
Restoring Grace

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Chapter One

It's a lovely house, thought Ellie. Perfect proportions. Probably Georgian, Queen Anne, something like that.

There were five sets of small-paned sash windows in the house and a couple of dormers in the roof. The front door had a fanlight above it and a neat path led up to the jasmine-covered porch. Looks just like a doll's house, she thought, and then laughed at herself: doll's houses were built to look like real houses, not the other way round.

The high walls which enclosed the garden were of fine grey stone and, peering through the gate, she saw carefully pruned fruit trees interspersed with something less formal, possibly roses, growing up them. A large patch of fragile mauve crocuses broke up the green of the lawn and there were clumps of daffodils lining the path. It was a perfect time, and although the details of the flowers weren't really important from Ellie's point of view, the house looked utterly charming, despite the icy wind.

She put down her bag and inspected the gate. It looked sturdy enough and she put her foot in the gap between the posts, trusting it would take her weight, and hauled herself up for a better view.

Propped against a stone pillar, one of a pair that framed the gate, she could see the house in its entirety. It was what estate agents would call a gem. It looked empty, but there could easily be someone observing her from behind one of the windows which glinted so symmetrically back at her. Hoping fervently that there wasn't anybody looking – it would be so embarrassing, humiliating even – she jumped down. Then she remembered, and wondered whether, in the circumstances, she ought to have jumped.

Sighing, she fished her camera out of her bag and climbed back up to her vantage point. She adjusted the shutter speed and aperture, and fiddled with the focus, wishing she had more up-to-date equipment which would do these things for her. It wasn't as if she was a photographer, after all. She just wanted a picture of the house.

She took several shots, got back down to ground level and put the camera back in her bulging raffia bag. Then she took out her nose-stud, which was tiny and silver but could still appear threatening to certain sorts of people, removed two of her earrings (leaving only a single pair), and tweaked at her clothes and hair. It was important to appear respectable; owners of Georgian rectories tended to be on the conventional side.

As she tucked a strand of scarlet hair under her bandanna, she realised she had no real idea of the effect of her fiddling: she could be making herself look like a tepee-dwelling New-Age traveller, or the doorstep equivalent of a second-hand car salesman. However, she put her shoulders back, picked up her bag and opened the gate. This was the brave bit.

The owners of such a house must be affluent, she thought, determined to be positive. She just hoped they didn't have dogs.

'Not that I don't like dogs,' Ellie muttered, in case they did have dogs and they were listening. 'I just don't want to be bounced on, not just now.'

But no dogs came bounding up, plunging their friendly but forceful paws into her stomach (as had happened in the last place), and she made it to the front door unmuddied and able to breathe normally. Then she took a deep breath and pulled hard at the knob which protruded from the stone door jamb, hoping it was attached to something. It jangled encouragingly, but waiting for the door to be opened was always the worst part. She ran her tongue round the inside of her mouth so it wasn't dry, and her lips wouldn't get caught on her teeth when she stopped smiling. Then she relaxed her mouth so she could smile sincerely the moment the door was opened.

She didn't have to wait long. A young woman wearing several layers of jumpers, cardigans and scarves over her jeans, sheepskin boots and an anxious expression, answered it quite quickly. Almost certainly not the owner, Ellie decided, more likely the daughter of the house. Probably a bit older than she was herself – late twenties, early thirties – she had an ethereal quality, enhanced by her draperies, as if she had been out of the world for a while. Her hair was light brown, recently washed and looked difficult to manage. Ellie thought she probably needed some sort of product to get it under control, but this woman didn't look as if she'd ever heard of styling wax or mousse. Her eyes were a sludgy green, reminding Ellie of a semi-precious stone someone had brought her back from India once, and a few freckles peppered her nose and cheekbones. Ellie liked freckles; she had them herself, and seeing them on this woman gave her confidence.

'Hello,' she said. 'I wonder if I can interest you in a picture of your house . . . your parents' house?'

The young woman shook her head, making her shiny hair even more disarrayed. 'No, it's my house.'

This was a bit of a surprise, but Ellie tried not to show it. 'Well, I've just taken some photographs of it, and if you're interested, I could paint a watercolour from them. See?' Ellie produced her album from the bag. In it were photographs of houses, and next to them, photographs of the pictures she had painted. Then, deftly, she produced an actual painting, mounted but not framed. 'And here's one I did earlier!' She laughed, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

The young woman took the sample painting. 'It's lovely. The trouble is, I couldn't possibly afford –'

'I'm very reasonable. I could do you one for about fifty pounds. Unframed.'

