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## The Landlady

by Stuart Carruthers

The big green georgian door dominated the view along Collins's Avenue. Despite the years of neglect inflicted on this once great house, its brass ironmongery was still polished every week, much to the confusion of its occupants.

Zilla MaGrath was twice divorced, an alcoholic and not to be trusted. Following the failure of her second marriage, she managed to walk away with a small fortune and the family home. She wasn't as old as she looked, nor was she as stupid as people made her out to be. Her reputation as a credible landlady wasn't great, but she kept the rent low enough so her tenants were long term, they just about tolerated her daily tantrums in return.

The rules of the house were you paid your rent at 1700 every Friday in cash. A minute late and she'd make your life hell for the forthcoming week. The layout of the old house resembled a typical family home. Zilla occupied the downstairs basement flat and only she had access to the garden. The tenants used the front door and had no access to the basement, if they needed to contact her they used the phone in the hallway. Strange set up, but that's how she liked it.

But Jay had different rules. His "gift of the gab" insured that he basically paid his rent whenever he wanted. His ability to convince a drunken Zilla that he'd paid her and that she'd spent it on more bottles of expensive wine, was a trick he's learned from his parents back in Salford. Jay Kimpton was twenty nine and moved into No 63 Collins's Avenue in 1989. His life had been a mixture of skirmishes with the law and moving from town to town.

Despite living in the house for a number of years Jay could never understand why his landlady's children never called around to see her. She had no pictures of them within the flat and the only reason he knew she had children was she mentioned it once during a drunken argument about unpaid rent. Considering their mother was cash rich and living in an expensive house, something wasn't right.

The day hadn't started well. Last night's hangover insured Zilla was in a foul humour and when Janet phoned to say the upstairs shower was leaking into her room, she opened a new bottle and settled into a mid-morning session. Jay hadn't intended on going to work. However just as he was leaving the house to take the short walk to the bookmakers, Zilla requested he fix the problem upstairs.

It was around lunchtime when Jay returned to the ground floor after fixing the leaking shower when he quickly became aware of the raised voices from downstairs. Above the familiar howls of his landlady he became aware of another female voice. The large hallway echoed to the argument and Jay was captivated. Eager to find out who this person was, Jay made his way around the side of the house and into the back garden. As he carefully made his way across the garden the argument suddenly stopped. Peering in through the open door Jay's life was never going to be the same again.