Thirteen Steps Down

Ruth Rendell

Chapter 1

Mix was standing where the street should have been. Or where he thought it should have been. By this time shock and disbelief were past. Bitter disappointment, then rage, filled his body and climbed into his throat, half choking him. How dared they? How could they, whoever they were, destroy what should have been a national monument? The house itself should have been a museum, one of those blue plaques high up on its wall, the garden, lovingly preserved just as it was, part of a tour visiting parties could have made. If they had wanted a curator they need have looked no further than him.

Everything was new, carefully and soullessly designed. 'Soulless' – that was the word and he was proud of himself for thinking it up. The place was pretty, he thought in disgust, typical yuppie-land building. The petunias in the flowerbeds particularly enraged him. Of course he knew that some time back before he was born they had changed the name from Rillington Place to Ruston Close but now there wasn't even a Ruston Close any more. He had brought an old map with him but it was useless, harder to find the old streets than searching for the child's features in the fifty-year-old face. Fifty years was right. It would be half a century since Reggie was caught and hanged. If they had to rename the streets, surely they could have put up a sign somewhere which said, Formerly Rillington Place. Or something to tell visitors they were in Reggie country. Hundreds must come here, some of them expectant and deeply disappointed, others knowing nothing of the place's history, all of them encountering this smart little enclave of red brick and raised flowerbeds, geraniums and busy lizzies spilling out of window-boxes, and trees chosen for their golden and creamy white foliage.

It was midsummer and a fine day, the sky a cloudless blue. The little grass plots were a bright and lush green, a pink climbing plant draping a rosy cloak over walls cunningly constructed on varying levels. Mix turned away, the choking anger making his heart beat faster and more loudly, thud, thud, thud. If he had known everything had been eradicated, he would never have considered the flat in St Blaise House. He had come to this corner of Notting Hill solely because it had been Reggie's district. Of course he had known the house itself was gone and its neighbours too but still he had been confident the place would be easily recognisable, a street shunned by the fainthearted, frequented by intelligent enthusiasts like himself. But the feeble, the squeamish, the politically correct had had their way and torn it all down. They would have been laughing at the likes of him, he thought, and triumphant at replacing history with a tasteless housing estate.

The visit itself he had been saving up as a treat for when he was settled in. A treat! How often, when he was a child, had a promised treat turned into a let-down? Too often, he seemed to remember, and it didn't stop when one was grown-up and a

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responsible person. Still, he wasn't moving again, not after paying Ed and his mate to paint the place and refit the kitchen. He turned his back on the pretty little new houses, the trees and flowerbeds, and walked slowly up Oxford Gardens and across Ladbroke Grove to view the house where Reggie's first victim had had a room. At least that wasn't changed. By the look of it, no one had painted it since the woman's death in 1943. No one seemed to know which room it had been, there were no details in any of the books he'd read. He gazed at the windows, speculating and making guesses, until someone looked out at him and he thought he'd better move on.

St Blaise Avenue was quite up-market where it crossed Oxford Gardens, tree-lined with ornamental cherries, but the further he walked downhill it too went down until it was all sixties local authority housing, dry cleaners and motorcycle spare parts places and corner shops. All except for the terrace on the other side, isolated elegant Victorian, and the big house, the only one like it in the whole neighbourhood that wasn't divided into a dozen flats, St Blaise House. Pity they hadn't pulled that lot down, Mix thought, and left Rillington Place alone.

No cherries here but great dusty plane trees with huge leaves and bark peeling off their trunks. They were partly responsible for making the place so dark. He paused to look at the house, marvelling at its size, as he always did, and wondering why on earth the old woman hadn't sold it to a developer years ago. Three floors high, it was of once-white, now grey, stucco, with steps up to a great front door that was half hidden in the depths of a pillared portico. Above, almost under the eaves, was a circular window quite different from the other oblong windows, being of stained glass, clouded by the accumulation of grime built up over the years since it had last been cleaned.

Mix let himself in. The hallway alone, he had thought when he first saw the place, was big enough for a normal-size flat to fit inside, big, square and dark like everything in there. Big dark chairs with carved backs stood uselessly against the walls, one of them under a huge mirror in a carved wooden frame, its glass all spotted with greenish blots like islands on a map of the sea. Stairs went down to a basement but he had never been in it and as far as he knew no one else had for years and years.