'That is reasonable,' the woman agreed. 'But the thing is . . .' She paused, sighing. 'On the other hand, a painting would be lovely if . . .'

Ellie shifted her weight to her other foot. It would be fatal to rush this woman when she might be about to decide to have a painting, but on the other hand, her need to go to the loo, which had been faint but bearable up to now, was becoming more pressing. Jumping off the gate hadn't helped.

'I'm sorry I'm being so slow to make up my mind,' the woman went on, still gazing at the sample painting with her head on one side.

'You're not. People take ages.' Ellie regarded the woman more thoroughly. 'I'm sorry, I know it's an awful cheek, but would you mind terribly if I used your loo? Normally, I'd just hang on but I'm pregnant.' She blushed as she said it. She'd told almost no one, not even her parents, and it was shocking to hear the word out loud.

'Oh! God! How lovely! Of course! Do come in. The place is in a bit of a state, I'm afraid.' The young woman opened the door.

Ellie paused on the doorstep. 'I'm Ellie, Ellie Summers.' She took hold of the woman's hand. 'It seems sort of rude to use your loo when you don't know my name.'

The woman laughed and instantly became pretty. 'I'm Grace - Ravenglass or Soudley.' She wrinkled her forehead in thought. 'I'm recently divorced and I can't decide if I should go back to my own name.'

As they shook hands Ellie wondered what it was about this young woman that made her feel all right about mentioning her pregnancy. Possibly it was because she appeared slightly vulnerable too.

'Come in,' said Grace. 'I'll show you where to go.'

Grace hadn't opened her front door to anyone except builders for a while, but there was something about the girl - Ellie - which she warmed to. It might be to do with her easy smile, bright clothes and even brighter hair escaping from under her scarf, but more likely it was because she was fairly near her own age and female. She hadn't had any contact with someone like that for aeons.

She probably wouldn't buy a picture - she could never justify the expense - but she felt OK about ushering the girl down the passage to the downstairs cloakroom, freshly cleaned for tonight.

She hovered in the kitchen nearby so she could hear when Ellie had finished and she could show her out. She rearranged the bottles on the table, scouring her memory for where she might find something else to sit on. Her few chairs were already in place round the table, but there were a couple of empty spaces which would have to be filled by something. There were probably some more tea chests in the attic. They were a bit high, but comfortable enough if she put cushions on them. Luckily she had plenty of cushions. A fan heater was valiantly gusting into the icy air, as yet making no impression on the cold.

She heard the old-fashioned flush and was ready when Ellie emerged.

'It's a lovely house,' Ellie said eagerly. 'Even the cloakroom has got period features. I love that cistern! And the washbasin! Just like an old washstand, only china!' Realising she'd run off at the mouth again, she bit her lip. 'Oh, sorry. I hope I didn't sound too like an estate agent.'

'It is a lovely house,' agreed Grace, pleased with Ellie's enthusiasm. If everyone reacted like that she need feel less worried about opening her house to strangers. 'If rather on the cold side.' On an impulse she added, 'Would you like a bit of a tour? I could do with the practice.'

'What do you mean? You're not opening the house to the public, are you?'

Grace laughed. 'Not exactly, but I have got lots of people I don't know from Adam coming this evening, and I haven't had anyone here for ages.' She frowned. 'Of course, I won't let them out of the kitchen except to go to the loo. But I wouldn't mind showing you round.'

'Well, if it would be useful, I'd love a tour.' Ellie didn't hide her excitement. 'I love houses. I suppose that's why I paint them.'

I must be mad, thought Grace as she led the way down the passage, inviting people in off the street to look round my freezing cold house. No, she consoled herself, Ellie had shown interest; she wanted to see the house. It wasn't as if there was anything in it that would make it a target for burglars, after all. As they passed the kitchen, she said, 'Shall I put the kettle on? Would you like a cup of tea or coffee afterwards? I was just about to have one myself when you rang the doorbell.'

'That would be great, if you're making one. When I was looking for a loo earlier, I couldn't find anything that wasn't a pub or an antique shop, and they were both closed. Nothing like a coffee shop for miles.'

'No, we are very far away from everything here. How did you find me?'

'I drove past the other day, when I was delivering a picture and got lost. When I saw your house, I knew it would make a lovely painting.'

