

# Chapter One



I know they are watching me go. The road out of the village is long and straight. It will be miles before it bends, carrying me out of sight of the upper windows of the grand house. I know what they see: a nothing, a nobody. A small, staunch figure, lonely in mourning black, stiff skirts rustling about my boots, cloak fast against the cold. A crisp black bonnet settled grim upon my head and ribbons whipped by the wind. What a desolate January traveller I must represent.

Frost on the fields and upon the road, the village empty and forlorn, my boots leaving a trail of prints that peter into infinity. That is what they hope I will do – vanish like a melted footprint. If I can, I will oblige them. My reason for being here, the only person I have ever loved, now lies beneath six feet of earth and thick, shadow-green boughs of yew in a quiet corner of the churchyard. She was laid there yesterday.

The air is so cold that the tears are flayed from my eyes, eyes I had thought to be finished with crying for all time. After the biblical floods I have shed in the last three days I thought there

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could be no water left in my depleted form. Yet it seems that life, and grief, and winter go on. My toes are numb as I trudge the miles that lead me away from Aurelia's grave and from Hatville Court, the only home, grudging as it was, that I have ever known.

Soon enough, it threatens dark. The sharpest sickle moon I have ever seen hangs razor-edged in a grey sky and ahead I see the silhouette of Ladywell, the next village. I have walked for hours.

I stop there because I know I must, although my needs are not the sort to be assuaged by food, or ale or fire. The chill in my bones is nothing to the freeze in my heart and no congenial company on earth could compensate me for the lack of Aurelia. But the next village is six miles yet further and the lanes are awash with shadow. It would be the height of folly to go on; a young woman alone has ever been an easy target for villains. And although I have little faith that my life will ever again feel worthwhile, I still do not wish to throw it away. Aurelia may be gone, but she is not done with me yet. I will carry out her wishes in death every scrap as faithfully as I did when she was with me.

I enter the Rose and Crown. With my second, secret legacy from Aurelia I could afford the White Harte Royal, a hotel of some repute. But news flows between Ladywell and Enderby. If it were heard at Hatville Court that Amy Snow was seen

taking a room at the Harte, they would be after me tomorrow in their carriage like the hounds of hell. For then they would guess there is more to my legacy than meets the eye.

The Rose and Crown will suffice. The chat in the lounge may not be the most refined for a young lady with a mind to her reputation but then I am *no lady*; this has been made abundantly clear to me.

I hesitate in the hall. *What am I?* Respectable young woman or guttersnipe? Servant, sister or friend? My role in the tale of Aurelia Vennaway puzzles no one more than me, especially now that I am called upon to conclude it.

‘May I help you, miss?’ A soft-spoken landlord approaches, clasping his hands as though anxious that his very presence might cause offence. How well I know that feeling.

‘Thank you, sir. A room for the night, if you please, and perhaps a little supper – nothing rich – and a warming drink.’

‘Certainly, miss, certainly. BELLA!’ His welcoming tone leaps to a bellow and a young maid pops into the hall like a jackrabbit from a hole.

‘Bella, light the fire in the Barley Room and take the lady’s bag there,’ he instructs, resuming his normal pitch. ‘Might I recommend, miss, that you take supper in the lounge tonight? I would not suggest it except there is a blazing fire there and it will take a while for your room to reach a comfortable temperature. The lounge is quiet – the cold is keeping many at home – and, if you’ll forgive me, you look frozen to the bone, Miss . . . ?’

‘Snow.’

He looks at me then, understanding dawning. Bella stands with my bag stretching her skinny arm almost to the floor, gazing with frank curiosity until he orders her on her way.

‘Begging your pardon, Miss Snow, if the lounge is acceptable I will attend to you myself, ensure you are undisturbed. By the time you are fed, your room will be fit to receive you.’

His kindness brings fresh tears to my eyes and only a supreme effort keeps them there.

I take my supper in the lounge and though I can eat only a little, the warmth and flavour are somewhat fortifying. I do not linger but retire to a small, simple room which is, as promised, tolerably warm. I perform a rudimentary toilette in a daze.

Whilst I walked I conceived the idea to write an account of my time and travels, so as to feel that my life has some substance, some witness. Alone in the silence, Aurelia’s absence presses down upon me but now is not the time to give in, not so very early on in my quest. I must be as strong as I need to be.

I begin to write. Really, there is nothing else I can do.

## Chapter Two



I cannot help but begin with a reflection on beds. An unseemly object of consideration for a young lady, no doubt, yet why should it be so? A bed is a place where so much of life is played out – births and deaths and passions and dreaming – all the most fundamental moments of our fragile human existence.

In this story there are several important beds, not least the sick bed of my mistress, where she lay for the better part of three years. And my own, very first known bed, which was a bank of snow – a pristine white mattress that supported my tiny head, cradled my kicking limbs and chilled my poor infant flesh 'til I was blue to the bone. It also gave me my name. Indeed, it provides not just a convenient name but an apt symbol of my identity. My whole standing in this society we call the world is drawn from that unloving, white blank.

I would not have survived that soft, glittering, beautiful bed – was not intended to, let us not shy from the facts – had it not been for a headstrong child who rarely did as she was told.

That child was Aurelia Vennaway, only child of Sir Charles and Lady Celestina Vennaway, the first family of the county.