When he came in he always hoped she wouldn't be anywhere about and usually she wasn't, but today he was out of luck. Dressed in her usual garments, long droopy cardigan and skirt with a dipping hemline, she was standing beside a huge carved table which must have weighed a ton, holding up a coloured flyer advertising a Tibetan restaurant. When she saw him she said, 'Good afternoon, Mr Cellini,' in her upper-class drawl, putting, he thought, a lot of scorn into her voice.

When he spoke to Gwendolen Chawcer, when addressing her was unavoidable, he did his best to shock her – so far without marked success.

'You'll never guess where I've been.'

'That is almost a certainty,' she said. 'So it seems pointless to attempt it.'

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Sarcastic old bitch. 'Rillington Place,' he said, 'or where it used to be. I wanted to see where Christie buried all those women he killed in his garden but there's not a trace of it left.'

She put the flyer back on the table. No doubt, it would lie there for months. Then she surprised him. 'I went to his house once,' she said, 'when I was young.'

'You did? Why was that?'

He knew she wouldn't be forthcoming and she wasn't. 'I had a reason to go there. The visit lasted no more than half an hour. He was an unpleasant man.'

He couldn't control his excitement. 'What sort of an impression did he make on you? Did you feel you were in the presence of a murderer? Was his wife there?'

She laughed her cold laugh. 'Goodness, Mr Cellini, I've no time to answer all these questions. I have to get on.'

With what? She seldom did anything but read, as far as he knew. She must have read thousands of books, she was always at it. He felt frustrated after her unsatisfactory but provocative response. She might be a mine of information about Reggie but she was too stand-offish to talk about it.

He began to mount the stairs, hating them with a fierce hatred, though they were not narrow or precarious or winding. There were fifty-two and one of the things he disliked about them was that they were composed of three flights, twenty-two in this stretch, seventeen in the next, but thirteen in the top flight. If there was anything which upset Mix more than unpleasant surprises and rude old women, it was the number thirteen. St Blaise House, fortunately, was number 54 St Blaise Avenue.

One day when old Chawcer was out he had counted the bedrooms, not including his own, and found there were nine. Some were furnished, if you could call it furniture, some were not. The whole place was filthy. In his opinion, no one had done any housework in it for years, though he had seen her flicking about with a feather duster. All that woodwork, carved with shields and swords and helmets, faces and flowers, leaves and garlands and ribbons, lay under an ancient accumulation of dust. Banister was linked to banister and cornice to picture rail by ropes of cobwebs. She had lived here all her long life, first with her parents, then with her dad, then alone. Apart from that he knew nothing about her. He didn't even know how she happened to have three bedrooms on the top floor already converted into a flat.

The stairs grew narrower after the first landing and the last flight, the top one, was tiled, not carpeted. Mix had never seen a staircase of shiny black tiles before but there were many things in Miss Chawcer's house he had never seen before. No matter what kind of shoes he wore, those tiles made a terrible noise, a thump-thumping or a clack-clacking, and his belief was that she had tiled the stairs so that she would be able to tell what time her tenant came in. He had already got into the habit of removing his shoes and continuing in his socks alone. It wasn't that he ever did anything wrong but he didn't want her knowing his business.

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The stained glass window speckled the top landing with spots of coloured light. It was a picture of a girl looking into a pot with some sort of plant in it. When old Chawcer brought him up here for the first time she had called it the Isabella window and the picture, Isabella and the Pot of Basil, made very little sense to Mix. As far as he was concerned, basil was something growing in a bag you bought at Tesco. The girl looked ill, her face was the only bit of the glass that was white, and Mix resented having to see her each time he went into or came out of, his flat.

He called his home an apartment but Gwendolen Chawcer called it 'rooms'. She lived in the past, in his opinion, and not thirty or forty years ago like most old people but a hundred years. He had put in the bathroom himself with Ed and his mate's help and fitted the kitchen. He paid for it, so Miss Chawcer couldn't really complain. She ought to have been pleased; it would still be there for the next tenant when he was famous and had moved out. The fact was that she had never been able to see the need for a bathroom. When she was young, she told him, you had a chamber pot in your bedroom and a basin on the washstand and the maid brought you up a jug of hot water.

Mix had a bedroom as well and a large living room, dominated by a huge poster photograph of Nerissa Nash, taken when a newspaper started naming the models as well as the clothes designers. That was in the days when they called her the poor man's Naomi Campbell. They did so no longer. Mix stood in front of the poster, as he often did when he first came in, like a religious contemplating a holy picture, his lips murmuring, 'I love you, I adore you,' instead of prayers.