'I'm sure it would –' Grace became diffident again, and Ellie hurried on.

'No pressure, honestly. I do understand about being broke.' She paused, embarrassed by her frankness. 'You may not be broke, of course . . .' She shivered, although she tried not to, inadvertently drawing attention to the cold.

'Broke about covers it. I'll put the kettle on.'

'Well, then, this is the hall, obviously.' Grace stood in the square, panelled space from which a stone, uncarpeted, staircase led to a small gallery. She had always liked the way the shadows of the window bars patterned the bare stone flags, revealing their unevenness.

'And here's the drawing room,' she went on, when Ellie had had time to admire the perfect proportions, the fine panelling and the arched space under the stairs which now contained boxes of wine and glasses.

The drawing room was also panelled, but was brighter, holding on to the last hour of February light. As well as the two sash windows which went down to the floor, there was a curved window, also to the floor, at the end, which had French doors opening on to the garden at the side of the house.

'I don't know if that's original,' said Grace, flapping a hand at it almost apologetically, 'but it's lovely in summer. We get the sun almost all day.'

'What period is it?' asked Ellie. 'I would have said Georgian, but I know nothing about architecture. I ought to really, seeing what I do for a living.'

'It's been messed around with so much it's hard to tell, but my aunt always told me it was William and Mary. There's an inscription saying sixteen ninety-seven over an archway in the garden, but I think there's been a house on this plot for ever.'

'That's so old!' Ellie wandered round the room, absorbing its lovely proportions, wondering about its emptiness. 'This is a beautiful fireplace,' she said (it being the nearest thing the room had to furniture), admiring the delicate stone carving.

'And it draws really well too,' said Grace. 'We used to light it all the time, when we were together.' She hadn't had the heart to light the fire and sit in the big room by herself all winter, so she'd spent most of the winter evenings in bed, snuggled up with the radio, a pile of books, two hot-water bottles and her goose-down duvet. Perhaps it was time for her to start lighting the fire again, to stop being such a recluse. 'Come on, I'll show you the dining room.'

They went back into the hall and down a passage on the opposite side of the hall to the one they had entered. Grace opened the door. 'This part of the house is much older than the front. Even when Edward - my husband - was here we didn't use this room much. It's too far away from the kitchen, really, and it's not as light as the drawing room. It gets forgotten, rather.'

'If you didn't have the drawing room you'd love it,' said Ellie, thinking of her own small home, where the front door opened straight into the living room, and the staircase ran up the back wall to three, tiny bedrooms.

Grace blushed apologetically. 'Of course. I'm just so spoilt.' By way of apology she said, 'Those curtains have been up for ever – I don't dare draw them in case they fall apart. I could never afford new ones. The curtains in the drawing room are newer, just from my aunt's time.'

After an inspection of the study, a large, panelled room, they moved upstairs. After a more cursory tour of that, Ellie said, as they came back downstairs, 'I don't want to be rude, but I can't help noticing that you haven't very much furniture. You weren't burgled or anything, were you?'

The idea was horrifying. 'Oh no, it wasn't stolen! It went of its own accord.'

'What?'

Grace chuckled, realising how that must have sounded. 'Not by itself, of course. It was accompanied by an adult. It was my husband's.'

'Oh.'

Grace, aware of the kettle on the gas, said, 'Let's go back to the kitchen before the kettle boils dry. And it should be a bit warmer in there now.'

Together they went into the large, rather bleak room. It had a high ceiling and more stone flags on the floor.

'What this room needs,' said Ellie, 'is lots of copper pots and pans, a roasting spit, sugar grinders, stuff like that.'

Grace said, 'I'd rather have an Aga.'

Ellie giggled. 'I suppose I would, too.'

'Now, is it tea or coffee?' asked Grace, but she'd lost Ellie's attention. She was standing in front of the huge, built-in dresser, on which a few unmatched but ancient-looking plates tried valiantly to fill the space.

'That's wonderful! It would take whole dinner services at a time! I suppose your husband couldn't take that.'

'Oh no. He was very scrupulous.' Suddenly it seemed important to Grace that Ellie shouldn't think badly of Edward – she still loved him, after all. 'He didn't take anything that wasn't his, and he left me the bed and the duvet, which were his, too, really. Do sit down. So is it tea, or coffee?' Grace's hand hovered between a jar of coffee and a packet of tea bags, wishing she hadn't mentioned the duvet. It was so personal.