At a precocious eight years of age, Aurelia was her parents' treasure and their bane. Unimpressed by her own elevated standing in society, she seemed oblivious to the inherent differences in value that exist between human beings. I, in contrast, have never been ignorant of the fact that some children are infinitely more precious than others.

The day she found me, Aurelia wore a copper-coloured dress and sturdy brown boots with copper-coloured buttons. She was wrapped in a sky-blue cloak and wore a cream fur hat. I cannot remember this, of course, but she told me. Aurelia told me all the stories of my early life in painstaking detail as if to make up for my unknown identity with a richness of personal history.

That day, the tedium of the overheated, overpopulated parlour had quite engulfed her. Although the deepest snow in living memory lay upon the ground, the sun was shining and Aurelia breathed easiest out of doors. The four walls of any given room could not give her the horizons she longed for – horizons she could measure with her eyes and strive to conquer with her own two legs. She was like a wild animal, Cook always said.

She ran to the woods, where the jays knocked and shrieked with such heartfelt outrage it was a wonder she heard me at all. But she did, and though she lost her hat as she scrambled and

slipped in the snow, she found me – skinny and frantic beneath an endless blue sky. I wonder, if I were even able to be conscious of such a thing, whether Aurelia in her sky-blue cloak appeared to me like a divine being condensed from the air.

Unlike the babies of cousins and acquaintances that had hitherto constituted her experience of the infant population, I was not red-faced and hearty but sliver-thin and blue. Nor was I smothered in yards of satin and lace; I was entirely naked. I screamed, she said, as though I would take on the whole world.

So she wrapped me in her cloak and ran for home. Neglecting all rules of decorum and boot removal, she erupted into the parlour, where her mother and aunts still sat talking and stitching and talking. Horrified gasps greeted the snowy tracks on the rug as Aurelia laid her bundle carefully before the fire and loosened the folds.

She could not quite understand why Lady Vennaway's response to my arrival was to cry '*Aurelia!*' as if she had done something truly dreadful. She could not understand why she was in disgrace (and it was clear that she was) for helping a living soul. Nor could she understand why her aunt Evangeline made such a fuss about the loss of the hat, as though a hat were more valuable than a baby.

In time they explained to her that not all babies are of equal value, that their worth depends upon many things, particularly the circumstances of their birth and the family into which they make their appearance. Indeed, that the world has room for an

entire hierarchy of babies. I was a particularly worthless example, an unsavoury breath of disgrace – albeit not their own – that was simply neither welcome nor appropriate in the elevated Vennaway household.

Within moments of my arrival at Hatville Court I was banished to the kitchen. Not for me the roaring parlour fire and the rich softness of the Indian rug. No, the residual warmth of the stove and a bucket hastily emptied of potatoes had to serve. But Aurelia insisted on following me there and together she and Cook tended me, nursing me back to pinkness, and life.

Lady Vennaway was deeply shocked. Not at the atrocity that had been done to me, for she was well aware that mankind, outside the best families, was a seething pot of iniquity. But that the result of such immorality had presented itself on *her* property, encroached into *her* household – this was outrage. All she wanted that day (and her husband was in accord) was to get rid of me. There were orphanages, workhouses that existed to solve problems like me. But their cherished, adored Aurelia would not hear of it.

Hatville Court may be imagined as a sort of latter-day Agincourt, hosting a struggle that ebbed and swelled over two and a half decades. One army was composed of Lord and Lady Vennaway: powerful, respected, moneyed and always, incontrovertibly, *right*. They had history, authority and convention on their side. The opposing army consisted of Aurelia. As a child, a *daughter* no less, her chances of prevailing were

non-existent, yet she refused to acknowledge the fact and this carried her a long way.

Most of Aurelia's battles were minor: the choice of a gown, censorship of her reading matter, whether or not she must accompany her mother's morning calls around the neighbourhood. These she sometimes won, more usually lost. But championing me was the first of several causes over which she would have her way no matter what. On this occasion she achieved her victory with sheer obstinacy, showing an iron will far from palatable in a young lady. I believe she also resorted to a tantrum. However, just as even the most brilliant general can benefit from reinforcements, so was Aurelia's campaign fortified by unexpected allies.

The first of these was Lady Vennaway's visiting troupe of sisters. Although all were horrified by me, some also expressed sympathy for my poor infant self – and relief that Fate had brought me to a family with such ample fortune that I surely would be no trouble to anyone. (It may be that mischief towards Lady Vennaway, the proudest and most beautiful of the sisters, lurked behind these philanthropic sentiments.)

The second was the appearance, just two hours later, of the Reverend Mr Chorley. If he was dismayed by the gaggle of ladies into which he stumbled, he was soon distracted by the news that awaited him. Aurelia, stubbornly absent since my arrival, suddenly reappeared and informed him of her discovery. Her florid description of the poor blue baby was further

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embroidered by Gwendoline, the youngest and least circumspect of the aunts. The good reverend was also of the opinion that God had brought me to the Vennaways in order to preserve my life, as well as to bless Lady Vennaway with a priceless opportunity to do her Christian duty and set an example to the whole village.

For the Vennaways, reputation was everything. Her ladyship was cornered. General Aurelia prevailed.