I Took a Wrong Turn Somewhere (Somehow I Ended Up Right)
by LadyChi

Summary

Felicity Smoak made one mistake in her whole life, and his name was Oliver Queen. They had one night together, and then the Queen's Gambit went down. Then she found herself crying in a dormitory bathroom, hoping what she knew down to her bones to be the truth was a lie...

Felicity Smoak has Oliver Queen's children.

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THIS STORY IS OFFICIALLY ON HIATUS. THERE IS NO PLAN TO UPDATE IT AT THIS TIME.

Notes

I... really don't know why I'm doing this, except that I woke up in the middle of the night and I had this plot bunny and while I knew that baby fic has been done in this 'verse before, I thought perhaps it hadn't been done quite like this. I hope you enjoy it.

If you do, please feel free to follow me at my brand-new tumblr. For some reason, the other one got deleted, so, it is now storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com
Felicity Smoak only made one serious mistake in her whole life. And his name was Oliver Queen. She met him at a party -- one thrown by her high school best friend’s current college boyfriend’s frat -- one to which she’d been dragged. She spent part of the night trying to find a nice quiet, spot away from the crowd and the noise, and the other part of the night chatting with a man who seemed to be still a boy, with eyes so blue she thought they were crystals.

He said he found her interesting. He liked that she made him laugh -- and he did laugh a lot. His kiss tasted like tequila and his hands were fast and practiced. He told her that he was on a break from his long-time girlfriend. He told her about feeling lonely in the crowd, trying to fill up that space with alcohol.

She might have looked back on his lies and manipulations with anger, if she hadn’t seen right through them.

She’d smiled at him, told him he was going to have to do better than that. She said honesty was always a better choice when it came to getting in her pants.

And Oliver Queen took her challenge like no man had before.

“Felicity Smoak,” he said, “I would very much like to fuck you senseless.” And then his lips twitched into a smile. “Please.”

Felicity laughed. She told him that would be quite an accomplishment. And then she followed him to his hotel, and they proceeded to be very… enthusiastic together.

A month later, The Queen’s Gambit was lost at sea. And Felicity was peeing on a stick in a bathroom in her dormitory, praying to every god she could think of that what she knew to be true right down deep in her bones was a lie her body was telling her.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong.
When they found him on an island in the South China Sea, Felicity was at home, tucking her children into bed. Stories were read, teeth were brushed, glasses of water placed carefully by the bed. Felicity smoothed the duvet cover of Maddie’s bed with one hand. It was showing signs of wear. Perhaps in a few years she wouldn’t be so enamored of pink butterflies and Felicity could get her something different. Matthew’s comforter was all Spiderman, just like his backpack and his tennis shoes and his favorite sweatshirt.

"We're going to sleep," Felicity said. "No more voices, okay?"

They nodded. Felicity knew better than to trust them, though. As soon as she closed the door she waited for the whispers to start. She sighed and rapped the door lightly with her knuckles. "I meant it, you two. Goodnight."

She walked back to the kitchen, picking up the detersus of a day at home with four-and-a-half-year-old twins. Crayons and shoes, Cheerios and snacks everywhere. Juice and milk glasses on every surface. Kleenexes and Legoes.

She never thought that this would be her life. She hadn't really wanted this for herself. She got through college by the skin of her teeth and through the generosity of her parents. She kept Maddie and Matthew clothed and fed by working all hours of the day and night their first two years of life. And she had felt guilt, every single moment she was away.

A job offer from Queen Consolidated immediately after graduation had seemed like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, she hadn't ever spoken to anyone about the identity of the twins' father. So there was no way for anyone at QC to know that she was the mother of Oliver's children. On the other hand, maybe Oliver had said something to... someone....

But in the end, she decided she was being paranoid, and she took the job, and moved her and the twins from Michigan to Starling City into a two-bedroom apartment. She saved every penny she could towards the downpayment on a house. She'd hoped that she would be able to have the twins out of the city by the time they started kindergarten, but that was only months away and she was thousands away from her goal.

But. She took a deep breath. Her kids were smart, and funny, and kind. They were certainly well behaved. They didn't have everything they wanted, but they had everything they needed.
Her phone rang and she reached for it without looking at the caller ID.

"Are you watching this?"

Felicity shook her head. "No, Barry. I am not watching... whatever. I just got done convincing the kids that nighttime is for sleeping. I am having a single glass of red wine and listening to the sound of silence."

"You should turn your TV on. You won't believe who they found."

"Who?"

"Oliver Queen!"

Her blood froze. She gripped the phone as tight as she could.

“Can you believe it? Dude's been gone, what?"

"Five years," Felicity said hollowly. "He's been gone nearly five years."

"Apparently he's been like, Swiss Family Robinson-ing it on some island in the South China Sea that the Chinese used to use as a prison island? Pretty cool, right?"

“Yeah.” Felicity swallowed and bit her lip. “That’s… pretty cool.”

“Hey, is everything all right there?” Barry’s voice went quiet, concerned. Felicity nearly cursed his perceptiveness.

“Everything’s fine. I’m just tired.”

“Okay. Because you know if you need anything…”
“You’ll be up from Central City in a flash, I know.” Felicity smiled and laid down on the couch, closing her eyes.

“Anything for my three favorite people in the world. You know that.”

Felicity fingered the necklace he’d given her during their brief and spectacularly failed romance. He was a friend -- a good friend. The kind of friend who would drop everything in a heartbeat to do whatever you needed. And there had been a few sparks, and enough things in common that they had both thought that a relationship was worth a shot. Felicity counted their friendship surviving their amorous relationship among her great blessings in life.

“I do know that. It was good to hear your voice, Barry.”

“Okay. I’ll let you go so you can relax, ‘Licity. Have a good night.”

“Good night.”

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Oliver Queen was whisked straight from the island to a boat, straight from the boat to a plane, and straight from a plane to a hospital, where the doctors oohed and aahed over the scars his life on Lian Yu had left him with. He knew, of course, realistically, that he was nothing like the prideful, arrogant little boy who had barely survived a shipwreck -- but perhaps he had underestimated how much the time on the island would change him outwardly.

The first time a nurse asked if there was anything she could get him, he’d asked for a razor and a thick bar of soap and some privacy. She’d helped him cut his hair, but he’d scrubbed himself clean until every inch of his body felt almost raw. Five years of sweat, of dust, of earth, fell away from his body and went down the drain.

Then Oliver stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist, and faced himself in the mirror. Not a little boy anymore -- and sure enough, there was a trace of his father now, where there hadn’t been before. In the cheekbones, in the eyes.
But there was something in him that hadn’t been in his father. Something that the island had taught him about life and death, about a warrior’s spirit and a friendship betrayed. No -- there was little of Ollie Queen left in the man standing in the mirror.

“Your mother’s here to see you,” the doctor said, on the other side of the shower in the private room he’d been examined in. “She brought you some clothes.”

“All right,” Oliver said. “Just -- just a second please.”

“Yes, Mr. Queen, absolutely.”

Though he’d worked out before the island, he’d never had this body -- never needed this kind of strength or agility, so when he slid on the pants, he was grateful for the belt. The sweater sat awkwardly on his shoulders -- just a little too tight in some places, too loose in others.

He stepped out of the bathroom fully dressed, and saw the doctor waiting for him, the ever-present clipboard clasped in front of his waist. “Mr. Queen, you can, of course, leave with your family. But I suggest to you that perhaps it might be best if you seek someone you can talk to, over the course of the next few weeks. Someone who can help you… adjust.”

Oliver thought of the little red book. He thought about his father, blowing his brains out on a life raft before he could do anything to stop it. He thought about Slade, and Shado, and a mentor failed.

“Thank you,” Oliver said, with a smile that he knew he was going to need some more practice at before it looked genuine. “I just might do that.”

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Felicity walked on eggshells for the next couple of weeks. She hoped against hope she wouldn’t run into Oliver Queen at his parents’ company. Not that he’d spent a great deal of time in the building before the shipwreck, but big traumatic life-changing events tended to change people’s habits, as well, and maybe he’d decide he’d want to take a vested interest in the family company. Starting with the IT department.

And then, she wondered, what would she say? Oh hi, Oliver, nice to meet you again. I’m sure you don’t remember me, but I’m Felicity Smoak, the mother of your illegitimate children. Which no one
else knows about.

Not that she’d started out with these intentions. If she’d had it her way, she would have run to Oliver in the beginning, explained what was going on, given him the chance to be involved in Maddie and Matthew’s life. She’d grown up without a father, and knew how keenly you could feel that loss all of your life.

