

I'm a Man

by Luka

She was looking good, if she said so herself. Hair dark, glossy and lustrous, with no hint of grey. Skin clear and glowing. She carefully applied some lipstick, blew herself a kiss in the mirror, then stuck her tongue out. Her grandmother had always warned her about vanity. But then this was one man worth the effort.

Inspector Esther Lee of Hong Kong Police took one last look around the hotel bedroom, flicked the bedspread into position, grabbed her handbag and started downstairs to the foyer.

He was there waiting for her. She hung back for a moment to watch him. He was a livewire, eyes scanning the foyer, poised on the balls of his feet. As she got nearer she could see he'd lost weight and that there was a sprinkling of grey in his hair. But he was still drop-dead gorgeous.

"Inscrutable Oriental, she say . . ."

"Esther!" That devastating wide smile stripped away the years. He hugged her, kissing her cheek.

"So where are you whisking me off to tonight?"

He laughed. "Thought you'd have had enough of hotel and conference food, so there's some wholesome home-cooked stuff on offer. Sound OK?"

She grinned. It sounded just perfect.

A silver Capri was parked outside the hotel and he ushered her to it.

"Madam, your chauffeur-driven car awaits you."

"Thank you, sir."

She scrambled into the back, noticing another man at the wheel. He nodded to her.

"You remember Bodie, don't you Esther?"

"Oh, yes. Nice to meet you again."

"And you," he said briefly.

Ray climbed into the passenger seat and wriggled round so he could see her. "How's the conference been, then?"

"Too much talk, not enough action."

"Story of my life."

"And mine."

There was sound resembling a snort from the driver's seat. Ray grinned. "Bodie's well-known for his wit and charm."

"Thought you'd have had enough action to last you for the foreseeable future." Bodie's voice was gruff.

"Yeah, well . . ."

"What's been happening, Ray?"

"Ah well, been out of commission for a bit."

"How come?"

"Silly fucker stopped a bullet meant for someone else," said Bodie tersely, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Ray! How bad?"

"Bad enough that his heart stopped in the operating theatre."

"Oh god, Ray!"

"Esther, I'm fine now."

Bodie seemed about to add something, and then thought better of it. He braked with a little too much force and then reversed the cumbersome car into a space in textbook style. Ray hopped out and tilted the seat.

"Madam's table awaits her."

"Thank you James!"

It was a garden flat, open-plan and airy. There was still enough light left for Esther to peer out into a walled garden. "Got some herbs out there. And a few tomatoes," offered Ray proudly.

"Do I get to sample them for dinner?"

"Don't ask what's in the lasagne . . . Whatever didn't move in the fridge got chucked in. Here was me, planning a grand menu, and the bloody Cow called us in on our day off."

"How is Mr Cowley?"

"Same as ever, cantankerous old sod!"

"And he spoke so highly of you."

"Doubt it," said Bodie. "Esther, do you want a drink?"

"Wine, please. Oh, I brought this." She handed Bodie a bottle of wine. Doyle craned his neck to look at it.

"Not that poncey Aussie stuff!"

"You're behind the times, Ray. Anyone who's anyone drinks Aussie wine these days."

"Not Bodie. He's still at the anti-freeze stage."

"Ho ho." Bodie rolled his eyes and passed them both glasses of wine.

"Cheers," said Ray, swallowing a mouthful of the wine. Esther was amused to note that he still slurped.

"Something smells good."

"Ah, that'll be my new aftershave!"

"Go for eau de garlic, do you?"

"Very cutting, Esther."

"You two going to sit down instead of insulting each other?" asked Bodie, lighting two candles on the table.

"Don't be mean, mate, we've got a lot of catching-up to do."

"Three years," offered Esther.

"Blimey, you know how to make a man feel old. Especially given you've been promoted."

She smiled and nodded.

"So how's it going?"

"Fine. It's worked out well."

"So no chance of that flophouse now, then?"

"Well, I'm always open to decent offers."

"What the hell are you two rattling on about?" asked Bodie, closing the curtains with what seemed to Esther a little too much violence.

"After that Chinese case went belly-up, me and Esther were all set to run away together and set up a Suzy Wong flophouse."

"Sit up to the table and I'll get the food," was Bodie's only comment on the matter.

"Shall I sit anywhere?" she asked.

"By the window," said Bodie tersely. "Ray, you're in my way. Sit down."

"Yes master!" He leaned over to top up her glass and she caught that tantalising aroma she'd always associate with him ... herb shampoo, a sharp lemon-based aftershave and an underlying musk which was all him.

"So, what's been happening, Esther? Any Mr Esther hanging around at home pining for you?"

"I wish! I'm married to the bloody job."

"Sounds familiar." Bodie put a bowl of salad in the middle of the table and gestured to Ray to hand round the plates.

"Yeah, well ... Any woman wanting to get anywhere, especially somewhere like Hong Kong, is lucky if she gets home every few days. Can't remember the last time I had two clear days at home."

Bodie gave an indefinable snort and started to serve the lasagne. Its rich aroma made her realise just how hungry she was. Two helpings later, she pushed the plate away and smiled happily. "My compliments to the chef. Whichever of you it was, I want to marry you and have your babies and keep you tied to the oven!"

"There you are, Ray, an offer you can't refuse." She glanced at Bodie, not sure whether she was imagining the edge in his voice.

"Nah, you'd be fed-up of pasta after a week - I can't do anything else!"

"If you'd seen what I survive on, you'd understand why that sounds like riches untold."

