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The Landlady

by Sue Thompson

The house stood in a tree-lined avenue at the far end of the city. An innocuous house. If you happened to walk past it you would not give it a second glance. Except at night that is; at night there would be a light emanating from the windows with a dull reddish tinge to it. No sound would come from within but the odd gentleman would be seen jumping out of his carriage and bolting up the steps and at that precise moment the door would open and he would slip in, before he could be noticed. The police turned a blind eye to the goings on at number 20 Everline Street. They liked the petite dark haired landlady who occupied this house, with her quiet demeanor she went about her business with an air of confidence and professionalism.

The fact that the Chief Detective Inspector frequented the establishment once a week had absolutely nothing to do with it.

Lady Isabella Duggan, as she liked to be known, her birth name being Maud Cruickshank, had been born in Glasgow, her parents had died when she was very young of TB and Maud and her brothers had been sent to the workhouse. Her life had not been an easy one. But she had worked her way out of the gutter and managed to save enough money to move on. But that seemed a lifetime ago and now she was very proud of the law-abiding citizen she had become: she felt she was giving the gentlemen of Bristol a service that they needed. All in all everyone was happy.

Only the previous week whilst she was out walking a woman had brushed past her rather closely and whispered in her ear how she was so grateful to her.

Explaining briefly that she was so relieved that her husband no longer imposed himself on her. Pressing several notes into Maud's palm, Lady Isabella had smiled and nodded; oh yes she knew she was doing a great service.

But she was not just a landlady she was a listener, the men who visited her and her girls, sometimes needed to offload to them their darkest secrets and she kept a little black book exactly for these occasions. Call it her insurance she thinks to herself. Who could blame her, after all you never knew when you would need it.

There were pages and pages of dates, times, conversations anything she thought might come in handy one day. The book was locked safely away in the safe that occupied the wall in her room behind a specially purchased portrait of a magistrate in a compromising position with another man. She loved that portrait and stifled a giggle each time she retrieved her black book from the safe.

But Lady Isabella realised that she could not go on forever and she was beginning to tire of these stupid men who left their poor wives at home whilst they felt they could exploit other women. Yet she knew she was also part of that exploitation. She had been planning this day for a long time, now she had to put it into action, the black book could now be used to get her away from this life and become a proper landlady in a little seaside town.

At first the men had been enraged and had threatened her, but she had held her nerve and in the end they had been more than generous to her.

The house stood on the seafront, a pretty town house with flower boxes lining the windowsills. The sign that hung proudly outside was called 'Maud's Boarding House'.