



*DEAD* a novella  
*already*  
by Jennifer Rutherford

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A NOVELLA BY  
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## SUMMARY:

There's only one thing missing from Liv Foster's life, and as a woman who prides herself on her independent lifestyle, it's so embarrassing to admit that she is desperate for a man. Well- ONE man -James Barnes. He came into her life a month ago, working at her favorite bar, Odin's Ravens, where she and her best friend Steve Rogers hang out after work nearly every day; after 30 days of incessant flirting, what was once a little crush on the guy has taken a turn for the worse into "when my body explodes from unresolved tension, tell my parents I loved them" territory. Since she can't take it anymore, she plans to just go for it with him at Odin's Ravens annual October 31st *DRINKS TO DIE FOR!* party tonight.

But Liv gets more than she bargains for when it comes to "going for it" with James. It was just supposed to be a bit of fun- just some drinking and dirty dancing and making out in costumes, then going back to her place for some extracurricular activity, right? She was NOT prepared for a terrifying haunted house with the bar owner's slightly evil, *slightly* gorgeous son Loki and his enigmatic girlfriend Sigyn. Liz was even *less* prepared for the knives- ACTUAL knives -to come out.

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# CHAPTER ONE

Liv Foster moved away from her hometown of Houston, Texas five years ago. She'd flown to New York City for a *fifth* (lord have mercy) job interview at Stark Advertising's corporate headquarters, and a week later, she had, to her complete shock because it *had* to be too good to be true, received an offer for a position at one of their regional northeastern branches. The pay was *legit*, with killer benefits beyond the basics, like an onsite gym and indoor pool, five hundred a month bonuses for carpooling or biking to work, memberships to the major museums, house cleaning services, yearly subscriptions to Netflix and Amazon Prime among other things. Uh.... yes please.

It's the little things, right? She'd accepted right on the spot.

The move hadn't been *easy* of course. After all, she'd really enjoyed her life in southeast Texas, despite the stifling summers and periodic *disastrous* flooding. Her two bedroom had been an absolute steal, and only three blocks from the village, close to Rice University where her older sister Jane was a professor in the physics department. Every Monday and Thursday night when Jane stayed until nine to do grades, Liv would grab take out from their favorite eats and bike to her sister's office for dinner together. God, she loved her big sis, even though Jane was a total science nerd. There had been other things too—her dad's post-season Astros tickets (cheating controversy aside), the 60 degree winters, Torchy's Tacos, her hilarious best friend and tattoo artist Darcy who owned *I Love Lewis Ink*, hanging out with their other pals at the Present Company bar after work. Oh, and her hairstylist Aimee. Liv had not been looking forward to the inevitable disappointment of going through no less than five bad haircuts before finding the "right" stylist again.

But the career opportunity had been too important to stay put, to become stagnant, to not face the reality of her first Saturn return. Life was too short to cling to comfort rather than take risks and try new things, even if they scared the hell out of you. So, in the spring of 2014, after promising to facetime every week with her parents and Jane and Darcy, she'd jumped into the deep end and moved to Nornstown, Connecticut to start a new life. It was a decent sized (roughly 65,000) city west of Stamford and only about thirty miles from NYC's city line, and other than the typical high cost of living in the northeast, Liv had zero complaints.

Her 1940s two bedroom rental in the heart of the museum district was on the pricey side, but it was close to work, and all the best amenities of the city were within walking distance, so it was worth it. It hadn't taken long to establish a new social life either, which (let's be honest) was the most important thing outside of making money,

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obviously. Not having friends to hang out with would have driven her absolutely insane. Thank *god*, her first week on the job, she'd met the *niciest* guy—Steve Rogers worked two floors up from her, and they'd been great friends ever since that first meeting. Super good-looking, steady job, caring, strong, funny...total marriage material...for someone else. He was just too good, as in, should wear a halo, for her to date. She didn't need a "bad boy" per se, but she had a weakness for guys who seemed like they *could* be a little villainous but were holding back. Steve was incapable of being anything but a total sweetheart, and she loved him for it, but anything beyond friendship was off the table. He had also been her connection to what would become a close-knit group of friends, and she would be forever grateful to him for it.

One of the best things about her new life was finally experiencing *all four* seasons, and nothing could beat experiencing a full autumn, in her mind. As much as she loved her hometown, there was no denying the lack of fall fun. It was just too damn hot there, with temps still in the 80s halfway through October. Not exactly sweater weather. Also, the leaves rarely changed until late November, and by that point, people had tossed their pumpkins and put on holiday music. She *hated* that. December was just one big ball of stress as far as she was concerned. Why would anyone want to extend the crazy an extra two weeks?