But Oliver’s boat had gone down, taking his life, his father’s life, and the life of a girl who probably hadn’t thought much of getting on the Queen family yacht to sail around the world with Robert and Oliver. The type of girl that Oliver usually slept with. She’d seen pictures of Sara Lance -- she was leggy and blonde and beautiful and put-together in that indefinable way that said she was the Love Interest.

And anyway, once that had all happened, Felicity felt like the worst thing she could to Moira Queen would be to come to her, pregnant, alone, and without a plan, claiming to be carrying her dead son’s children. Best case scenario, she’d dismiss Felicity, and not believe her story. Perhaps sue her for defamation of character, or something. Worst case scenario, Felicity always figured, she’d believe her story, and be appalled at Felicity’s lack of resources, and perhaps try to take the twins from her.

It hadn’t been easy. Sometimes, late at night when it was just her, trying to get two babies to take bottles and changing diapers and wiping up spit-up and knowing she had to be up in an hour to take an early morning shift at the coffee shop, she’d fantasized about a good relationship with the Queens -- one where they helped her out, financially, visited the children, loved them the way she did. She wanted them to have a relationship with their father’s family.

She just… didn’t know of anyway to give them that.

But then, eventually, the anxiety faded. When Oliver was in the papers, he was in the papers for mouthing off to the press, eschewing responsibility for his family’s company and opening a nightclub in the Glades. He was rarely seen in the hallowed halls of Queen Consolidated.

Until one day, he stepped into her office.

“Felicity Smoak?”

She knew that voice. Knew it down to the tips of her toes. Remembered what it sounded like under covers, and in the morning. Resolutely, she finished typing, and then she turned.
“Hello.”

The look on his face -- the slow, dawning look of recognition, was almost priceless. If it hadn’t been so sad that he’d forgotten her name, she would have taken a picture of it.

“It’s you.”

“Indeed. I am me, me am I.” Felicity waved her pen, fought the urge to straighten every rumpled thing about her appearance. Her shirt was stained, probably, her hair was a mess, she’d gone with glasses instead of contacts this morning for expediency’s sake, and…

There was a picture of the twins on her desk, embracing each other and looking straight into the camera. Oliver stared at it for a long moment.

“I… remember you,” he said slowly.

“That’s good, at least,” Felicity said, biting her lower lip. “As I remember you.”

“You didn’t have kids when we…”

“No.” Felicity shook her head. “Definitely not. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yeah.” He seemed to snap back to the task at hand, holding out a laptop which had definitely seen better days. “I was at a coffee shop and I uh… spilled a latte on it. Anything you could get off of it would be… very beneficial.”

She knew that tone of voice. Matthew sometimes tried to use it when he thought he was getting away with something. She looked over the computer carefully for a moment. “A latte, huh? Because these look like bullet holes.”

“My coffee shop is in a very dangerous neighborhood.”
Felicity didn’t even dignify that with a response, she just set to work.

“Thanks, Ms…. Well, Felicity.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Queen.” She didn’t look up from where she was removing the casing.

“How old are your… I mean, they’re yours, right?”

Felicity lifted her head. She wanted to tell him, right then. She wanted to say: Yes. They’re mine. And they’re yours. Guess we weren’t as careful or as clever as we thought we were. But I can’t be sorry about it because they turned out beautiful, and perfect. And I took my finals from a hospital bed so that they could come out safe and sound, and only two weeks early. And I was so scared I would do something wrong or break them that sometimes I cried for hours at a time. And Matthew had ear infections, non-stop, it seemed, for three months, but nothing ever fazed Maddie. And they used to sleep with their little fingers all curled together.

And she wanted to say: Everyone tried to tell me I couldn’t do it by myself. Everyone tried to tell me they’d be better off with someone else, but I had carried them in my body. I had loved them all this time. I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t give our babies up.

But instead, what she said was: “They’re mine. They’re four years old.”

“Just four, or?”

“They turned four about two and a half months ago,” Felicity said evenly. “I’ll be done with the laptop in a couple of hours, Mr. Queen.”

“Ah. Okay.” Oliver turned to leave. Felicity could see his brain at work, the calendar slowly counting back. It wouldn’t be long before he asked the question, and she told herself, as soon as it was discovered he was alive, if he ever asked her, she’d tell him the truth. “It was good to see you again, Ms. Smoak.”

“You too.”
When he was gone, she got up from her desk, walked to the ladies room, found a stall, sat down on
the toilet, and cried.

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“What do you know about Felicity Smoak?”

Walter looked up from his desk. “Oh, hello, Oliver. Nice to see you.”

Oliver took a look around, and realized there were three very-serious looking employees sitting
around Walter’s desk, taking notes on whatever he was saying.

“I’m very sorry to interrupt,” Oliver said, as contritely as he could muster. “Walter, can I speak to
you for just one moment?”

“Sure, would you mind giving us the room, please?” Walter asked, and all of the employees rose as
one and filed out of the door. “You were asking me about Felicity Smoak.”

“Yes. I --” Oliver drew in a deep breath. “I was just wondering why you recommended her, in
particular.”

“She’s the very best in the technical division,” Walter said evenly. “But if you’re unhappy with what
she was able to do for you, I’m sure Stan can recommend someone else…”

“No,” Oliver’s voice was firm. “Definitely don’t need… anybody else. I’m not unhappy at all. I just
- - I knew her before.”

“Oh really.” Walter sat back in his chair, steepled his fingers together. Oliver was unaware people
still did that unironically. “I was unaware of that. She certainly didn’t mention it in any of the
conversations we’ve had, or the interviews.”

“She wouldn’t. I don’t think she cares over much about… impressing people. Anyway. Do you have
a personnel file on her?”
“I’m sure I could pull it for you. I can tell you that she’s overcome quite a bit of adversity over the past few years. You know that scholarship your mother gives out?”

“For young mothers who are getting their degrees.”

“Yes. She was a recipient three years in a row. She’s cracker-jack smart and she does her best by her kids.” There was a note of warning in Walter’s voice.

“Listen, if that’s what you’re worried about, don’t be. Single mothers were never my thing. I’m just… checking up on a friend.”

“I think,” Walter said, his voice cutting into the memories playing in Oliver’s head, “if you want to check up on a friend, perhaps you ought to ask her these questions yourself.”

Oliver nodded, vaguely, and rose to his feet. “Did she ever say who… I mean, is the father involved?”

“It’s always been my understanding that the father of those children has passed, unfortunately.”

“Okay.” Oliver got to his feet, tried to remember what smiling genuinely looked like, and rearranged his face to something approximating that. “Thanks for your help, Walter.”

“You’re welcome.”

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“It’s just the expectations. Somebody’s constantly disappointed in you, you know? You aren’t a genius like your father. You aren’t… congenial and charming like your mother. Whatever it was that made them so magical, you don’t have it, so you just -- eventually, you give up trying. And then you’re left wondering: if I’m not my parents, then who am I?”

The girl, young and blonde, the way he liked them, crossed one leg over the other and stared at him
for a minute. “Do you actually get girls with that line of crap?”

“Excuse me, what?”

“I mean, I guess I can see the appeal. They think you’re baring your soul to them, but you really aren’t, are you? I mean, it’s true enough but it’s not the kind of truth that keeps you up at night, is it Oliver?”

Oliver lifted his mouth in a smile and dodged the question. “So if my usual lines won’t work for you, what does, Felicity Faith Smoak?”

“Well, Oliver Robert Queen, you might try some actual honesty.”

“I broke up with my girlfriend. It sucks. But then it doesn’t suck, sometimes.”

“Ah, the post break-up dichotomy. Blessed freedom. Crushing aloneness. All in one swirly-whirl ice cream cone of suckitude.”

“I think you’re hot,” Oliver said, and laid a hand on Felicity’s thigh. “I mean, really, incredibly hot.”

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By the time four forty-five had rolled around, Felicity was done. She needed to pick Maddie and Matthew up at the QC daycare before 5:30 and getting data off of the computer had been no walk in the park. There was a screaming headache behind her eyes.

And then Oliver Queen walked through her door.

“I have your data for you. But I have to tell you, I want no part in whatever… corporate espionage
thing you’ve got going on right now.”

That seemed to genuinely puzzle him. And so she explained: about the stock auction, about who the laptop really belonged to. All of her Spidey-senses were tingling, but she tamped down on the urge to ask him to explain himself more. One, it wasn’t really her business: if Oliver Queen wanted to be less-than-truthful to one of his employees, it wasn’t really a crime. And two: she really wanted him to leave.