'I'm off coffee at the moment,' said Ellie. 'But tea would be great.' She pulled out a chair. 'I don't usually get hospitality before I do the picture, although I sometimes do when I deliver.'

Grace laughed. 'I'm not sure if you'd quite describe this as hospitality, although it's the nearest thing I've been to it in a while.' There was something very cheering about having Ellie sitting at her kitchen table. She was so up front and, if she was a little outspoken, she wasn't critical.

Now Ellie said, 'I know it's cold, but why are those bottles wearing socks?'

'It's to hide the labels,' Grace explained, laughing again. 'I'm having a wine tasting tonight. The first one in my own house, although I've done a couple of others.'

'Oh? Is it like an exam? Do people have to guess which wine is which?'

'Oh no, nothing like that. Not at this sort of wine tasting. This is much more low key and is more about finding out what people like. We're testing supermarket wine basically, seeing which one we like best. I'll write up the results for a few local papers I've got contracts with.' She frowned. 'I do it by hand and then take it into a place in town to get it typed. It's silly really, they won't pay me much and I spend most of it on secretarial services. But it's something and it's good publicity. And it means I can quote it if another paper or magazine wants a wine correspondent.'

'Imagine being a wine correspondent. It sounds very high-powered. I don't know a thing about wine.'

'You don't have to unless it's your job. You just have to know if you like it. You could stay for the wine tasting, if you like.'

Grace hadn't known she was going to say that, but once she had, she realised it was because she quite wanted the moral support of someone she could relate to. She'd lost touch with a lot of her girlfriends when she got married and moved away from home, and then she and Edward had mostly socialised with his contemporaries. That was the trouble with living in a large house away from other houses: it was hard to get to know your neighbours, especially if you were single. Meeting Ellie reminded her of how much she missed female companionship.

'That's really kind of you,' said Ellie, 'but I'm not drinking at the moment. Because of being pregnant.' Then, to Grace's horror and surprise, Ellie began to cry. 'Oh God, I'm so sorry. It's my hormones or something. It's to do with telling - people.'

'Have you told many people? Has it happened every time?' Grace instantly stopped feeling sorry for herself and wished she wasn't too shy to put her arms round Ellie.

Ellie sniffed, looked in her bag for a tissue, and produced a bit of kitchen towel which had obviously been used as a paint rag. 'No. Hardly anyone. In fact, only my boyfriend, and now you.'

'Oh.' Grace felt tremendously flattered. 'Well, it's often easier to tell people things when you're unlikely to see them again. Like on trains.'

Ellie sniffed again and nodded.

'So you haven't told your parents, then?'

Ellie shook her head. 'It would be all right if I could say Rick and me were going to get married. But we're not.'

'I don't recommend marriage myself, having just got divorced. You could just live together,' Grace suggested.

'We could, only Rick doesn't want a baby. He says we're fine as we are, and he's right. Only I'm pregnant. He thinks . . .' She sniffed some more. 'He thinks I should – God, I can't even say it!'

'No, don't. You don't have to. I know what you mean. He thinks you shouldn't go on being pregnant.' Grace got up and found a box of tissues and put it in front of Ellie. 'I'll make the tea.'

'So, why did you get divorced?' asked Ellie a couple of minutes later, having taken a heartening sip. 'Did he find someone else, or did you?' Realising she'd let her curiosity get the better of her again, she bit her lip. 'Sorry! You don't have to tell me. It's none of my business. I'm terribly nosy.'

'Well, on the understanding we're unlikely to see each other again . . .' Grace frowned, suddenly sad at the thought that this cheerful-even-when-weeping person would soon go out of her life for ever. ' . . . I may as well tell you.'

'Why did you marry him? Not because of his furniture, presumably.'

Grace chuckled. 'I didn't know about his furniture – although he had some wonderful antiques – when I fell in love with him.'

'So why did you?'

'He was – is – terribly attractive. He's older than me and I was very young when I met him. He was so witty and cultured, and for some reason he turned his attention to me. It was like the sun was shining on me alone. I couldn't resist him.'

'So how old is he now?'

'Forty-six. I'm thirty-one.'

'It is quite a large gap,' said Ellie cautiously.

'Yes, but I don't think that was the problem. Not really.'

'What was, then?'