Nornstown on the other hand, was a fall haven all through October, and it was incredible, especially for someone who had been denied that joy for three decades. Colorful trees, leaves blowing in the chilly breezes, crisp air, scarves, jackets, hoodies, corn mazes and *actual* pumpkin patches within ten miles. This place was all about spooks too. The city might as well change their name to Sleepy Hollow. One would think Jack Skellington himself was the *mayor*, for god's sake. Spider webs, skeletons, jack-o-lanterns and more adorned the streetlamps, stop signs, city hall, the parks, the schools.... you name it. Amazing.

Five years into her life in the southwestern corner of Connecticut, she was no less thrilled when she got to change the wall calendar in her kitchen on October 1st. And, same as always, she would be no less depressed on November 1st, which was *tomorrow* ...ick. Maybe she was a bit sadder this year since it was the last Halloween of the decade, and it felt even more final somehow. Eh, whatever. The next several hours were going to be fun as hell, and she would be crazy to miss out on it by *moping*. So... here we go.

Liv flicked on her porch light and stepped onto her front porch, locking her door behind her before setting a bowl of candy on her outdoor bistro table covered in spiders and webs. Behind the table, her life-size animatronic Sam from 2007's underrated comedic horror film *Trick 'r Treat* swiveled his head slowly. She hung a sign written in "dripping" blood red letters around his creepy burlap sack covered neck: *Go ahead, take a handful...Hopefully you'll live through the night.*

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No, an empty threat made by a piece of wood wouldn't stop kids from dumping the whole bowl in their bags, but it was definitely more fun than the lame *take ONE piece only*" post-its that people put out with their candy. That, and it went with the sharply bitten lollipop in Sam's hand.

Head tilted, she scrutinized the set up, then readjusted her pumpkins sitting on the chairs next to the candy so they were more visible from the street. Along with a few hundred purple mini lights strung underneath the webs across the porch and inside the landscaping, the whole thing looked fantastic. Not too cluttered. Not too minimal. *Definitely* the creepiest and *classiest* house on the block. Smiling, she nodded once, giving herself a mental pat on the back— *especially* for those pumpkins. Honestly, they were flawless, and they'd been so fun to carve.

Last weekend, she'd begged Steve and Sam (his best gym buddy and spotter who had just earned his black belt in Krav Maga and wouldn't shut up about it) to come over and carve pumpkins. They'd balked about it at first but had given in quickly when she'd promised to provide alcohol and pizza. Sam had cut his to look like it was a face vomiting stringy seeds, declaring it a masterpiece while laughing at Steve's ultra-boring triangle eyes and nose and mouth. She'd made two: a bleeding heart with a dagger in it, and "*I'll be right back*" in block letters on the second one. She'd brought the drinks out *after* they were done handling knives since going to the ER because a drunk moron accidentally chopped off their finger wasn't high on anyone's bucket list. They'd watched the first season of *American Horror Story* until one in the morning when the guys had passed out on her couch and loveseat, both of their mouths hanging open—Mmmm, *so* hot. Their combined snoring had been a real treat, too. Fun times. Anyhow.

Hurrying down the steps to the sidewalk, Liv checked the time on her phone. She lived eight blocks from the bar where she was supposed to meet up with Steve at five-thirty. They'd both left early from work to get a head start on the fun, but despite that, she was running late. Walking faster, she shot him a quick text letting him know she was almost there.

*Liv: Be there in 10. Had to grab extra candy from the store on the way home since I only bought a hundred pieces last week like a MORON. Smdh*

*Steve: Just admit you were shaving your legs in case you get lucky with a certain bartender tonight. ;-)*

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*Liv: ...*

*Steve: Trying to think of a clever response, aren't you.*

*Liv: ...*

*Steve: So much for your "quick" wit.*

*Liv: ...*

*Steve: I'm really disappointed in you, Livvy.*

*Liv: \*middle finger emoji\**

Chuckling quietly, she slid her phone into her pocket then adjusted the strap of her black sling bag. She popped her jacket collar to cover her ears since the sun would be below the horizon in a few minutes, and the minute it got dark, she would turn into an icicle. While she fiddled with the top button, a group of shrieking costumed kids (probably already hyped up on sugar) nearly ran into her.

"Woah, woah careful!" she yelled at them, panicking silently as they dodged across the street right in front of a car coming toward them that was going *way* too fast through a residential area on Halloween night. Thankfully, the driver slammed on his brakes, screeching to a stop, barely avoiding a hit.

Relief shooting through her veins, she bent down to glare at him through his open window. "What, do you get to level up if you kill enough trick-r-treaters? You know these kids don't respawn, right?"

Looking her up and down, the guy revved the engine, then shouted over it. "I'd take you for a ride if you weren't such a bitch."

