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Fortune and the Brave

by Dan Judd

Nine months did not normally feel like a long time but things were far from normal, at the moment. They'd met at the supermarket. November 23rd. Heaving it was. Christmas come early as people began to stock up on stuff they didn't really need or want. Shelves bulging with crackers, nuts and boxes marked Celebrations that were anything but.

Their hands had brushed, grabbing for the Christmas Radio Times. Jo laughing, taking the piss when Ian told her of his yearly ritual, marking out time with his highlighter pen. That year the colour was green.

Jo never expected him to move in so quick. But, what with Ian not having a job and she being furloughed, it made some sort of crazy sense. "Two months in and I'm already waving my knickers at you," she had joked.

It was Ian's idea to go to Tangs. Always so thoughtful, it wasn't just a romantic gesture, but to silently show their support as they'd both been disgusted when they'd heard about the smashed window and the graffiti. Plus, they did the best chicken and lemon.

Ever the romantic - she hoped it would last - Ian suggested they dress up, get ready separately. She went along with it. She'd already learnt it was easier that way. She jumped, hearing the back door. Any noise did that, being so unusual, made her jump. Then the front doorbell. There he was all dressed-up in his only, multi-purpose suit. He'd augmented it with one of her blouses to give himself a ruffled, 70s dandy look. He rocked it. She'd put on one of her three bridesmaid dresses. The one that didn't make her look like a Dutch toilet roll holder.

“You look mirror-lickingly gorgeous,” he exclaimed, beaming with pride.

“Come on, we’ve got to be their prompt otherwise we lose it.”

“You lost it years ago!”

“No, it was only nine months.”

Banter, she used to love it. Everyone, at some time or another, sits down to a banquet of consequences, Jo thought. But maybe tonight wasn’t the right time to tell him he should move back to his, when he got a job.

She was so lost in this thought that she didn’t immediately notice their fellow clientele. She was jolted out of it by Ian’s hearty laugh.

“What the fu...” she exclaimed, not being able to spit out the word as she drank in the fact that pitted around the room were shop dummies. All blank heads and dressed up in ill-fitting, mismatched clothes.

It was to keep people a safe-distance apart informed Tom, their waiter. Suddenly the romance of the evening was gone.

She tried not to be freaked out, remembering her mum ignoring the written warnings and taking her through the Chamber of Horrors, aged just 6. She failed. She was sure she saw one of the dummies twitch.

But Ian always had a knack of teasing her out her fears.

“I’ve heard of dumb waiters but this is new,” he joked.

“He can stay,” she thought to herself, snapping out of it as she nipped the last prawn cracker.