera rarely delivered on.

Another time, the year before they went to high school when Donna was being a real pissant about everything, she had tried to get Sam to steal a roll of Life Savers from the corner store. 'I'll do your homework. Or how about I cut your bangs? Or your nails. You pick.' Sam had sat quiet on the park swing, ignoring her, then Donna let loose with a gurgled roar, her mouth open so wide that Sam could see her tonsils vibrating. 'Christ! Ask Vera then!' (They had both recently started referring to Sam's mom as 'Vera', because she was so unmotherly – she didn't hug and she didn't hit.) 'Get the money from her! She's one of them Romanov princesses. You know she is!' She pushed Sam off the swing. 'Where's her stash of jewels?' Donna had yelled as she twisted Sam's arm behind her back. 'Why are you holding out on me?'

Sam shoved Donna off and scrambled up. 'Vera's not Russian, you idiot!' she said as she kicked Donna in the tail bone then ran home.

Vera had laughed her head off when Sam told her what had happened, but Sam didn't think any of it was funny.

Donna still lived below her, though she had some kids now, and this late, even on a Saturday night, she would be asleep. Sam sighed, recommitted herself to the dresser drawer before her. She took out the hatbox and examined the horror within. It was an old neon-green pillbox with a monstrous

fringe at the back. Her mother had worn it to Sam's fifth-grade recital.

The other mothers in the tenement were earthy, crude. Sweat stains on their house dresses, under their arms, down their backs. They shuffled in and out of each other's apartments in slippers squashed at the heel, asking what kind of shit they had cooking, or what they got from their husbands the night before. 'Something good?' they'd snicker. They liked to talk, to share. They were fleshy, uncomfortably warm. Vera had been cold, hard bone.

Sam tore the lining out of the hat and coming up empty, tossed it across the room. She knew why Vera had worn these things. To scare people off.

Sam pulled out the purses and stuck her fingers through the holes in their frayed creases. One was electric blue and covered with ducks, the other purple velvet with red soap bars. She threw them into the trash pile, too. She put the turned-out drawer back in the dresser and started on the next. It was useless, she knew it. She'd gone through them all before. Right after her mother died, then a few months ago when Sam got fired again. She'd had a series of jobs as a typist. For a while, she managed to stick at the Brooklyn port authority, which was a good place, but her last job had been at a dingy fly-by-night insurance agency. She always got fired, and for the same reason: she was too slow. She wasn't really; when she put her mind to it she could type as fast as anyone. But she had a really bad habit of spacing out and not realising it till another girl poked her or, worse, the boss rapped a hole punch hard against her desk. With no good references, she had decided to go back to the job she'd had

in high school, down at the corner grocer's. Less pressure, nowhere near as dull, but the pay was bird seed.

So she was back looking one last time for false bottoms or dimes squirrelled away inside linings or shoved in cracks. Her mother had a habit of hiding inconsequential things in odd places, but right after that fight with Donna at the park swings Sam had thought she'd finally struck gold. Stuffed up in the sofa frame, she had discovered a small square box, only about four inches wide and embroidered with flowers. They had faded from yellow, red and purple to something murkier, but the box was still beautiful. Inside, there was a soft sage-coloured velvet lining and to her utter amazement, jewellery. A tiny amethyst brooch; a ruby and gold ring; earrings with dazzling clear teardrops that must have been diamonds. There were five pieces in the box – possibly more but that's as far as she had gotten when Vera came through the door. She wasn't mad at Sam; Vera rarely lost her temper or raised her voice. Sam was mad, though. Donna had been right: Vera was some kind of runaway princess. She pointed to the jewellery and asked why her mother had lied to her, made a fool of her? 'And why have you been feeding me nothing but oatmeal all this time?' she yelled. Vera stared flatly at the box then said that the jewels were fake, she got them from a local theatre junk sale. Said they wouldn't even buy a week's worth of fried-chicken dinners. 'So why hide them?' Sam had asked, completely fed up with Vera's secrets and her inconsistencies, that Vera had refused to ever answer any of the questions Sam had about their life. Like who Sam's father was – Vera wouldn't even tell her if she'd been married or not – or who *Vera's* father had been, for that matter.

Sam had known for some time that Vera and her story didn't

add up. *But what in God's name could this woman be hiding?* Sam had seen a good deal of life by this point, all themes and variations on fathers and mothers and families, or lack of. Fathers passed out in their own vomit in the alley. Husbands who were really brothers (down in 3B, ugh). Mothers who ran away, sisters who were the real mothers, grandmothers with their minds long gone, strapped down in their own beds to keep them from wandering out in front of a bus. It was inconceivable to Sam that Vera could've been hiding anything worse. So why wouldn't she tell Sam anything? Ever?

Vera didn't answer her this time, either. Only closed the box and put it up on the shelf over her bed.

When Sam went looking for the box again – she was going to take it to the pawnshop to see what they said – it was gone from the shelf. She found it later under a floorboard, but each time she went back for it, it was in a different place and with one less piece of jewellery.

Up until that box, it had always been a game for Sam – to find what her mother had hidden. But she decided she didn't care anymore. Vera could keep her stupid secrets.