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"I'm heartbroken," she deadpanned, eyes rolling so hard they might end up stuck there. This *boy* was probably ten years her junior—22 at most. Not even old enough to rent a car. Even if he wasn't a total dick...gross.

"Slow the hell down, *son*, and happy Halloween," she said sweetly, giving him a fake smile as she turned on her heel and resumed walking toward the bar.

Paying no attention to whatever moronic thing he shouted at her as he drove off in the opposite direction, she hurried to get to the crosswalk before the light changed on her. She did *not* want to be stuck in this cold any longer than absolutely necessary, and since the sidewalk was packed downtown for the annual Masquerade Parade that would start at 6, it was already taking longer than normal to get to the bar. Wishing she'd put on gloves, she squeezed through dozens of costumed bodies, freezing her ass off across the last two blocks.

Swinging on its hinges four feet above the entrance to the bar, the gold sign reading "*Odin's Ravens*" in old Norse red font protruded from the outer brick wall of the old three story building, an iron raven permanently perched on it. Muffled music pulsed behind the wood-paned glass door, and as she pushed the handle and stepped inside, the sound sharpened into an appropriately creepy, rich synth-pop. An absurdly dulcet voice rang clear as a bell through the packed house, the *could-be-straight-outta-the-80s* ear candy loud enough to wake the dead. Pun intended.

Under her feet, the ancient-looking solid wood floor planks vibrated from the thundering bass, and Liv breathed a sigh of relief, warming up the second the door closed behind her. She had to push up on her toes to find Steve since the bar was probably in violation of maximum capacity fire codes at this point and being just shy of 5'4 had some serious disadvantages. Spotting him sitting at the bar nursing a bottle of Sam Adams, she slid around vampires, zombies, witches, movie characters, and the *animal-ears-plus-lingerie-equals-costume* types to get to him. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders, giving him a side hug once she finally reached him, and he turned to smile at her.

Stepping down from his barstool, he gestured to it and helped her up onto the tall leather seat, then spoke directly into her ear. "I tried to save a seat for you, but it's just too crowded. You know how October 31st is around here."

She snickered at his awkward effort to force his body between her and the 200-pound werewolf sitting next to them. "You sure you're okay to stand next to that thing?"

Steve gave her a withering look. "His tail is digging into my back, but I think I'll survive."

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While he twisted, trying to find the most comfortable position, Liv chewed her lip, looking past him to check out her recent obsession working double time behind the bar. Leaning her elbows on the counter and pushing forward to get a better view, she watched him efficiently and calmly take order after order, fill glass after glass, pour shots and more, all with a sexy little smile rarely leaving his face. Oh god, her eyes were probably turning into *actual* hearts right now. She would happily sit here and be subjected to lame drunk guys hitting on her if it meant she could just stare at that absolute *dream*.

He had the kind of old school charm that made him a total lady killer. For certain *she* had died the first time she'd seen him, and her thirsty, slack-jawed ghost had risen from the dead to haunt him every single day of the past month since he'd joined the Odin's Ravens team. Okay, so that was possibly the creepiest extended metaphor ever, but *seriously*. She blinked lazily when his tongue darted out to lick his lips as he inserted someone's credit card into the chip reader.

*Yeahhhh*, she wanted to lick his lips too.

"You'll never guess what happened to me at work," Steve said, his voice breaking her out of her wonderfully wicked thoughts, and she begrudgingly tore her eyes away from her pretend boyfriend.

"Ummm," she hummed slowly, her brain needing a second for his words to even register, "Maggie *'My-Eyes-Are-Up-Here'* Carter charged into your office and begged you to take her roughly over the edge of your desk?"

She laughed when he choked on his drink, his eyes going a little crossed. "You should see the look on your face."

He pointed to Liv. "Exactly that. That is *exactly* what happened," he stopped, waving a hand when her jaw dropped, "Kidding. Sorry to disappoint. *Believe* me."

Her shoulders slumped. "There is no way the real story will be anything other than completely boring now."

"Oh, just wait for it, kiddo," he snorted, pausing to take a sip from his drink. "So... new hire walks into my office and drops her HR file on my desk. Says 'hi, I'm *Maerssyn*, the new sales intern' and-"

"Wow. Juicy stuff," Liv said straight-faced, cutting him off, her fingers drumming on the counter with the beat of the song before the pronunciation of the girl's name suddenly hit her.



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"Wait," she cocked her head at Steve who was pressing his lips together as though trying to suppress a laugh, "did you just say her name was *Martian*?"

At his nod, she raised an eyebrow. "As in, what Elon Musk wishes he were? As in, a Matt Damon movie?"