But she could see in his eyes that he had questions. He’d done the math. He’d seen their eyes -- the brilliant Queen eyes staring at him in the picture frame.

He took his laptop, and was about to leave again, before he turned and faced her. “I need you to tell me the truth.”

“I’ve never lied to you yet,” Felicity said evenly.

“Four years and a few months -- that would line up about right from when we…”

“Yes. It would,” Felicity said.

“So?”

“So what?” Felicity reached for her pencil and gripped it as hard as she could.

Oliver crossed the room, and sat down in the chair across from her desk, resting his forearms on its dark surface. “Felicity. You know what I’m asking you.”

Panic rose in her throat, for once cutting off the words that she would have otherwise spoken. She took a deep breath and steadied herself for the explosion she knew was coming. “If you’re asking if Madelyn and Matthew are yours…”

“Yes, that’s what I’m asking.”
“Then yes. They are.”

Something flickered in his eyes, and then they shut down, as cold and impenetrable as a steel wall. “Oh.”

Felicity pushed her chair back from her desk. All of a sudden he was too close. “I don’t want you to think I -- I expect anything. I mean, obviously, you weren’t around when I was making all of the decisions, so you didn’t really get a say, but I mean….”

“I have… children.” Oliver leaned back in his chair and flung his arm over his face. Felicity thought, for one horrible moment, that he was going to cry, but then he started to laugh. “I’ve got kids.”

“Well, technically speaking, I have children,” Felicity said. “You, I mean, do… as well… but not in the sense of….”

“Felicity. I -- “ Oliver stopped laughing, stood up and started to pace. “I just don’t know what to do with this information. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, honestly.”

Felicity shrugged. “I don’t know. I hadn’t… fully made up my mind. I had vague thoughts of like -- walking up to Queen Manor and knocking on the door and seeing if you recognized me, which presupposed me actually being able to get to Queen Manor….”

“Felicity, you don’t honestly think I’d forgotten you, do you?”

“I always figured I was one slightly abnormal encounter in a lifetime of… encounters.” She could see from the tilt of his lips that she wasn’t completely wrong.

“I have …” Oliver sighed. “Madelyn and….”
“Matthew.” Felicity supplied. “I want to be clear here: I am not expecting anything out of you, Oliver. I’ll let you figure out what you want to do. If you want to have a relationship with them, we’ll have to talk about it.”

Oliver took the picture off of her desk, and stared at it for a long moment. “Can I…”

“Do you want a copy?” Felicity asked, her heart in her throat. “I can -- I can get you a copy. And of course, if you want, I can… supply you with their hair so you can run all the tests to make sure I’m not lying to you, although, again -- I’m not expecting anything, least of all money, okay?”

“Yes. I want a copy.” Oliver straightened his shoulders. “And… I suppose… we had better… I believe you, of course. But…”

“Not everyone will,” Felicity said, with a smile. “It’s okay, Oliver. Just -- let me know what you’re thinking, all right?” She reached in her desk, took out a sheet of pictures from a local school picture company, and removed a wallet-sized photo of the twins wearing closely-matched green outfits, and gave it to Oliver, along with her business card, with her cell phone number written on the back.

“Thanks, Felicity.”

“You’re welcome.”

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In the afterglow, Oliver found himself lingering -- not something he was prone to. It wasn’t unheard of for him to want to stick around for round two, but it wasn’t, exactly, his usual modus operandi.

“Is this the part where you tell me you’ve got a very important business meeting in the morning and we put our clothes back on and you very gently tell me that maybe it’s better if this was a one-time thing?”

Oliver looked up from the lock of her hair he’d been playing with. “Why? Is that what you’re used to hearing?”
“No. But then, I don’t normally do… stuff like this.”

“Stuff like what?”

“Sleep with older guys I just met. Or guys I met at a party. Really. Actually, I don’t do much sleeping with… guys at all. Or girls. Or anything in-between, you know, because gender’s not really a binary thing, and…”

“Felicity.” Oliver bent and kissed her collarbone. “Calm down. I don’t have a business meeting in the morning. I do, however, have a… craving.”

“A craving for what?”

Oliver bent and whispered in her ear something truly filthy and delightful. Felicity blushed and chuckled, and indulged him.

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All through the next few days, as Oliver did his best to keep his family alive and breathing, his conversation with Felicity ran in the back of his mind, and the memories of their one night together played on a loop.

He couldn’t sleep. Insomnia was an old friend. Only this time, the demons of his time on the island weren’t the thing keeping him awake. Or they weren’t, mostly. It was a picture in his wallet.

He’d looked at it so often now he practically had it memorized -- the folds in Madelyn’s dress, the silly grin on Matthew’s face that was so much his sister Thea at that age that it was uncanny. They were beautiful children. They had hair the color of honey in a jar, and bright blue eyes. The boy’s face was narrow and then -- so much Felicity. And Madelyn had more rounded features. They were embracing each other happily, laughing into the camera.

He wondered what their voices sounded like. What they would think of him. He’d not spent much time around kids, ever, with the sole exception of Thea, and even then, that had been years ago. Some of his classmates had gone on to have children, of course, but they were kept carefully separate, trotted out to perform on instruments occasionally, or to look cute in family photos. Not something he’d enjoyed as a child.
Or wanted for his own children, actually. The few times he’d thought about ever having children with anyone, it had been Laurel, of course. Distantly. Hazily. The mere thought of sharing an apartment with her had been enough to lead to him self-destructing that relationship. How was he supposed to handle… fatherhood, exactly, without self-destructing?

“Hey!” Tommy knocked on the door frame. “Your mom let me in, told me you were up here.”

“Were we supposed to be going out tonight?” Oliver asked, looking at Tommy’s outfit, a slick suit with a button-up shirt.

“No, we weren’t supposed to, but I thought you might want to get out and see the sights a bit with me tonight. I know the past few days have been kind of stressful, what with getting shot at and all.”

“Ah.”

“And Laurel told me she uh -- she might have been a little bit harsh with you the other night.”

Oliver waved a hand. “It’s nothing I don’t deserve, really.”

“What’s that?” Tommy asked, pointing to the picture in Oliver’s hand.

“It’s uh --” Oliver thought for a minute. “It’s a picture.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Without asking, Tommy lifted the picture from Oliver’s hand. “Huh. Cute kids. Whose?”

Oliver weighed his options. He could lie, of course, but he was lying to Tommy about so much already. “Mine.”

Tommy took a step back. “What? Are you sure?”
“Timing’s right. Woman’s right.” Oliver shrugged. “I’m having the biolabs at Queen Consolidated run all of the tests, but… I’m pretty sure she’s not lying to me. Just look at them.”

“Holy crap. The boy looks a lot like your father, doesn’t he?”

Oliver shrugged. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Hell of a welcome-home present, friend.”

Oliver laughed. “Yeah, that’s pretty much what I was thinking.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

Oliver shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s what I was just sitting here thinking about.”

“Well, those kids deserve a father. Is there another man in the picture?”

“No. Felicity –”

“The mother?”

“Yeah. She said if I wanted to have a relationship with them, we could talk about it.” Oliver closed his eyes. “I’m just not sure -- Tommy, hell. You know I’m not cut out to be a father right now.”

“Those kids aren’t going to wait around until you’re ready to be a father,” Tommy said with a shrug. “Listen -- you and I both said, if we ever… found ourselves in this situation, we were going to do better than our fathers, right?”

“Yeah.” Oliver sighed.

“Hey -- I’m pretty sure I’m the first one to do this, right?”
“What?”

Tommy pulled Oliver into a one-armed hug. “Congratulations, man.”

Oliver smiled grimly and returned the hug. “Thanks, Tommy.”

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Felicity’s phone rang late in the evening several days later, when the twins were sound asleep. She didn’t recognize the number, so she answered formally. “This is Felicity Smoak.”

“Hey, Felicity, it’s Oliver Queen.”

Felicity sat up straight. “I heard your family was involved in the shooting the other day. Are you all right?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Ah, yes, thank you. We’re all fine.”

“Good. I was worried,” Felicity said, and then bit her tongue. “What… I mean, I assume you’re calling about…”

“The tests came back from QC,” Oliver said.

“Wow, that was quick,” Felicity said, and pressed her palm to her chest, trying to calm its racing pattern.

“I had them put a rush on it,” Oliver said. “I didn’t want to…”

“I understand,” Felicity said quickly. “Well?”
“I was wondering -- I mean -- I would like to have a relationship with my children.” Oliver’s voice nearly cracked. “Please.”

