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The Landlady

by Sho Botham

'The white walls are gorgeous,' said Lucinda. 'I love how they've covered them with these regimented rows of portraits in black frames. It gives the hallway a clean and bright appearance. Definitely my type of decor.'

It is, said Marianne, it is so you.'

The red alcove was hidden from view except for anyone coming out of the reading room. Against the cool black and white of the rest of the hallway, the red alcove offered a glimpse of another world full of intrigue and seduction. The Johnsons were getting out of a taxi.

'Are you sure this is it?'

'That's the address on the bit of paper,' said Emilia.

'Okay, I thought it would be bigger but let's go and find out,' said Jasper.

Grabbing their wheeled luggage they climbed the 10 steps up to the front door and pulled the bell chain. The door opened to reveal a woman dressed in black and white and wearing high-heeled black shoes.

'Welcome,' she said, 'do come in.'

The Johnsons stepped inside and looked at all the black and white portraits watching them from the walls and liked what they saw. High-heeled lady ushered them towards a young man who had appeared it seemed from nowhere, to take them to their room.

In the kitchen garden, Marius the chef was collecting vegetables and herbs for dinner. He was picking baby carrots, fennel, mange tout, potatoes, mint and rosemary. When his basket was full he lifted it towards his face and breathed in the aroma of freshly picked vegetables. Happy with his choices he headed to the kitchen at the back of the house to start preparations for dinner although it was still only three o'clock in the afternoon.

Marianne lifted her mobile phone to her ear and said, 'is that you darling? Yes, we have arrived. It's a lovely place and the gardens look beautiful. We haven't seen anyone we know yet. Lucinda reckons the house is full tonight so it should be a good do. I will, I'll say hello to her from you and let you know how we get on. Bye darling, bye.'

'What's that noise outside?' said Jasper looking out the window, 'it sounds like something is going on. Shall we go and find out?'

'Yes, I hate not to know what's going on,' said Emila.

Coming out of the house they saw at least 10 other guests huddled together talking in hushed but bordering on hysterical tones. Jasper looked over the huddled heads but he couldn't see anything. Emilia listened to what was being said and her eyes widened.

High-heeled lady stood waiting for the hysteria to die down before inviting the group to follow her back into the house. Gathering in the white hallway, she put her right index finger to her mouth as if to silence everyone.

'Are you ready?' she shouted.

'Yes,' they shouted back at her.

High-heeled lady strode towards the red alcove and leaned against the wall, which swung open revealing a dimly lit corridor.

'Who's first?' she said, 'who wants to meet The Landlady?'