Grace sighed. She had thought about it all so much she was almost numb to the pain. 'Well, the main thing was that I wanted a baby and he didn't. He's got children by his first wife. But really, I wasn't up to his speed intellectually. He found someone else who was more on his level. I can't blame him, actually.'

'That's generous of you! Don't you want to scratch her eyes out? I would.'

Grace shook her head. 'Not really. And in a way it was sort of a relief when he went because the thing I had been dreading had actually happened. So I didn't need to dread it any more, and could just start to get over it. I'm not saying I wasn't devastated' – she paused to wonder how long the devastation could possibly last – 'but I always knew I couldn't keep him interested. I never believed he truly loved me – or if he did, that he would go on loving me. And I was right there,' she added ruefully. 'Although he has been very kind.'

She looked at Ellie, so calm and together in spite of being pregnant by a man who didn't want it. 'Why am I telling you all this?'

'We're on a virtual train,' Ellie reminded her. 'We're never going to see each other again. Unless you can afford a painting after all.' She paused. 'Did he give you the house?'

'Oh no. I inherited it from my aunt.'

'So did he give you money when he left?'

'Oh yes, he gave me a very generous settlement, but although I've got enough left to keep me going for a few months, I spent most of it.'

'I can't exactly see what on, from here,' Ellie smiled.

'Well, no,' Grace laughed, 'but if you went into the attic you would see that every joist and beam is new, and that every dodgy tile has been replaced by a reclaimed stone one. It cost a fortune. I bought a car with what was left after the roof.'

'That's awful. And he's left you with hardly any furniture at all?'

'Well, only what I inherited.'

Ellie was confused. 'But didn't your aunt have any furniture, either? It seems weird!'

'Oh yes, but it went to my older brother and sister. They got the furniture, I got the house, because she was my godmother as well as my aunt. They were livid.'

'Why?' Ellie was staggered.

'They felt the house should have been sold and the money divided between us. But it just so happened that Edward and I were newly engaged when she died, so living here made perfect sense. Besides, it's what my aunt wanted, obviously, or she'd have made her will differently.'

'So from his – your ex-husband's – point of view, marrying a woman who had a really great house was a good idea, if he had lots of lovely antiques that needed a home.'

She shook her head. 'No. He didn't marry me for my house, I'm quite sure of it. He fell in love with me in a sort of obsessive way. When the obsession faded he realised we didn't really have that much in common, and then of course he fell in love with someone else.'

'So how long were you together?'

'We married when I was only twenty-two, and had five very happy – ecstatic really – years, one less happy, and one downright unhappy. It's taken nearly two years to get divorced.'

'He sounds a complete bastard.'

'He wasn't, really he wasn't. He was a sort of serial monogamist, and probably incapable of staying faithful to anyone for more than a couple of years, but not a bastard. He was very fair to me.'

Ellie shrugged. 'I think it's very grown up of you to feel like that.'

'I'm not saying he didn't make me suffer, but he didn't do it on purpose. And the baby thing is understandable. After all, he has got two perfectly good children already. When he realised how I felt, particularly as I'm fairly sure he had someone else in mind, we decided to call it a day.'

'It is a bit ironic,' said Ellie, draining her mug. 'Here are you, wanting a baby, and here's me, pregnant, not wanting one.'

'I thought you did want one? I thought you said you couldn't – do anything about it.'

'That's slightly different. I didn't want a baby before I got pregnant. But now I am pregnant, I couldn't not have it.'

'And you don't think your parents will be supportive?'

'Well, yes, they will. But they'll tell me off terribly for not being more careful.' She gave a wry smile. 'I was on the pill, but I threw up. It must have been just at the wrong moment.'

'Or the right moment. From the baby's point of view.'

'It's a pity we're not the sort of people who could just swap lives. I could give you my baby and carry on, and you could have my baby and not worry about having to find someone else to give you one. But we couldn't, could we.' This was a statement, not a question.

'Nothing's ever that straightforward. Would you like another cup of tea?'

'No, thank you, but another trip to the loo would be very welcome.'

Grace stayed in the kitchen while Ellie visited the cloakroom again, then went with her to her car and waved until she was out of sight. Back in the house, it suddenly felt larger, lonelier, and possibly even a bit colder, than it had done before.

'I shall be looking forward to feeling lonely when the house has been full of strangers for an evening,' she murmured, and turned her mind to finding seats for the wine tasting, and to giving her latest article a final polish. 'I must get a computer, or even a typewriter,' she went on. 'I must get back into the real world.'