Felicity wrapped her arms around herself. “I don’t want to keep you from them, Oliver. I just need to figure out how… I mean. We need to figure out how we go about this. I don’t want the kids to get hurt if…”

“If I wake up tomorrow and decide that Oliver Queen, playboy, doesn’t have time for being a dad?” Oliver asked.

“Well, yes. To be blunt,” Felicity said.

“I seem to recall that you like that kind of honesty,” Oliver said softly. “I don’t know what to say to you to make you think that I’ve changed, but…”

“I know,” Felicity said. “Listen, tomorrow’s Saturday, right?”

“Right.”

“We usually go to Starling City Celebration Park in the afternoon. If you’re free around one, you could stop by. I’ll introduce you to the kids as my friend. We’ll… see how it goes from there.”

The door to the twins’ room opened and Maddie stepped out. “Mama?”

“Yes, baby?” Felicity asked. “Just one second, Oliver.”

“Can I have some water?”

“There’s a glass in the bathroom. You may fill it up and have a drink and go back to bed.”

“Which uh -- which one was that?” Oliver asked.
“Madelyn. I call her Maddie. She does this quite a bit -- dozes, and then wants to go to the bathroom or get a drink, and then she goes back to bed. It just takes her a couple of hours to go to sleep all the way.”

“Oh,” Oliver said. “I guess -- I’ve probably got a lot to learn, huh?”

“One step at a time,” Felicity said.

“I do want to get to know them. And I do want to get to know you,” Oliver said, firmly. “I want to try and do my best at this. I know -- I know for sure it’s what my father would want. It’s what I want. But I’m also --”

“You also just got back from an island. And apparently you’ve got a lot going on,” Felicity said. “I get it, Oliver. Like I said -- I don’t want anything from you that you don’t want to give. But if you’re going to do this, if I’m going to bring you into our children’s lives, then I need to know that you’re doing it with your eyes wide open, Oliver. These kids don’t deserve to have their hearts broken.”

“I know.” There was a long pause, then Felicity could hear Oliver expel a long breath. “Well. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

Felicity hung up the phone and looked down at her hands. She hoped she was making the right decision.

**

John Diggle stared at Oliver from across the basement. “Where are you going?”

Oliver slipped his shirt back on and glanced down at his watch, calculating whether he still had time to shower or not. “The park.”

“To meet a girl?” Diggle lifted one corner of his mouth. “I thought you were still all about Ms. Lance.”
A pang hit Oliver in the stomach. Laurel. He… was going to have to tell her, eventually, and add a brand new offense to the long list of ways he had betrayed her all of those years ago. He was going to have to tell everyone. His mother, his sister…. He was going to have to figure out a way to keep them safe.

He’d never thought about doing this when he had this much to lose. But he couldn’t deny himself this, couldn’t force himself to walk away from Felicity and the kids he’d only ever seen pictures of.

“To meet Felicity Smoak.”

“The IT girl.”

“Yes. I’m going to take a shower.”

“Why are you going to the park to meet the IT girl?”

“Because she’s…” Oliver sighed. “It’s complicated, okay?”

“Oliver, I’ve known you less than a month and a half, and I’ve got say, nothing with you is ever simple.”

“I’m going to grab a quick shower and then you can drive me over,” Oliver said.

“Oh I can, can I?”

“Yeah, this is definitely an Oliver Queen meeting.”

A few minutes later, Oliver was showered and dressed in clean clothes. He found himself staring in the mirror again, the way he had just a few weeks prior. He thought he’d figured himself out on the island, firmed up all of the weak parts of himself.
How wrong he’d been. He was scared in a way he’d not been scared since the very beginning on the island.

“Oliver, are you ready to go?” Diggle’s voice cut through the bathroom door.

“Yeah.” Oliver pushed away from the mirror. “Let’s go.”

He was situated in the backseat of the black sedan before Diggle resumed his interrogation. “Oliver, you want to tell me what this is all about?”

Oliver looked out the window, and watched Starling City pass by in flashes of grey and green. “About three weeks before the boat when down, Laurel and I… broke up. For about two days. She wanted our relationship to move forward -- I was an idiot. I thought I was too young. I thought we were moving fast enough, even though we’d been dating for years. I liked things the way they were. But I was also in love with her. So I’d lie to her about how I felt. I’d tell her I was ready for us to move in together, to start looking at rings… But then every time we would start to do those things…”

“You’d wimp out, wouldn’t you?” Diggle’s eyes met his in the rearview mirror. Oliver’s mouth lifted in a smile.

“Yes, exactly. I’d wimp out. I’d run for the hills. Laurel was getting really tired of it.”

“For good reason,” Diggle said.

“I went to a party at Starling City University thrown by a friend of a friend of a friend. It was getting… crazy, the way parties in those days did. But I caught sight of this beautiful blonde girl. She was watching everyone lose their minds and it looked like she thought it was hilarious. But not like she thought she was better than everyone there…. it’s hard to describe. There was just something about her.” Oliver shrugged. “I wanted her. I was single. I went over and I tried all of my best moves on her.”

“And she fell for it,” Diggle said, smugly.

“Nope. She didn’t at all. She told me she was interested in sleeping with me, if that’s what I wanted, but she had no interested in playing any games. Looking back on it, I think maybe she wasn’t as… secure as she sounded back then, but I just found it… incredibly hot.” Oliver coughed. “Anyway.
We slept together. Then I got back with Laurel. And then I started sleeping with Laurel’s sister. And then the boat went down and by the time I got back to Starling City I hadn’t thought about Felicity in… a long time.”

“Oh.” Diggle was beginning to see what was going on, or so he thought. “So are you two attempting to rekindle whatever it was that made that night so… magical?”

Oliver shook his head. “No. We slept together one night, five years ago. And apparently what they tell you in health class in middle school is very true. It only takes one time.”

“She’s got your kid?” Diggle asked, his eyes widening.

“She’s got my kids. Plural. Two of them.”

“Oliver,” Diggle said sternly. “How long have you known about this?”

“She told me two weeks ago. We ran the DNA tests and I got them back yesterday. They confirmed her story.”

“And knowing that didn’t slow you down?” Diggle turned into the park’s parking area and turned the car off. “Knowing you’ve got kids didn’t make you rethink this… crusade you’ve got going on at all?”

“No,” Oliver said firmly. “If anything, it makes me want to press the accelerator. Digg, my children are living here. Going to school here. Walking the streets here. I need this place to be better for them.”

Digg sighed. “So what are we doing here? Playing at being a Dad for an afternoon?”

“No,” Oliver said. “I’m just…. meeting them. Felicity thinks we should see how it goes.”

“Well, at least one of you has got a brain in your head,” Diggle said under his breath, and he followed Oliver down the pathway to the playground.
“Keep an eye out, okay?” Oliver said under his breath as they neared the swingset. “I don’t want a lot of attention, so let me know if we need to make a quick exit.”

“Sure, Oliver.”

It was a warm afternoon in Starling City, and a Saturday to boot, so the park was crowded with children running and screaming, vaulting off of playground equipment and playing the kinds of games Oliver remembered playing all throughout elementary school. Oliver caught sight of Felicity almost immediately. She was seated on a park bench, a cup of coffee in her hands. At the office, he had noticed, she dressed nicely, but here at the park, she wore a faded pair of jeans and an MIT hoodie, her hair pulled back in a simple ponytail.

She was engaged in a conversation with one of the other moms, gesturing with her hands while her eyes tracked her children throughout the park. As soon as she caught sight of him, though, she stopped and waved at him.

“Oliver!” She sounded genuinely pleased to see him as she said goodbye to her friend and said goodbye, meeting him halfway. Some part of his nerves calmed slightly. Apparently this wasn’t going to be awkward right from the start.

“Hey, Felicity.” Oliver turned to check on Diggle, who had stopped some distance away and stood, with his arms behind his back, somehow blending in with the rest of the crowd.

“Who’s that?” She asked.

“John Diggle. He’s my driver and sort of my bodyguard. It’s a long story, but he’s a good guy. I thought it might be a good idea to have him here, in case someone puts two and two together and calls the paparazzi four.”

“Hey, John,” Felicity said easily, waving her hand. “Thank you for this.”

“It’s not a problem, Ms. Smoak,” Diggle said with a warm smile. “Happy to help.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I didn’t even think…”
“I imagine you had quite enough on your mind already,” Diggle said easily. Oliver stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.

“Well, Maddie and Matthew are excited to meet you,” Felicity said, turning to look at them. “I don’t introduce them to people very often so…”

“Mama!” The little girl who ran over had hair that was longer than the picture Oliver had of her. It had been braided, although some of it was falling out. The knees of her jeans were black with mud. “Matthew pushed me over!”