Bodie cleared the table soundlessly, shaking his head when Esther stood up to help. Ray glanced after him and said quietly: "Sorry he's a bit grumpy tonight - he thinks I've been overdoing things."

"And have you?"

He shrugged and gave that impish grin which showed off the chipped front tooth. "Well ... I've been back at work a fortnight. Driving a desk until today when it all went tits-up at some stakeout and Bodie and I found ourselves out there directing operations."

"So what the hell happened, Ray?"

He poured her some more wine and shouted: "The cream's at the bottom of the fridge, Bodie. Oh, it was fine. Just some tosser willy-waving. We soon had him out of there."

"That's not what I ..."

"We have to come clean and admit the dessert is shop-bought. Well, restaurant-bought. Gino, who runs this wonderful little Italian, is a life-saver. At one point it looked like the first course'd be from there as well. Come on Bodie, you're a growing lad, you can have more than that!"

A trace of a smile touched Bodie's harsh features and he took another spoonful of the rich, creamy dessert. Esther had no idea what it was, but it was delicious, and she happily accepted a second helping.

"That's what I like to see, a woman with a healthy appetite," said Ray, passing her the jug of cream. She looked up to grin at him, but instead saw Bodie staring at her with an intensity that made her feel uncomfortable.

She said quickly: "I'll suffer for this when I get back at the weekend. It'll be twice a day at the gym for the next fortnight."

"So what's this course in aid of?"

"Ah, putting myself about a bit and trying to remind my bosses that my immediate superior retires in nine months' time."

"What are the chances of you getting the job?"

She shrugged. "50-50. The other condender's an obnoxious little turd, but the big boss likes him. I have to hope he fouls up between now and then."

"Well, you could always apply for that transfer to CI5. The Cow's finally moving into the 20th century and acknowledging that the girls can do just as well as the men in most cases."

Bodie stood up and grabbed the dish from under her nose. "Coffee?"

"Please. Black, no sugar. Can I do ...?"

"No. Sit over there if you want." He gestured to the sofa.

"Thanks. Better go and powder my nose first."

"Down the hall, last on the right," said Ray, collecting the rest of the plates.

She closed the living room door behind her and felt for the light switch. She was in a small hallway with three doors off it. The furthest one was a bathroom, painted pale blue and with a rather good seascape above the basin. She used the loo, washed her hands and checked her make-up. On the way back her curiosity got the better of her. Next to the bathroom was a small spare room, little more than a box room. The single bed was piled high with diving gear and motorbiking kit and boxes of books were stacked round the sides. She closed the door quietly and opened the opposite door. This one was a spacious bedroom, light and airy and with an immense double bed.

The room looked like a line had been drawn down the middle - on one side clothes were strewn everywhere. She recognised Ray's trademark jeans hanging from the arm of a chair, with a couple of tee shirts screwed up nearby. The bedside table held a teetering pile of paperback books and what looked like a spare part from a motorbike. The other side of the room had been arranged with military precision - clothes folded neatly over the back of a straight-backed chair and highly-polished shoes aligned beneath it. The bedside table held a glass of water, an alarm clock and a book on military history.

She closed the door quietly, feeling like an interloper. The realisation of what she'd seen made her suddenly feel very lonely.

As she opened the door back into the living room, she heard voices raised to a fierce whisper. "Bodie, will you cut it out? You're behaving like a spoiled little brat."

"Ray, I'm ..."

"I don't know what your bloody problem is, but it's downright bad manners."

"I know, I'm ..."

"I gave you the choice, said I could meet Esther somewhere else and take her out for a meal. It was you who insisted she came here."

"I know, and I'm ..."

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you this. Just because I have female friends, doesn't mean I want to bed them. You're all I want and need."

Bodie wrapped his arms around Ray and kissed his forehead. "I'm sorry, Ray."

Ray smiled and gently touched Bodie's lips. "Yeah, all right ... Come on mate, get that coffee ready, or Esther'll be sending in a search party."

Hastily she sat down on the sofa and started leafing through a magazine. It was only after Ray had passed her a mug of coffee and given her a slightly odd look that she realised it was not only a soccer magazine – a sport she knew nothing about – but she'd also got it upside down.

The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly, as they chatted about their respective jobs. Bodie lightened up, turned on the charm and she found herself liking him a great deal. But after an hour or so she felt like she was occupying too much of their space, so she made a big show of looking at her watch and insisted they called her a taxi rather than driving her back to the hotel.

Bodie helped her on with her coat and she held out her hand, feeling oddly formal with him. But he kissed her on the cheek and said how much he'd enjoyed meeting her, and he hoped she'd come and visit the next time she was in England.

Ray escorted her outside and they perched on a low wall to wait for the taxi. "So you're going home Saturday?"

"Yes. Blasted 8am flight with a two-hour check-in."

"I can collect you and take you out to Heathrow, no problem."

She squeezed his hand. "Thanks for the offer, but I've arranged to share a cab with a couple of others on the same flight."

"If you're sure. It's been lovely to see you, Esther. Stay in touch, won't you?"

"Of course. And if you two fancy a holiday in Hong Kong, I've got a nice city centre flat."

"Blimey, can't remember the last time we had a holiday!"

The taxi drew up and the driver tooted his horn. She stood up and hugged him. "Ray, I'm glad you're both happy. You deserve each other."

As she waved to him from the back seat of the taxi, she was amused to see him gaping after her, shaking his head and smiling.

-- THE END --



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