He was earning good money at Fiterama and he had spent freely on this flat. The chrome-encased television, video and DVD player were on the hire purchase as was most of the kitchen equipment but that, to use one of Ed's favourite expressions, was par for the course, everyone did it. He had paid for the white carpet and grey tweed suite with ready cash, buying the black marble statue of the nude girl on an impulse but not for a moment regretting his purchase. The poster of Nerissa he had had framed in the same chrome finish as the TV. In the black ash shelving he kept his collection of Reggie books: 10 Rillington Place, John Reginald Halliday Christie, The Christie Legend, Murder in Rillington Place and Christie's Victims among many others. Richard Attenborough's film of 10 Rillington Place he had on video and DVD. It was outrageous, he thought, that one Hollywood movie after another was re-made while you never heard a thing about a re-make of that. The one he possessed he often played and the digital version was even better, clearer and brighter. Richard Attenborough was wonderful, he wasn't arguing about that, but he didn't look much like Reggie. A taller actor was needed with sharper features and burning eyes.

Mix was inclined to day-dream and sometimes he speculated as to whether he would be famous through knowing Nerissa or through his expert knowledge of Reggie. There was probably no one alive today, not even Ludovic Kennedy who had written the book, who knew more. It might be his mission in life to reawaken interest in Rillington Place and its most famous occupant, though how this was to come about after what he had seen that afternoon, was as yet a mystery. He would solve it, of course. Perhaps he would write a book about Reggie himself, and not one full of

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feeble comments on the man's wickedness and depravity. His book would draw attention to the murderer as artist.

It was getting on for six. Mix poured himself his favourite drink. He had invented it himself and called it Boot Camp because it had such a savage kick. It mystified him that no one he had offered it to seemed to share his taste for a double measure of vodka, a glass of Sauvignon and a tablespoonful of Cointreau poured over crushed ice. His fridge was the kind which spewed out the crushed ice all prepared. He was just savouring the first sip when his mobile rang.

It was Colette Gilbert-Bamber to tell him she was desperate to get her treadmill repaired. It might be no more than the electric plug or it might be something bigger. Her husband had gone out but she had had to stay at home because she was expecting an important phone call. Mix knew what all that meant. Being in love with his distant star, his queen and lady, didn't mean he was never to treat himself to a bit of fun. Once he and Nerissa were together, a recognised item, it would be a different thing.

Regretfully but getting his priorities right, Mix put his Boot Camp into the fridge. He cleaned his teeth, gargled with a mouthwash which tasted not unlike his cocktail without the stimulus, and made his way down the stairs. In the midst of the house you wouldn't have guessed how fine the day was and bright and hot the sunshine. Here it was always cold and strangely silent too, it always was. You couldn't hear the Hammersmith and City Line running above ground from Latimer Road to Shepherd's Bush, or the traffic in Ladbroke Grove. The only noise came from the Westway but if you didn't know you wouldn't have imagined you were listening to traffic. It sounded like the sea, like waves breaking on the shore, or what you hear when you hold a big seashell up to your ear, a soft unceasing roar.

These days Gwendolen sometimes needed the help of a magnifying glass to read small print. And, unfortunately, most of the books she wanted to read were printed in what she understood to be called 10-point. Her ordinary glasses couldn't cope with Papa's edition of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, for instance, or what she was reading now, a very old copy of Middlemarch, published in the nineteenth century.

Like her bedroom above it, the drawing room encompassed the whole depth of the house, a pair of large sash windows overlooking the street, french windows at the back giving on the garden. When she was reading Gwendolen reclined on a sofa upholstered in dark brown corduroy, its back surmounted with a carved mahogany dragon. The dragon's tail curved round to meet one of the sofa arms, while its head reared up as it snarled at the black marble fireplace. Most of the furniture was rather like that, carved and thickly padded and covered in velvet which was brown or dull green or the dark red of claret, but some was made of dark veined marble with gilt legs. There was a very large mirror on one wall, framed in gilt leaves and fruit and curlicues, which had grown dull with time and lack of care.

Beyond the french windows, open now to the warm evening light, lay the garden. Gwendolen still saw it as it used to be, the lawn closely mown to the smoothness of

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emerald velvet, the herbaceous border alight with flowers, the trees pruned to make the best of their luxuriant foliage. Or, rather, she saw that it could be like that with a little attention, nothing that couldn't be achieved by a day's work. That the grass was knee high, the flowerbeds a mass of weeds and the trees ruined by dead branches, escaped her notice. The printed word was more real to her than a comfortable interior and pleasing exterior.