“Well, you tell him to come here, and we’ll talk about it,” Felicity said evenly.

“Okay!”

Maddie ran off and then returned with her brother in tow. Oliver found himself breathless. He couldn’t find the words to speak. He wasn’t expecting to feel a connection to his children like this. He wasn’t expecting the way seeing them with Felicity would impact him.

He had, of course, mourned for the time he missed with his family. Coming back and seeing Thea so changed, so grown up, had been quite a trip. He’d known that she would be seventeen, that she would be different, but actually seeing it had thrown him.

But nothing like this. It hit him, all of a sudden, how much he’d missed. Tears threatened his cool demeanor. He’d had one extremely pleasant night with Felicity. But he’d missed the pregnancy. He’d missed seeing them as babies. He’d missed bathtimes and mealtimes and putting them to bed. He’d never cared for them while they were ill. They were meeting him for the first time, and they wouldn’t know to call him Dad.

While he steadied himself, Felicity negotiated the twins’ disagreement until they were both apologizing and hugging each other.

“Maddie, Matthew, I want you to meet my friend Oliver.”

Matthew, it seemed, was the shy one. He hid behind Maddie and waited until she shyly said hello.
“It is… very nice to meet you two,” Oliver said softly, extending his hand. Maddie looked up at him, a grin overtaking her face. She reached out and slammed her hand down on his in the most enthusiastic high-five he’d ever received.

Not to be outdone, Matthew did the same, and Oliver made a show of pulling his hand back and shaking it like they’d really hurt him.

“You are both very strong,” he said.

“I’m the strongest!” Matthew shouted. “I’m so strong, look!” He flexed his arm muscles for Oliver to see.

“Look at me!” Maddie demanded, doing the same. Oliver obligingly reached out and felt each of their bicep muscles, looking very impressed. “Your turn!” Maddie shouted, and reached her hands out to touch Oliver’s arms before he’d got them flexed. “Whooooooaaa,” she said.

Felicity covered her mouth with her hand. “Would you two like to walk around, see if we can’t find the ice cream man?”

“For reals?” Matthew shouted.

“Yes, absolutely, for reals,” Felicity said.

**

They spent the next few hours in the park. Oliver was a huge hit. He climbed the monkey bars with them, he took their talk about superheroes and bugs very seriously. Never once did his attention waver from them.

It was stupidly attractive.
Felicity reminded herself over and over and over again that this was not a Disney movie. Oliver had come back from the dead. That much was true. Her children would finally have a father. That was also true. Mostly.

But they had never been in love. Her one night with Oliver, other than the conception of her children, had not been the most romantic experience. He’d been in love with someone else. She’d been a little bit lost and they’d had fun together. There had definitely been attraction there, and some heat.

Oliver had been then, and probably still was now, though, in love with someone else.

Still, Felicity thought, she could appreciate the view of Starling City’s returned pretty bad-boy playing enthusiastically with two four-year-olds. She could find it attractive, she told herself, and separate herself from the fantasy of a more traditional family.

She really and truly could.
part ii: "an innocent man", "damaged", and "legacies"

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity deal separately with the events of the episodes listed, and work together to try and figure out a way to coparent their children.

Chapter Notes

Wow! An abnormally-fast update from me! This is not my usual writing speed. Don't get your hopes up!

I also wanted to say THANK YOU and OH MY GOSH WOW to all of the people that left kudos and comments on the first chapter! I will get to thanking those of you that commented, but rest assured, my swift-updating is for YOU lovely people you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver stayed with them from the park to ice cream. And finally, she invited him over for dinner and that had evolved into him staying to help the twins get ready for bed. Felicity had a thought that maybe they were moving too fast, but the twins had begged, and they had really been good, and Oliver hadn’t really wanted to leave, either.

He read story after story. He clearly wasn’t very practiced at reading out loud, but Maddie and Matthew both sat in rapt attention while he read Curious George to them. They were exhausted from a long day at daycare, and it hadn’t taken long after the light was turned out for them to fall asleep.

“What did you tell them about me?”

Felicity poured them a glass of wine and turned the TV on low to cover the sound of their voices. “What do you mean, about you -- about you you, or about their father you?”

“About their father,” Oliver said, taking the glass from her. “Thank you for this.”

“You’re welcome. I find Pinot Noir to be the best companion for gourmet mac and cheese straight from the box, myself,” Felicity said on a chuckle. She took a sip of the wine and gathered her
thoughts. “I told them that their father died on a boat. I told them he was in heaven. I told them that he didn’t get a chance to know them while they were alive but that he would have loved them.”

“Ah. Okay then.” Oliver took a sip of his wine and lifted his eyebrows. “This is good.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said. “I get one good bottle a month. It’s sort of my vice. And I can tell by the look on your face that you didn’t come here just to eat my outstanding Kraft creations and drink my wine. What’s going on, Oliver?”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, slowly. “I think…. I think we need a better plan than this, Felicity. I have a lot of secrets to keep from my family. I just don’t know how much longer I can keep this under wraps.”

Felicity’s heart sputtered. “Oliver…”

“I know, we need to tell the kids first. We need to figure out more of how… this is going to work. I know I don’t have a right to ask anything from you, Felicity, but…” Oliver stopped. “Felicity, don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying!” Felicity said, reaching for a Kleenex to wipe her eyes. “And if I was, I wouldn’t know why, so.”

“If this is too much, then…”

“No.” Felicity held her hand up. “I’m sorry, Oliver. I just don’t know how to handle this.”

“I don’t know how to handle it, either,” Oliver said. “I know, it’s got to be… weird for you, to have me show up after all these years, but I came back from the island and found out I was a father, so….”

“There aren’t any manuals for this kind of thing,” Felicity said on a laugh. “And not a single chapter in any parenting book I’ve ever read about what to do if one of the parents involved comes back from the dead.”

“I want us to work out a way where I can see the kids,” Oliver said. “I want them to… have rooms at the mansion, feel like they really belong there, eventually. I want them to be able to have a
relationship with Thea, and with Mom. But my life is so -- crazy, right now. If they come stay with me they might be with babysitters some of the time.”

“When they’re with me they’re with babysitters some of the time, Oliver,” Felicity said. “Not all of the time, but some of the time. It might -- it might take some getting used to for me to split time with you, honestly. I’ve been taking care of them all by myself since they were born, and…”

“I understand. I’m not saying we share custody right away, if we ever get there,” Oliver said. “But I do…. I want them to be part of my family.”

“I’d like that, too,” Felicity said softly.

“You know holding my mother back once she realizes she has grandchildren is going to be quite a feat,” Oliver said, with a smile. She could see he was trying to reassure her.

“I thought about… going to her, once,” Felicity said honestly. “I had just been awarded the Moira Queen Educating Young Mothers scholarship. Part of my prize was a breakfast with her. And the whole time I sat there, I wanted to say -- by the way, did you know? But I never could make myself do it. I didn’t think she’d believe me, and I…."

Oliver reached out, and touched her hand lightly. The first time he’d touched her since they’d reunited. “She’s going to love you, and she’s going to love the kids.”

“We should tell the kids first,” Felicity said. “They’re… probably going to want to know where you were. And then you can tell your family.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “And then there’s one other thing, Felicity.”

“What?”

“No matter what happens, I want you to come and meet with some lawyers with me.”

“Because like it or not, Matthew and Maddie are Queens, Felicity,” Oliver said gently. “And that means that part of everything I own is theirs.”

“Oliver, I told you that money was the last thing that I…”

“I know you didn’t ask for it. I know you don’t particularly want it, but Felicity -- I want to make it so that if I’m ever not here, Matthew and Maddie can go to whatever school they want to go to. I want to make it so you don’t have to worry about them driving safe cars or living in safe places. It’s the bare minimum I can do. And I don’t know that I’ll be able to live with myself if we don’t do this soon.”

“Oliver, you know you’re safe now, right?” Felicity asked, squeezing his hand. “I mean, you’re not worried about…”

“I should have died in the shipwreck, and countless other times over those five years, Felicity,” Oliver said. “If there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s that I can’t take my survival for granted. I’m sure you’ve got something in place in case something happens to you, right?”

“My -- mom. She would get custody. There’s some money in life insurance. It’s not much but…”

“It’s the best you can do, right?” Oliver said. “That’s all I want to do for Maddie and Matthew. The best I can do.”

“Yes.” Felicity sighed. “All right. We can go see some lawyers.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said, with relief. “I should probably get going. I still have one more stop to make tonight.”