"Yup," he said, exaggerating the 'p' with a pop, "but spelled M-A-E-R-S-S-Y-N."

Putting a hand over her eyes, Liv shook her head. "What kind of dumbass names their kid that? And honestly, the completely nonsensical spelling makes it worse. *Geezis* Steve, were you able to say it without laughing?"

"No," he snorted, setting both elbows on the bar and leaning his head into his palms. "It's awful, Livvy. I saw her another four or five times today, and I cracked up every time because I kept picturing her as some Area 51 escapee." He stood back up to his full height. "From the way she looked at me, I can't tell if she thinks I'm stupid, or if she thinks /think that *she's* stupid. Either way, it doesn't bode well for the manager/subordinate relationship."

"No, it doesn't," Liv laughed, struggling to breathe because of the '*Area 51 escapee*' image in her head.

"Anyway. Then Maerssyn-" he rolled his eyes at the name "-said '*nice to meet you Mister Rogers*' as she was about to leave."

"Huh," Liv started, resting her chin between her thumb and forefinger, "so did you tell her not to call you that because every day is *not* a beautiful day in the neighborhood, and you want your name to reflect the reality of your life?"

Eyes blowing wide open, his mouth fell into an open smile. "That is *exactly* what I said! Get out of my head!"

"Great minds, babe," she smirked, giving him a high-five. In her periphery, she saw her hot-enough-to-make-a-nun-terminate-her-vows crush muddling mint leaves inside a cocktail glass. Lucky mint—she wanted him to muddle her.

"But she didn't understand that reference," Steve sighed, puffing out his cheeks then letting the breath out in a whoosh.

Liv turned her head sharply toward him, jaw on the floor. If there was anything that could have pulled her away from unabashed gawking at human male perfection incarnate, it was someone being old enough to have a 401K but not knowing who *Fred Friggin' Rogers* was.

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"*Dude*, that's like not knowing who Kermit is or something! Mister Roger's Neighborhood is iconic! Holy shit."

"I know right?" he picked his beer back up and lifted it to his mouth. "I've never felt so ancient in my life."

"Aw Steve," she pressed her lips together, patting his shoulder, "don't feel bad. They probably just didn't have after school public programming on her home planet."

Steve spewed his drink, bursting into such violent laughter that he choked, and she cackled at the sight. Deadpan delivery *nailed*. God, she hadn't had one sip of alcohol, and she was already having a *killer* good time.

Ha! –Halloween pun —*a/so* nailed.

Once he could breathe again, Steve shook his head. "All jokes aside, I can't believe extraterrestrial girl insulted one of my childhood heroes."

"If Fred Rogers is your hero, maybe y'shoulda come dressed as him."

They both turned toward the sudden voice, and it took everything in Liv to not moan at the sight of her drink-mixing daydream standing right across from her, both hands on the counter, a black dish towel slung over his shoulder—his perfectly *broad* shoulder. Normally he wore basic black tees or solid, dark-colored Henleys, but tonight he looked like he'd walked straight out of a Nirvana concert or something with a wrinkled blue plaid flannel button up hanging open over a white t-shirt. Grunge style was *not* her thing, but honestly, the (literal) "*I woke up like this*" unwashed bed head thing he had going on tonight was *working* for her.

"Well hi there, Olivia Foster," he drawled, grinning crookedly at her.

*Don't bite your lip—do NOT bite your lip*, she told herself silently. Two seconds later, she bit her lip. Wow, great willpower.

His voice would have been the death of her if she weren't dead already. Twinkling blue eyes, cupid's bow lips, cheekbones as defined as his biceps, and that *hair*—luscious, dark, shining hair that was just long enough to have to push it behind his ears or it would fall forward into his eyes. Would it be too much to ask of the universe to let her get her hands in it while cutting her lips on that sharp jawline? Come on, throw a girl a bone. She swallowed, hopefully not audibly, and smiled.

"Well hi there, James Barnes."

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## CHAPTER TWO

He cocked his head a little. "How many times do I gotta tell ya my name is Bucky, Liv? Even my ma doesn't call me *James*, so it doesn't feel like it fits."

"Okay, first off," she held up a finger, "That's what she said."

His responding laugh, one that wrinkled his nose and caused his eyes to crinkle at the corners, made her insides giddy. Few things could make her as happy as knowing that the guy she was into thought she was funny.

"And second of all," she added, giving him a once over from head to waist, frowning a little because the damn bar obstructed the view below, "you do *not* look like a *Bucky*."