Sam used one of the stained blouses to unscrew the hot light bulb from the lamp and returned it to the socket over the kitchen sink. It was the only bulb she had left. She turned around, hands on hips, to face her remaining possessions. The small, plain kitchen table and two chairs. A pine side table next to the sofa that doubled as Sam's bed. The draughtsmen lamps. Her mother had hated frilly or ornate furniture. Liked it cheap and straight, she had said. *And beat up*, Sam thought. She would be lucky to get ten dollars for all of it; the wood was so scraped and wobbly. Even after she sold it, she

wouldn't be able to afford to sleep on the floor. She was four months overdue on rent. Not unusual – but she didn't have her mother's powers of persuasion and she was sure the building superintendent would kick her out come January. She eyed the sofa. Time for a farewell look in the springs. With a great thud, she dumped the whole thing over onto its side. A baby started wailing in the apartment below, followed by several big pokes of a broom handle on the ceiling. *Guess Donna's awake now*, she thought. She wound her hand up through the springs and in between the frame and upholstery. Peanut shells. Paper clips. Faded receipts. She pulled out a piece of old popcorn and put it in her mouth – it tasted soft and stale.

There was a tin box in the back corner of the frame. It had been there for years; it was one of the last things Sam had found before she'd given up the game of figuring out Vera. She'd never come back to it. There was no promising jingle or heft to it and a surprisingly unrelenting lock had defied her attempts to pick it. She assumed it was filled with stupid things like old crossword puzzles or stamps or matchbook covers – things she had found elsewhere in Vera's hiding spots – and had forgotten about it.

She pulled the tin box out once more and braced herself for whatever bizarre remnant of her mother's anxiety she'd find this time – felted balls of cat fur? – and took it over to the kitchen table. She took out the cleaver – her mother had enjoyed butchering her own meat when she got a hold of any – and brought it down hard on the clasp. The box skittered away. She didn't want to risk her other hand by holding the box in place, so she started hacking wildly around the lock plate. Below her, Donna was pounding on the ceiling again with

something bigger this time – the baby's head? Sam grimaced but kept going. It felt good to vent her anger. At her situation. That her mother had shut her out. That she was alone.

It didn't take long to cleave open the thin metal. She looked inside, then shook her head in disgust. This was not going to pay the rent. A stack of small, thin envelopes. Addressed to Vera, but sent to a PO box instead of their apartment. And judging by the return address, these weren't love letters from her absent father.

Bell & Sons Solicitors
Grave House
Blake Street
York, England

She took out the letters and spread them over the table. There were about two dozen of them, and several had postmarks dating back to right before Sam was born. Well, someone had been persistent. Why had a law firm been writing to Vera for over twenty-six years? Some of them hadn't even been opened. What had Vera done? What was she ignoring? What *wasn't* Vera ignoring was more like it.

If the envelopes had been fatter, Sam might have been more curious. But she didn't really want to discover that her mother was a fugitive or that she owed money in another country. Or both. Vera, a criminal. That would explain a lot.

She held up the most recent letter to the light, felt a small catch in her throat. It had arrived the week before her mother died. She pulled out the single sheet of notepaper, unfolded it.

Dear Miss Cooper,

In answer to your query, Lady Cooper is still with us.

Your most obliged & obedient servant,
Roger Bell

Lady Cooper? Who was Lady Cooper? She had to be a relative, right? And what exactly did 'still with us' mean? Every phrase in the short letter was a mystery. What query? What exactly had Vera asked Roger Bell? She screwed up her face even more as she looked at the last line – Vera had an obedient servant? Huh? What kind of new craziness was this? She started opening the rest of the letters. Each one arrived around the same time every year and was a near copy of the next, except half the letters – those dated before 1942 – were signed by a Henry Bell and – Sam blinked hard as she re-read them – these did not refer to a 'Lady Cooper'. Instead, Henry Bell wrote: 'In answer to your query, your mother is still with us.'

Sam felt hot, dangerous – like she could explode. Lady Cooper. Lady with a capital L. The neighbours had been on to her mother, all right. Maybe Vera wasn't a Lady, but her mother certainly was. So why had they been living in a fourth-floor walk-up in Bensonhurst? Why had Vera raised her daughter this way?

The letters were all postmarked December or January; a time of year, Sam recalled, when her mother was even more tense than usual. On some of those dark winter evenings, Vera would dump a pack of cigarettes into a bowl and use

the glowing end of one to light the next until she had smoked them all. Once Sam had been old enough, she would leave the apartment during these toxic rituals. Had the letters been the cause of them?

Lady Cooper. Vera's mother. Sam's grandmother. *And there's a good chance she's alive*, Sam thought as she threw the ruined box in the trash can. She put the letters back in their envelopes, then stacked them in piles on the table. Why were there no letters directly from Lady Cooper? Or had Vera hidden them? Were there hiding spots yet unknown to Sam? Impossible.