“Okay,” Felicity said. “We’ll talk tomorrow and set something up.”

***
Oliver left Felicity’s house and went straight to Verdant, where he swiftly changed clothes. He had wanted to stay, and drink her wine, and maybe sneak another peak of the twins sleeping in their beds. He was learning so much about them. Shy Matthew, until you asked him to destroy a tower or what he thought of Superman, and then he talked a mile a minute. Maddie, who was bright and talkative and loved nature. She would talk all day about flowers and bugs, and got into everything.

Felicity’s apartment wasn’t much. But it was enough, Oliver thought. It was clean -- not sterile clean like some of the houses he’d spent time in growing up, but the kind of clean that was good, and homey.

He wished that she would let him help more. He would give her the world if she would ask for it, but he knew that she wouldn’t take it. Getting her to agree to the trust funds he intended to set up for the kids had been a victory in and of itself.

But now -- Oliver took a deep breath. He let all of that go -- his worries about Felicity, the children, and tried to concentrate on what was in front of him. Jason Brodeur was on the list, and Peter Declan deserved a chance to live, and the best defense counsel that Oliver could get for him, which meant he would have to lean on the good nature of Laurel Lance.

Oliver swept the green paint across his eyes and pulled his hood up.

**

When Felicity got the summons, all of her coworkers looked at her with huge eyes and mouthed things like “what did you do” and “you are soooo toast”. Felicity couldn’t help but wonder if maybe Oliver had said something to Walter, and maybe that was why she was being summoned to the office -- maybe they’d try to fire her to get her out of the way…. maybe he wanted to ask her questions….

But it was most likely, she decided, that someone had made an extremely poor decision. She wasn’t going anywhere without a fight. She had a good situation at Queen Consolidated. Granted, her supervisor was an incompetent asshole. The kids liked the daycare here, though. The pay was as good, or better than anywhere else, and she thought she was a valuable member of the team.

Mother of Oliver Queen’s bastard children or not. She set her shoulders and strode across the impressive corridor to the wall of glass that led to Walter Steele’s office.

“I would like to know why I am being fired!” Felicity heard the door to Walter Steele’s office close
right behind her.

“Excuse me?” Walter looked up placidly from his desk.

“I’m the biggest asset this company has in its technical division, and that’s including my so-called ‘supervisor’, so letting me go would be a huge mistake,” Felicity continued.

Walter smiled slightly. “I agree most emphatically, Ms. Smoak.”

Relief flooded through Felicity. She let out all the breath she’d been holding in. “I’m sorry, I just figured when you called me up here…” Unable to stop herself, she mimed slitting her throat and flushed.

“No. I called you up here because I would like your help with something.”

While Mr. Steele instructed her about tracing a company and two point six million dollars, Felicity fought the urge to sink to the floor. Her knees went a little weak, but she heard every word. When she took the folder of information from Mr. Steele, she fumbled her way through saying thank you and good-bye.

When she got in the elevator to go back down to her floor, she wrapped her arms around her chest and counted to ten three times. She wasn’t sure her heart was going to survive the next week until all of her secrets were out. Once Mr. Steele realized what she had been keeping from him and his wife, it was very likely that he would never ask for her help again.

Unless, perhaps, she did a very good job.

Felicity straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath.

**

Oliver couldn’t help coming home from seeing Laurel feeling like for once, things were going his way. Everything he’d sacrificed, all the pain that he’d been through….The friends he’d lost, and betrayed, and tried to save and failed… maybe the scales were finally balancing.
He made a show of studying the pictures in the entryway while he turned over the days’ events in his mind. Diggle was committed to helping him now. Laurel had seen him -- perhaps not the so-called real him, but the masked him, and was slowly coming around to that side of him.

And he had met his children. His fingers itched to pull the picture from his wallet and put it in one of the frames.

“What’s that?” Thea came around the corner, her tone genuinely shocked. “Oliver, what’s wrong with your face?”

“What?”

“Your face! It looks like… is that a smile?” Thea’s teasing took him back, years, to when this would have been the normal way they talked to each other.

“It might be,” Oliver said, letting the smile grow -- it felt genuine now, it felt good. Life felt good.

“What brought that on?” Oliver shrugged. It was hard to find the right words. To say what he wanted to say. He laughed. He actually laughed, and Thea’s mouth dropped open. “Are you feeling okay?”

“You know what, Speedy? I’m feeling great,” he said, running a hand over his hair. “I took your advice with Laurel.”

“Yeah?”

“I think it’s working,” he said, and laughed again. “And … good things are happening, Thea. Good things.”

Thea crossed the room, and wrapped her arms around his neck. Surprised, Oliver hesitated only a moment before he returned her hug.
“I never thought I’d see you act like this again,” Thea said into his neck, “I don’t care if it’s Laurel or if you’ve rediscovered Jack Daniels. I just want you to smile like this all the time, okay?”

Oliver thought about Maddie and Matthew, their bright, interested eyes on him, getting ice cream in the park, eating mac and cheese and spending the day knowing that -- maybe because he hadn’t been all that involved, he hadn’t fucked this one major thing up in his life. “I think I can promise I will try to smile more often, Thea.”

“Good, Ollie. That’s… more than I ever hoped for.”

As Thea went up the stairs, Oliver took out his phone, and sent Felicity a quick text. *I think sooner is better than later. Dinner tomorrow?*

It didn’t take long to read the text. _Yes. Tomorrow is good. Five-thirty, at my apartment._

Oliver sent a confirmation text, slipped his phone into his pocket, and jogged back up the stairs to his room. He didn’t think he’d sleep tonight, but for happier reasons this time than his usual fare.

**

The next day, Felicity worked hard. She was as thorough as she’d ever been, and whatever Moira Queen had been trying to hide, she had paid someone who was very good at their job to do her electronic hiding for her. But Felicity prided herself on always being able to find an electronic trail. It took her working non-stop and several big gulp sodas, but when she finally got it, she stood up in her chair and cheered.

The rest of the IT department was used to this from her, and only a few people turned around in their cubicle chairs to see what she was cheering for.

Two-point six million dollars had bought Moira Queen -- Steele? Queen. Two point six million dollars had bought Moira Queen a very handy little LLC, which she used to make one purchase, and one purchase only. A warehouse in Starling City. No information on the contents. Not that Felicity was curious about that at all. Because she definitely wasn’t a curious type of person. Nope.

The alarm went off on her computer, and her eyes widened. She dialed the number to the Queen Consolidated Company Child Development Center and sighed when she got Linda, the very patient
“Linda? I’m so sorry. I’ve got a meeting with Mr. Steele. It shouldn’t take me much more than five or ten minutes. I’ll pay the late fee, again, I just wanted to let you know…”

“It’s not a problem, dear, I was going to be here that late locking doors anyway. Get here when you get here.”

Felicity stood up, straightened her skirt and half-jogged over to the elevator. “Prepare to have your mind blown, Mr. Steele.”

**

Oliver’s good day quickly turned sour the next. Laurel Lance had been on the case, and clearly doing her best, pulling every trick in the book, working overtime to try and free Paul Declan. Despite their best efforts, by the end of the day, Laurel was still making the trip up to Iron Heights to apologize to Declan for being unable to save his life, and Oliver was putting the fear of God into Jason Brodeur.

And then he was rushing north to save Laurel.

Once he got there, to that closed room, and saw what was happening -- a switch flipped in his brain and he felt like he was back on the island again, and it was kill or be killed. Protect what he loved or lose it.

Only Laurel’s voice brought him out of his rage, and he paid the ultimate price for losing his control in front of Laurel. He heard her father tell her that they had saved Declan’s life. But he also heard Laurel call him a killer.

His phone beeped. It was five-forty-five. Where are you? Running late?

He sighed and put the phone away.

He was halfway back to the mansion, about ready to call Felicity and apologize, say that he’d made a
terrible mistake, that his children deserved better than him. Better than his life. Better than this…
stupid mess he’d inherited from his father and the weight of the Queen family name.

He didn’t want this for himself and he didn’t want it for his kids.

His phone rang this time, Diggle’s voice on the other end of the line. “Oliver. How’d it go at the
prison?”

“Laurel got out alive. Declan’s fine. Brodeur’s bodyguards confessed to the murder.”

“Okay,” Diggle said, drawing the word out. “You won, Oliver. You don’t sound very happy about
it, though.”

Oliver sighed. “Laurel … she told her father that she thinks I’m a killer. And she’s not wrong. I’m
supposed to go spend the evening with the kids. We’re going to tell them, or we were….”