He gave her a somewhat amused but mostly questioning look, clearly waiting for further explanation from her, but she merely shrugged. No way in hell was she going to tell him that he was way too hot for a name that belonged in June Cleaver's house, right next to Beaver and Wally. With his eyes steadily boring into hers while she sat there, completely wordless, the sound of drunk patrons having a fantastic time in a (relatively) small space faded until the only thing she could hear was the haunting music muffled by the blood rushing through her ears. Maybe it was only five seconds of silent eye contact, but it was more than enough to make her face and chest flush, so she looked down, pretending to find something in her bag. Sitting back up once her cheeks were no longer burning, she met his eyes again and let out a dramatic sigh.

"But since you've brought the name thing up *everytime* I see you, I give in. You win," she paused, taking a deep breath before relenting "... *Bucky*."

She looked sideways, mentally repeating the name several times. After a few seconds of letting it sit on the tip of her tongue, she decided that it actually *did* fit, and she liked it...a lot- oh woah, what she said! When she finally looked at him, he flashed her a smile bright enough to need solar eclipse glasses to look directly at it.

"Happy now?" She blinked, wondering how the hell even his *teeth* were pretty.

An impish, closed-mouth smirk replaced his blinding smile. "Depends how often I get to hear ya say it while beggin' me for somethin'."

Liv bit the insides of her cheeks so her jaw wouldn't drop at the...uh...implications...of his words. Alright, she needed a drink- *STAT*.

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But there was no way she could say "*Bucky, please give me a glass of whatever has the highest alcohol content by volume*" without her brain giving up after "*Bucky, PLEASE*" which would be the very definition of begging him for something. Nope. Nope. Nope. No begging for anything.

Smirk still in place, he tilted his head. "Cat got your tongue, Liv?"

She forced a laugh, trying not to focus on him mentioning her tongue because it sounded way too good coming from him. Sure, it was just as a highly common figure of speech, but still. Leaning into the back of her chair, she crossed her legs, attempting to look relaxed.

"Just parched, is all," she cleared her throat, "so how about you get me a house brew, please." She stopped short of saying his name after *please*. It was for the best.

Bucky squinted at her, his lips pursing. "Haven't I made about twenty vodka tonics for you? Figured you'd want that."

She pressed her lips together so she wouldn't snort like an actual farm animal at his expression. It was no doubt unintentional, but he was doing an *uncanny* imitation of Derek Zoolander, and holding back a cackle was making her sides hurt. Despite the pain, she was thankful for the comedic relief. She needed a break from a month of building sexual tension that was apparently reaching fever pitch tonight, or she was going to spontaneously combust right here. But since he'd killed her a dozen times already, it was just par for the course.

"Yes, vodka tonic is my go-to," she conceded with a smile, "but since it's Halloween, I shall face my *fear*-" she wiggled her eyebrows "-of beer."

It was perhaps the worst pun she'd ever made, and *that* was saying something, but she nearly fell off her stool from laughing, nonetheless. Hearing a sigh then a groan next to her, she looked left to see Steve hanging his head and pinching his eyebrows between his thumb and forefinger. Holding her stomach, she nudged him with her shoulder, and he lifted his head to eye her.

"That was bad, Livvy. That was really bad. That was really *really* bad."

"Nah," Bucky countered, and Liv turned back to see him leaning onto his forearms and grinning at her through eyelashes that belonged in a goddamn Maybelline ad. "I thought it was cute."

Bouncing the ball of her foot rapidly on the spindle of her barstool like she'd had about five espresso shots, she smiled back. God help her. He was being *such* a flirt tonight, and it was sending her pulse through the roof. If she died from a heart

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attack tonight, her parents could have him charged with involuntary manslaughter. For the love, her brain needed to go easy on the death metaphors, lest it decide to literally play along and kick the proverbial bucket before she had a chance to get her mouth on his.

Speaking of his mouth...it was moving, but she couldn't hear him over everyone dancing and *screaming* the lyrics to some edm trap crowd-pleaser that was now blasting through the house. He may as well have been speaking Russian for all her ability to interpret what he was saying when all these people were freaking out over beat drops that were, to be fair, pretty damn orgasmic. Bucky's eyes were raised in question, and she shook her head, pointing to her ear.

Leaning further toward her, now halfway across the counter, he raised his voice. "Porter, Amber, Blond, or Oktoberfest?"

She sucked in her cheeks, at a complete loss. Her experience with beer was, no joke, limited to a few red cups of piss Bud Lite back in college at that *one* frat party she went to before swearing them off for life. Talk about vomit-inducing regret. Both the beer, *and* the boys. But, come on, Odin's Ravens in house options had to be superior (both the beer, *and* the boy—ha! —or uh...*man*, obviously) and she felt daring tonight.

Sitting forward, she spoke loudly. "What do you suggest?"

Bucky chewed his lip, squinting at her as though trying to read her mind. "You one of those girls who's into that pumpkin shit from Starbucks?"