Her mind and her memories too were occasionally stronger than the book; then she laid it down to stare at the brownish cobweb-hung ceiling and the dusty prisms on the chandelier, to think and to remember.

The man Cellini she disliked, but that was of small importance. His inelegant conversation had awakened sleeping things, Christie and his murders, Rillington Place, her fear, Dr Reeves and Bertha. It must be at least fifty-two years ago, maybe fiftythree. Rillington Place had been a sordid slum, the terraces of houses with front doors opening on to the street, an iron foundry with a tall chimney at the far end of it. Until she went there she had no idea such places existed. She had led a sheltered life, both before that day and after it. Bertha would have married – those sort of people always did. Probably had a string of children who by now would be middle-aged, the first one of them the cause of her misfortunes.

Why did women behave like that? She had never understood. She had never been tempted. Not even with Dr Reeves. Her feelings for him had always been chaste and honourable, as had his for her. She was sure of that, in spite of his subsequent behaviour. Perhaps, after all, she had chosen the better part.

What on earth made Cellini so interested in Christie? It wasn't a healthy attitude of mind. Gwendolen picked up her book again. Not in this one but in another of George Eliot's, Adam Bede, there was a girl who had behaved like Bertha and met a dreadful fate. She read for another half-hour, lost to the world, oblivious to everything but the page in front of her. A footfall above her head alerted her.

Poor as her sight was becoming, Gwendolen's hearing was superb. Not for a woman of her age but for anyone of any age. Her friend Olive Fordyce said she was sure Gwendolen could hear a bat squeak. She listened now. He was coming down the stairs. No doubt he thought she didn't know he took his shoes off in an attempt to come and go secretly. She was not so easily deceived. The lowest flight creaked. Nothing he could do would put a stop to that, she thought triumphantly. She heard him padding across the hall but when he closed the front door it was with a slam that shook the house and caused a whitish flake to drop off the ceiling on to her left foot.

She went to one of the front windows and saw him getting into his car. It was a small blue car and, in her opinion, he kept it absurdly clean. When he had gone she went out to the kitchen, opened the door on an ancient and never-used spin dryer to take out a netting bag which had once held potatoes. The bag was full of keys. No labels were attached to them but she knew very well the shape and colour of the one she wanted. The key in the pocket of her cardigan, she began to mount the stairs.

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It was a long way up but she was used to it. She might be over eighty but she was thin and strong. Never in her life had she had a day's illness. Of course she couldn't climb those stairs as fast as she could fifty years ago but that was only to be expected. Otto was sitting halfway up the top flight, dismembering and eating some small mammal. She took no notice of him nor he of her. The evening sun blazed through the Isabella window and since there was no wind to blow on the glass, a nearly perfect coloured picture of the girl and the pot of basil appeared reflected on the floor, a circular mosaic of reds and blues and purples and greens. Gwendolen stopped to admire it. Rarely indeed was this facsimile so clear and still.

She lingered for only a minute or two before inserting her key in the lock and letting herself into Cellini's flat.

All this white paint was unwise, she thought. It showed every mark. And grey was a bad furnishing colour, cold and stark. She walked into his bedroom, wondering why he bothered to make his bed when he would only have to unmake it at night. Everything was depressingly tidy. Very likely he suffered from that affliction she had read about in a newspaper, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The kitchen was just as bad. It looked like one of those on show at the Ideal Home Exhibition, to which Olive had insisted on taking her some time in the eighties. A place for everything and everything in its place, not a packet or tin left on the counter, nothing in the sink. How could anyone live like that?

She opened the door of the fridge. There was very little food to be seen but in the door rack were two bottles of wine and, in the very front of the middle shelf a nearly full glass of something that looked like faintly coloured water. Gwendolen sniffed it. Not water, certainly not. So he drank, did he? She couldn't say she was surprised. Making her way back into the living room, she stopped at the bookshelves. Any books, no matter of what kind, always drew her attention. These were not the sort she would read, perhaps that anyone should read. All of them, except for one called Sex for Men in the 21st Century, were about Christie. She had scarcely thought about the man for more than forty years and today she seemed not to be able to get away from him.

As for Cellini, this would be another of his obsessions. The more I know people, said Gwendolen, quoting her father, the more I like books. She went downstairs and into the kitchen. There she fetched herself a cheese and pickle sandwich, readymade from the corner shop, and taking it and a glass of orange juice back to the dragon sofa, she returned to Middlemarch.

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