“Oliver, you can’t back out now.” Diggle’s rod-iron will could be heard loud and clear over the
telephone. “You told this girl you wanted to be a part of their lives, and I saw you yesterday, man. If
you back out now, it won’t be because this is what you really want.”

“They deserve better.”

“Hell, we all do. But something’s better than nothing. You die tomorrow, at least they got one day of
having a dad. You talk all the time about fixing your father’s mistakes, taking responsibility for the
hand your family played in the corruption of Starling City. Fine. But you can’t go around fixing
other people’s mistakes if you won’t take responsibility for your own, man. You helped make those
kids. You take care of them.”

Oliver gripped the steering wheel of his sports car tight, and then nodded. “Thanks, Digg. I uh… I
think you’re right.”

“Damn straight I’m right. I’ll tell your mother you’re working late. See you back at the mansion. I’ve
got security detail tonight. And Oliver?”
“Yeah?”

“Next time you feel like being an ass about your kids, don’t.”

**

Felicity checked her watch a second time. It was nearly seven ten, and Oliver had said he’d be at her apartment immediately after work. From the way he had been talking the day before, she was worried that perhaps something had happened to him.

Maddie and Matthew had already eaten -- they often came home from daycare starving, although she knew for a fact they ate voraciously there, when the buzzer rang. “Hey Felicity, I’m sorry I’m late,” Oliver’s voice said over the speaker. “Is it too late to come in?”

“NO!” Maddie and Matthew shouted, running to the door before Felicity could respond. “Come up, Mr. Oliver!”

Felicity rolled her eyes. “You heard the bosses, Oliver. Come on up.”

A few minutes later, Oliver knocked on the door and Matthew looked at Felicity for permission. She nodded, and Matthew threw open the door.

“Hi, Oliver!” he said brightly, her shy little boy who didn’t warm to many people very quickly.

“Sorry I’m late, kiddo. I am sorry, Felicity. Really.”

“It’s okay.” Felicity took one look at Oliver and fought the urge to check his temperature. “Are you okay?”

“It’s been a long day,” Oliver said tiredly. “Something came up at the office, and… anyway. I didn’t want to let you guys down.”

“Oliver, Oliver, look!” Maddie ran out from her bedroom holding a plastic bag with one of the most
grizzly-looking bugs Felicity had ever seen. “We went on a field trip today and I found this in the park and my teacher said I could keep it. Isn’t it cool?”

Oliver bent down and studied it, his face wan and his eyes tired. Felicity quietly went to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. She shook a few ibuprofen tablets into her palm and walked back to the front room.

“Here you go,” she said shortly. She handed him the water and the pills. “I don’t know if you’ve taken anything, but…”

“No, I haven’t.” Oliver looked at her in surprise. “Felicity, you didn’t have to…”

“I know.” Felicity turned to Matthew and Maddie. “Listen up, troops. Oliver has not eaten yet, so we’re going to get the plate out of the ‘fridge for him, okay? And then you two are going to go through the bath and we’ll get you in pajamas and then we’ll see if Oliver wants to read you a story, okay?”

“Felicity, you don’t have to take care of me.”

“No, I don’t have to. I am, in this one specific instance, choosing to, because you look like you got hit by a Mack truck. Do not begin to imagine that this will become a habit.”

Oliver smiled, dipping his head like that would cover up the emotion on his face. “I wouldn’t dare.”

Maddie opened the door, and took the plate of food they’d saved him -- a great heaping plate of spaghetti, some salad saved in a separate container, and a piece of garlic toast.

“Thank you, Maddie,” Oliver said, sitting down at the kitchen table, which had a loose leg and wobbled a little when it was jostled. Felicity made herself a note to take her screwdriver to it, maybe see if she could fix the problem herself.

“Mom, do we have to start bathtime now?”

Felicity rolled up her sleeves. “Yes. It’s Maddie’s turn now. Matthew, if you want to stay out here
“Okay!” Matthew bounced in his seat, launching into a long and complicated story about the game of kickball he and his friends had made up at daycare.

Felicity enjoyed this time. Maddie was getting better at washing herself, but she still liked to have Felicity do the shampooing of her hair since she was terrified of getting soap in her eyes. They talked quietly while Felicity lathered up the shampoo and then made Maddie’s hair stand on end, which reduced Maddie to a fit of giggles.

“We heard lots of noise coming from in here,” Oliver said, standing in the doorway. “Is it okay if we come in?”

“Come in, Oliver!” Maddie shouted. “We’re rinsing my hair!”

“We’re just about done. Matthew, go get your pajamas. Maddie, close your eyes,” Felicity said, reaching for the giant plastic cup she used to rinse the twins’ hair out.

“You’ve got some cool toys in here,” Oliver said to Maddie, crouching next to the tub, and Felicity. “Boats and frogs…”

“Sometimes we have time to play in the bathtub, and sometimes we don’t,” Maddie said seriously, holding her hands over her eyes while Felicity patiently got all of the soap out.

“I know how that goes,” Oliver said, smiling. “I would much prefer to take my time and get to play, what about you?”

“Me too,” Maddie said, nodding enthusiastically.

“Which, unfortunately, is not tonight, so, stand up Madelyn Rose,” Felicity said, and she started to towel Madelyn off. Then she wrapped the towel around her daughter securely and sent her back to her room to change. “You’re up, Matthew-Monster!”

Oliver sat next to her and laughed at Matthew’s antics. Madelyn came back, dressed in bright red
ladybug pajamas, and sat on the covered toilet seat, trying to talk over Matthew. Matthew played a quick game with Oliver with his tug boat, and then Felicity put on her stern voice.

“Tomorrow I have work, and the two Smoak children have school, so we need to get your hair washed, mister.”

Bathtime was soon over and Matthew dressed in his pajamas. Oliver and Felicity sat on separate beds and faced the twins.

“No bedtime stories tonight,” Felicity said.

Both of the twins’ faces fell, but she lifted a finger before they could protest. “Oliver and I want to talk to you guys. Let’s get you all tucked in first.” Felicity smoothed each cover out, kissed each cheek, and then returned to her spot at the end of Maddie’s bed. “Do you remember how I always told you, Daddy got on a boat, and it sunk, and he went to heaven?”

“Yes. Grandma says he drownded,” Matthew said, helpfully.

“Ah yes. Grandma is always so… truthful,” Felicity said, sighing. “Well, I’m afraid that… Mommy didn’t really know the truth.” She could feel Oliver’s eyes on him. “Daddy lived through the boat sinking and he found his way to… land, and… then he worked very hard to get home so he could meet you. Maddie, Matthew, Oliver is Daddy.”

Maddie’s got very, very big. “You’re my Daddy?” she asked. “You’re not dead?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Could you hear me when I talked to you? Mommy said you could hear me when I talked to you.”

“I might have been able to, if I had been, you know….” Oliver shrugged. “No, I’m sorry, honey, but I can hear you now. You can call me anytime you want and talk to me.”

“Will you talk back this time?” Maddie asked.
“Yes, of course. Every time,” Oliver said.

Matthew crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you going to come live with us and tell us not to do stuff?”

“I might tell you not to do stuff once in a while,” Oliver allowed, “but I’m not coming to live with you, no.”

“Mommies and Daddies are supposed to live together,” Maddie said, firmly.

“Except sometimes it doesn’t work that way,” Felicity said gently. “And that’s not how it’s going to work for us. Oli… Daddy is going to come see you whenever he wants. And you might go see him. And meet his mommy and his sister. And play at his house.”

“Will you come with us, Mommy?” Matthew asked shyly.

“I probably will, at least in the beginning,” Felicity said, and she couldn’t help leaning across the gap between their beds to kiss his cheek. “It’s going to be fun to have a Daddy, you’ll see.”

“Okay,” Maddie said, once she checked with Matthew. “We’ll give it a shot.”

Felicity covered her mouth, and Oliver chuckled. “Okay, I guess that’s fair enough, Madelyn. Can I kiss you guys goodnight?”

Madelyn was free and easy with her kisses, so Felicity wasn’t surprised when she laid a big one right on Oliver’s mouth. Matthew, on the other hand, was more reserved, so she found herself nearly gasping when Matthew kissed Oliver’s cheek, and then patted it with one of his hands. “Prickly, Daddy,” he said.

“Yeah,” Oliver said hoarsely. “I need to shave. Sorry, kiddo.”

“It’s okay,” Matthew said, and Oliver and Felicity got up, and left the room together, but not before
they heard, “hey -- do you think everybody’s daddies have got beards like ours does?”