She made a face, shaking her head. "Hell no. I know I fit the young... *ish*-" she added when Steve smirked at her like a total ass "-middle class female demographic, but I do *not* want my coffee to taste like a bad imitation of Thanksgiving dessert in a paper cup.

"My kinda girl," Bucky said, giving her another knee-weakening crooked grin.

"Shocking," Steve droned, "since you called it pumpkin *shit*-"he made air quotes "-kinda gave yourself away there, bud." He snickered when Liv shot him a look.

"I'm not faking an answer just to agree with him," she snapped. "You of all people know I *despise* pumpkin spice."

He held up his hands. "I didn't say you were faking it."

"I don't fake anything," she said, lifting her chin as she glared at her friend. She peeked sideways when she felt Bucky staring at her.

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His eyes roved over her face. "Are you still talking about coffee? Or...somethin' else?"

She gulped, thankfully not audibly, blinking as she tried to think of a witty response. Why was her brain shorting out on her?! That damned little smirk appeared on his face again, and he scraped his teeth over his bottom lip.

"Don't answer that. You'll like the blond," he said, standing upright and grabbing a pint glass. "Blond *beer*, that is. Not guys. No blond *guys*." He set it under the tap. "Kinda smoky. Hint of citrus. *No* pumpkin. Smooth as hell."

Blowing out a shaky breath, she clasped her hands on the counter. Could *he* just take a break from being, in his own words, *smooth as hell* for two seconds? Telling herself to get her shit together, she watched him drop an orange slice into the full glass and set it onto a cocktail napkin in front of her. Steve gave her a knowing grin and she almost stuck her tongue out at him. Controlling that urge, she took a sip instead, then moaned *very* quietly at the shockingly satisfying flavor. She downed the whole thing in ten seconds. Yeah, it was *that* good.

Steve gaped at her empty glass. "Seriously, Livvy? I really didn't wanna have to babysit you tonight."

Swiveling in her seat to glare at him, she set her jaw. "It's one beer, *dad*, and by the way, nine times out of ten *I'm* the one doing the babysitting." He started to respond but let out a defeated sigh instead when she looked away.

"So, Bucky..." she began, but trailed off when she saw that he had disappeared to take a drink order on the other end of the bar.

He turned at the sound of her voice and held up a finger, mouthing "*just a sec*" to her, then resumed talking to the other clientele. Puffing out her cheeks, she exhaled loudly and draped her arm over Steve's shoulders.

"I'm sorry for being so snappy," she frowned, leaning her forehead against his temple, "it's just...ugh...he makes me nervous as hell, you know?"

Raising his eyebrows, he laughed quietly. "I'd call it something other than *nervous*, but you do you."

He reached around her, giving her waist a good squeeze, and she patted him on the head sweetly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bucky coming toward them, grabbing a cheap house red from the wine shelf behind him along the way.

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"You wanted me?" he asked, eyes on hers as he blindly twisted a bottle opener into the cork.

He pulled the cork out with a pop, and she suppressed the instinct to blurt out, in very explicit language, exactly how much she did indeed *want* him. Instead she nodded slowly, giving him a somewhat lop-sided grin, and he grinned back. Admiring his hands as he filled a wine stem half full, she scooted forward.

"So, Bucky," she repeated herself, "what brilliant advice beyond beer flavors can you give me? What color shirt should I wear on my next dinner date? Glasses or contacts? Can I pull off skinny jeans?"

Quirking an eyebrow, he set the glass in front of a woman whose breasts were on the verge of popping out of her skintight catsuit, then walked back to Liv. She heard the woman holler "*DTF, Buck-eeee!*" at his back about ten times, and it took everything in her to not throw her glass at the woman's head. Seriously? What was wrong with people? Nothing wrong with wanting to do all the things with him, but good god, save the shameless verbal thirst for twitter or something, not real life.

"I so love a high-class lady," Steve deadpanned, eyes rolling.

"Tell me you don't hear shit like that on a daily basis, Bucky," Liv said tightly, staring daggers at catgirl or whatever costume that was as she cackled with her (presumably) friends.

Would going over there and ripping out a chunk of that trash bleach job on top of her head legally count as assault? Her narrowed gaze slid back to him when she heard him laugh quietly. She really hoped he wasn't about to say he considered that kind of blatant objectification to be a compliment. Sure, he was a guy, and no doubt that woman would *definitely* be an easy lay, which was usually what straight guys seemed to live for but come *on*. If it were the other way around, most people would call it harassment.

"Not on a daily basis, no, but when it happens, usually people are a little more discreet about it," Bucky sighed, running a hand through his hair to push the longer strands off his face. "Long as no one grabs my ass or crotch, I don't really give a damn. Types like *that* do tend to tip *extremely* well if I just smile at them once, so...whatever. Pretty easy extra hundred bucks."