Why had Vera kept this from her? They had a living, known relative, and a rich one at that, it seemed. At least one with money enough to have lawyers write on her behalf every year for decades. What awful thing had Vera done? Or… what awful thing had happened to Vera? She went to the stove and turned on the burner, opened a can of chicken soup and poured it into a pot. She had a few dollars left. She'd go to Western Union on Monday and send a telegram. To York, England.

There was a pop, a flash of light, then the room went black. The light bulb had blown. Sam gave up on the chicken soup and put it – pot and all – in the icebox. Then she went into her mother's bedroom and took Vera's faded red chenille bathrobe off the hook behind the door. She wrapped herself in it and curled up on her mother's bed.

2

6th December 1953

'Christ almighty, I told you!' Donna cursed in that deep, gurgling yell of hers. She'd come upstairs at five in the morning to ruin Sam's sleep as payback for the night before. Donna's short black curls were dented in on one side and she had the baby on her hip. Her quilted pink robe hung open and showed a belly that always looked pregnant even when she wasn't.

Sam put a mug of instant coffee in front of her friend and pushed the letters towards her.

'You owe me half!' Donna hissed as she read a letter, her baby trying to grab it out of her hand. 'You wouldn't be in this mess if you had listened to me.' Sam arched an eyebrow in disbelief. 'You snoozed your way through all of it!' Donna cackled. 'Keeping your head down, little Miss Goody Two Shoes. Never wanting to piss off Vera. Well you could've been living on Park Avenue instead of this pig puddle! I told you she had a stash! I knew she was loaded!'

'No you didn't.' Sam gave her a dirty look. 'You made that all up and you know it.'

'What was there to make up?' Donna barked as she leaned down to pick up several letters her baby had sent cascading off

the table. 'That fancy accent and those big words of hers? You don't talk like that unless you've got money somewhere.'

Sam rubbed at her temple. 'So what was Vera hiding then? What was so bad in England that she kept it all a secret?'

'You, you idiot. You're a bastard. She was cut off!' Donna said this with a little too much glee.

Sam scowled. 'Knock it off. So I'm a bastard and they wanted nothing to do with me. But that doesn't explain why Vera never told me about them.' Sam reached for the baby, who was trying to crawl across the table towards her. It was a little girl, only about fifteen months old, with hair just like Donna's. 'Why did Vera come to America? Why didn't she want me to know about my grandmother?'

Donna drummed her fingers on the table. 'Who cares, go over there and get the loot.'

'Don't be so crude.'

'Listen, stupid. Those bedroom eyes of yours?' She waggled a finger at Sam's face. 'Too bedroomy! Wake the hell up!' she growled. 'You got nothing here. I'm gonna kick your bony butt if you don't get going. You and Vera, sitting up here, year after year, doing nothing. Never going anywhere, never seeing nobody. Aren't you tired of it?'

'The thing is,' Sam said slowly, 'Vera knew she was dying. She knew we didn't have any money. I still had the job at the port authority then, but she knew it didn't pay much. And this' – she picked up a letter and tapped it against the edge of her empty coffee mug – 'this means, all along, she knew there might have been another way for us.'

'Are you listening to me? They cut her off! Vera was a *Lady*. Her mother was a *Lady*. No bastards allowed!'

'You don't know that. Any of it. The letters are addressed to *Miss* Cooper; she's never referred to as a Lady. And maybe there was a guy. Maybe Vera had a husband. There or here. Maybe he died.'

Donna looked at her. 'I didn't know they stacked shit that high. This Roger Bell. He says he's waiting to hear from Vera. Vera keeps asking 'em if her mother's dead. She needs her mother dead so she can inherit. Well it didn't go like that. So that means when Lady Cooper kicks the bucket, *you* inherit.'

'Huh? Why would Lady Cooper change her mind now? If she cut Vera off, that means I'm cut off too.'

'Whatever! Get over there and start begging.'

'It's not about the money,' Sam said, burying her nose in the sweet scent of the baby's curls and taking the coffee mug out of her little hands.

'You got a brain the size of a chicken's. If you're gonna sit there and be stupid' – she nodded towards the baby – 'she's good company. I'm going back to bed.' Donna pulled a bottle out of her robe pocket as she got up from the table and plunked it down in front of Sam. 'Just think' – her eyes glittered mischievously – 'if you get up off your ass, you won't have to wear that same dumb orange sweater every day… and you might finally get laid.'

'Jesus, Donna,' Sam said as her friend high-tailed it out the door. She looked down at the baby, the child's eyes wide in confusion at the sight of her mother leaving. The baby started fussing so Sam gave her the bottle Donna had left. She kissed the little girl on top of her head, then flinched as a memory rushed in – one of the last times she'd seen her mother, over there on the couch, trying to smile at Sam through the pain. She stood up

and turned away from the living room, started pacing across the small kitchen with the baby on her hip. Vera had left nothing and Sam hadn't expected differently. They had scratched by – everyone did in Bensonhurst. But Vera must have thought about what having a family would've meant to Sam after she was gone. Even if the family had disowned Vera, why hadn't her mother left the door open even a crack for Sam? She looked at the baby and said in a sing-song voice, 'I think your mama's right. There's only one way to find out.' The baby squealed, then threw her bottle down.