Unsure what to make of that response, she squinted at him. Well, at least he hadn't said he *liked* it. She gave him a little smile as he bent down onto his elbows again.

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"Anyway, forget them. You asked me a lotta questions about some hypothetical date. Lemme see here..." his gravelly voice faded to a low hum, and he chewed his lip, looking her up and down. "Go with a loose, but not *baggy*, dark-ish shirt. Your eyes are this sorta gorgeous ambiguous grey-ish blue green color, so stick with the contacts. And if you can't pull off your skinny jeans," his gaze dropped to her mouth for a second, "I can help with that."

Before her jaw could unhinge from her skull, someone else called him by name, and he left her to take their order. While he was occupied with the impressively convincing Edward Scissorhands (*how was that guy going to HOLD a drink?*) on the other side of the bar, Liv blinked, completely at a loss for words. Was she having a psychotic break, or had he *actually* said that?

*If you can't pull off your jeans, I can help you with that??*

She was so dumbstruck by his words that she didn't see him come back to her, only realizing he was there when she heard him sigh loudly.

"Sorry," he said, counting out a cash tip in his hands, "that was beyond inappropriate."

Steve snorted then, nudging her with his shoulder. "She didn't mind, trust me."

She didn't notice the nudge or hear Steve's voice at all really. Setting her chin on her palm, she stared all dreamy-eyed at the guy who had just insinuated that he wanted to take her pants off. Uh...Bucky Barnes could *get it*. And he was gonna. *Tonight*.

She was so done with the *this-is-going-nowhere innocent* flirting thing they'd been playing at for a month. Lowering her eyes to look at her hands in her lap, she smiled so wide it made her cheeks hurt. This was like unwrapping presents on Christmas and getting *everything* on her Amazon wish list, even that ridiculous three-thousand-dollar emerald ring.

No, it was better than that. It was Halloween, and she had just unwrapped a goddamn dark-haired Adonis who apparently wanted to unwrap her too. She raised her head again, shooting him a smile. This was happening. Good thing she *had* shaved her legs.

"Want another one?" Bucky asked, pointing to her glass, and she nodded, unconsciously biting her lip at him while he refilled it.



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Setting her second drink down in front of her, he sighed again. "So, boss man made a royal decree at the staff meeting this morning. Said we're closing at ten instead of two."

Steve frowned. "What? Why so early? Of all nights, seems like this is a great one for business," he said, gesturing to the packed house, "they're all dressed up and everything."

"Maybe Odin just *really* wants to go trick or treating," Liv shrugged, then picked up her glass and drank half of it. "He basically owns this city, so it's not like he's desperate for the extra cash ya'll would make tonight. Oh, and since you mention *dressing up*," she hissed, earning her confused looks from both men as she set her glass on the counter forcefully, "why have neither of you complimented, or at the very least, *acknowledged* my costume?"

She waved vaguely at her clothes: Lavender scoop neck tank, unbuttoned blue denim jacket with rolled up sleeves, both splattered with fake blood. Usually she just let her natural waves air dry because fixing them into an actual style took an hour, and she did *not* like staring at herself for that long. But tonight, she'd smoothed it into a straight fringe with the hair dryer, setting the bad idea bangs she'd been growing out for months with a light coat of hair spray. Splotches of temporary deep crimson hair color completed the look, and she was damn proud of it.

Brow creasing, Steve looked her up and down. "That's a costume?"

Her jaw dropped, and she scoffed. "*What?* Of course, this is a costume! There's blood all over me! What, did you think I was attacked by a rabid dog on the way here?"

Steve leaned back to avoid a likely smack to his shoulder. "My god calm down. I thought that red mess all over your jacket was some weird fashion trend that old men in their ancient thirties, like me, don't know about. I never pay much attention to what you wear."

Rolling her eyes, she pointed to her head. "That *red mess* is in my hair, too, and only a dumbass wouldn't notice that."

"In his defense," Bucky piped up, and she turned to glare at him, "it doesn't look like blood in your hair. Looks like those random streaks of color some girls add to their hair when they get bored with it. Or just...y'know...really drunk."

Growling quietly under her breath, Liv gulped down the rest of her drink. Yes, she was drinking too fast. And yes, it was already making her tipsy, but she didn't

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care. As though she wasn't already worked up enough from the unbearable overactive sex hormones driving her insane, and now *this*.

"I put a lot of time and effort into this costume. Original and not total crap like those off the rack one size fits all things that smell like plastic and rubber."

She knew she sounded like such a bitchy Halloween elitist, but *still*. She could forgive Bucky for not recognizing her costume because maybe he wasn't a horror fan (that and wanting to rip his clothes off dulled her annoyance), but Steve had no excuse. He'd known her for five years, and in that time, he'd probably seen this exact outfit on that sixty inch in her living room twenty times. He was officially on her list. She was on the verge of snarling at her friend for the *unacceptable* slight, but then Bucky cleared his throat, and she realized he was looking her up and down. She forgot her best pal existed at all.

Um...Steve who?

Squinting at her, Bucky pursed his lips, then snapped his fingers once. "You're the virgin heroine from a slasher movie."

Equal parts surprised and thrilled, she smiled wide, her tongue poking through her teeth. So, he *was* a horror fan. Talk about marriage material. Inching forward to the edge of the barstool, she bit her lip.

"Be. More. Specific," she enunciated each word.

Bucky set his chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted his head. "Uhhhh...90s hair, snug yet demure tee under a denim jacket covered in blood." He paused, narrowing his gaze further. "Do you have a white cordless phone with you by any chance?" He smiled triumphantly when she produced a phone out of her bag exactly like the one he'd pictured, her eyebrows wiggling.

"Sidney Prescott," he grinned, shaking his head. "Now that I see it, I can't believe that I didn't get it right away."

Nodding her head, she flicked her hair over her shoulder and poked Steve's shoulder. "See? You should be ashamed for not know-"

"Well, as her secret killer boyfriend, I oughta know more than him," Bucky spoke over her, dragging his teeth over his bottom lip when she twisted to face him.

First off, that lip-biting thing he kept doing *had* to be illegal, and secondly, *she* had to be seeing things. The music seemed to pound louder when he stood upright, pulling one flap of his plaid shirt aside, revealing "blood" on the white shirt

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underneath. Eyes blowing wide, she watched him swipe his finger across the red stains, then put it to his lips, all while staring at her like he was *villain dessert*. Christ...speaking of *thirst*. Her stomach did an excited flip as he closed his mouth over his finger and licked it clean.

"Corn syrup," he purred- yes, *purred*- keeping his eyes on hers. "Same stuff they used for pig's blood in *Carrie*." Pulling a ghostface mask from his back pocket, which must have been hidden under his baggy flannel the whole time, he set it on the counter right in front of her.

"Shut the front door," she breathed, her face lighting up brighter than Kim K's overused highlighter.

Shooting her a quick wink, he spun on his heel, going to the sink to wash off his hand. With his back to her, Liv blinked lazily at him. Holy shit, someone give this man an Oscar because he hadn't just dressed up as Billy Loomis, he'd *nailed* that iconic *ahh! -plot-twist!* quote. She had never had a thing for the evil antagonist from *Scream*, but she *did* (apparently) have a thing for Bucky *playing* said evil antagonist.

Congratulations, sir- You've just leveled up from main crush to must-have obsession.

Did he still want to help her pull off her jeans? Because she needed help with that. Lots of very Bucky-specific help.

"Wow," Steve said, finishing his drink and smacking his lips. "Inadvertently wearing costumes for couples, guys? It's fate."

Tossing the now wet hand towel into the designated dirty towel bin, Bucky shot the smallest of smiles at Steve, then slid his eyes to Liv. They were caught up in a staring contest with each other when Steve spoke again.

"You got a bloody knife in your back pocket to go with the creepy mask?"

To her extreme disappointment, Bucky broke their heated eye contact instantly at that, and her shoulders drooped. Dammit, Steve. Way to ruin the moment.

"I *wish*," Bucky sighed heavily, "I love knives. Not in a weird way," he added when they looked at him funny. "Remember I do Krav Maga with Sam? 'Course you do, since he won't shut up about getting his black belt," he groaned deep in his chest, eyes rolling, "which by the way, I earned mine first, just sayin. We fight with knives almost every time."

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"Ohhhhhhh," Steve and Liv said at the same time, almost comically.

Ignoring a guy in a giant banana costume shouting a drink order at him, Bucky stayed put and pushed some loose strands of hair behind his ears, a deep scowl creasing his forehead.

"Like I said, I love knives, and I'm really good with them, but I lost the right to carry one as part of my costume in a stupid ass bet with Loki."

Liv opened and closed her mouth. Hold the phone...had she heard him right?

"Wait...Loki?" she asked, eyebrows shooting to her hairline as she leaned forward in her seat, interest piqued even further.

Closing his eyes, Bucky hung his head, laughing quietly- *darkly*.

"Yeah," he nodded, looking up at her from under his brow, "Loki."

Exchanging concerned glances with Steve, Liv tapped her foot nervously. Well, this should be good.

Or *bad*, more like.



To be continued...