**

Diggle met Oliver in the front room of the Queen mansion. “How’d it go, Oliver?” The casual manner of address let Oliver know that no one was listening.

“It was… good. It went really well,” Oliver said. “Listen, Digg -- I set some stuff in motion before, and there’s not a lot of time, but I think things are going to get dicey for a little chunk of time here. I know it’s a lot to ask, but -- keep an eye on Felicity and the kids for me, okay?”

“Oliver… what’s going on?”

The door burst open. “Oliver Queen!” Detective Lance shouting could be heard all throughout the mansion.

Oliver shrugged one shoulder. “Showtime, Digg.”

“I do not have a good feeling about this….”

**

Oliver found himself on the other side of an interrogation table from Detective Lance. He’d never had a particularly good relationship with the man -- he hadn’t trusted Oliver with Laurel’s heart (for good reason, as it had turned out), and he hadn’t trusted Oliver’s money. Detective Lance had pulled himself up by his bootstraps, and could only afford the fancy private education his daughters got because Dinah Lance, his wife, had come from the same circles the Queens did.

Still, this particular situation was something of a new one. In all of the previous cases when Oliver had been arrested, Detective Lance had never been the arresting officer. And he’d never had quite this much hate in his eyes.

Oliver didn’t blame him. Some things couldn’t be avoided. And if someone had used his daughter like he had used Sarah…. Oliver had only known of his fatherhood for less than a week and already
he couldn’t imagine letting someone get away with what he’d done.

Still, there was no point in getting mad. No matter how hard Detective Lance pushed him, Oliver stayed implacable. Calm. Reasonable. So long as he managed to keep his head, he should be able to keep all of the balls he needed to keep in the air moving, he told himself.

Right on cue, his mother and Walter appeared in the interrogation room, looking distraught and furious. Oliver felt a twinge of guilt, but tamped down on that emotion. He had to hold fast to this course of action.

Even if it was vastly more complicated than he had originally planned on.

**

When Felicity got to work the next morning, the entire office was buzzing about the news that Oliver Queen had been arrested on suspicion of being the masked vigilante. She found herself staring at her cell phone instead of concentrating on her work, hoping that Oliver would call and explain himself.

Felicity sighed and forcibly tried to focus on her computer screen. She had no idea what she would tell the kids if Oliver got convicted -- surely he wouldn’t. Her keyboard took a pounding as she imagined saying, “Daddy got sent up the river because he was a little bit of a lunatic, and Mommy is very, very sorry about that.”

After her lunchbreak, her phone finally rang. When she saw the caller ID, she got up and walked outside of the building without explanation to take the call.

“Hi,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah -- they let me out on bail,” Oliver’s voice was easy, it sounded like he wasn’t worried about a thing.

“I saw. On my Google Alerts feed, which was very nice, because nobody called to tell me that the father of my children had been arrested.”
“I’m sorry, Felicity. I didn’t think I’d have to stay overnight.”

“How serious is all of this? I mean, do they have enough evidence… Obviously, they’ve arrested you so…. Actually. Let me ask this question. Are you the vigilante?”

“It’s very clearly ridiculous,” Oliver said, neatly dodging her question. “I don’t think I have anything to worry about, Felicity. Laurel’s dad is the one who arrested me, and she’s defending me. I think she’ll get him to come to his senses.”

“Is that even legal?” Felicity asked, dubiously. “I mean -- you would think it would be a serious conflict of interest, at least…”

“Felicity. I don’t want you or the kids to worry. I’m going to have Mr. Diggle or my other security professional, Mr. Smart, keep an eye on you and the kids from a distance this week, though.”

“Why? Oliver, no one knows that…”

“That we know of. But we were seen in public together. Believe it or not, my press had started to die down, but maybe one of your friends remembers seeing me at the park, with the kids and…”

Felicity sighed. “Okay. From a distance. I don’t even want to know they’re there, Oliver.”

“Deal.”

“Oliver?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor, okay?”

“Yeah?”
“Next time you’re arrested, pick up the phone and let me know.”

Oliver chuckled. “Deal.”

**

Oliver found the next few days -- difficult, to say the least. It began with being confronted about his scars, and choosing very carefully what to say about that, and then kissing Laurel, and having her push him away, then asking John to take on a German arms dealer by himself, and Laurel saying there could never, ever be anything between them, and then finally being attacked in his own home. By the time that Walter left in the middle of the night for a business trip that nobody knew anything about, Oliver was just about done.

He walked out to his father’s grave, and laid a hand on the smooth white stone. His father, of course, wasn’t here. He was buried under a pile of rocks on an island thousands of miles away. Oliver himself had done it.

But here, in the house, he could feel his father. He hadn’t realized, until long after Robert Queen was gone, what kind of man he had truly been. But for now realizing all of his faults, he couldn’t forget the good parts of his father. He’d sacrificed everything for Oliver. He’d been a good father in life, when it had occurred to him that he was one. He wasn’t a deliberately cruel man.

Oliver liked to think he might have something helpful to say, if he’d been alive in this moment. But he wasn’t.

Oliver found himself reaching for his phone and calling Felicity.

“Hi,” he said, when she picked up.

“Hi. You’re a free man, apparently.”

“Indeed,” Oliver said, unable to resist the smile that crept over his face. In more ways than one, he thought. Laurel made it clear: she wanted nothing to do with him. He’d burned all of his bridges there. Nothing less than what he deserved. Now, if he could only convince himself to let her go, the way she had let him go. “I was wondering… can I swing by tomorrow, see the kids?”
Felicity hesitated only a moment. “Yeah, they’ve been asking about you. I’ve just been saying that you’re busy.”

“I really am sorry, Felicity. I couldn’t help…”

“No. I know,” Felicity said. “It’s fine. You know. I just -- this is what I was worried about. You being here, but then… not.”

“I know, I must have let them down, and I’m sorry.”

“They’ll be really happy to hear that in person, Oliver. Tomorrow,” Felicity said. “You want to swing by in the middle of the afternoon while we’re lounging around the apartment?”

Oliver nodded. “I uh… I can’t tell you how good that sounds right now.”

“Why? Is something going on?”

Oliver thought for a long moment. Could he trust her? Well. She’d managed to keep possibly the biggest secret he could think of for four long years.

“Walter left. Unexpectedly. On a very long business trip.”

“Oh.” He could practically hear the gears turning in Felicity’s head. “I’m sorry, Oliver. I know that’s got to be hard for you.”

“Less hard for me than it is for Thea. She was twelve when Dad died, you know, so it’s not like she doesn’t remember Mom and Dad fighting sometimes, but I get the feeling Walter and Mom… don’t. Fight, I mean. As a general rule. So.”

“I’m still sorry.”
“And… uh. Laurel.”

“The girlfriend from five years ago that you’re still in love with,” Felicity said, and Oliver found himself chuckling at her honesty.

“Yes, her. She and I had a talk. And uh -- I don’t think we’re going to get back together. Ever.”

“Wow. Taylor Swift really does have a song for everything, doesn’t she?” Felicity said on a laugh. “I’m sorry, Oliver. I know that’s not what you were hoping for.”

“Nothing is like I was hoping for,” Oliver said. “I knew, when I left for five years, that I would come back and things would be different, but I guess I just didn’t…”

“You’re not God, Oliver. I can’t even imagine what I’ll be like in five years, let alone my children or my family or… you,” Felicity said. “You’ve got to stop kicking yourself for not being omniscient. You’re doing the best you can, right?”

Oliver smiled at the nod back to their earlier conversation. “I really and truly am.”

“Okay, then,” Felicity said. “You’re doing good enough.”

**

Oliver dropped in several times over the next few days, staying for a couple minutes, or for a couple of hours, once even asking for her help tracking down an old friend. Felicity got the feeling they were on a list of his many obligations, one of many balls he was trying to keep in the air. She didn’t mind looking up Reston while Oliver played with the kids and kept an eye on her.

She might have resented his divided attention, except for the fact that Maddie and Matthew both seemed to blossom in his presence. He hadn’t really grown up until he’d went to the island, so there was still enough of a child in him that he loved rolling around on the floor, wrestling with Matthew and Maddie in a way that almost made her nervous, except that she remembered doing the same thing with her father. He helped them build complex towers and then think of cool ways to knock them down.
He didn’t try, too often, to bring gifts with him, as Felicity tried to give him the death glare every time he did, but she noticed that the kids’ collection of toys, at least, was slowly expanding. She couldn’t bring herself to say no, though, because, after all, he’d missed out on five years of buying them toys and watching them grow.

She also got used to spotting, every once in a while, a man in a suit outside of her apartment, with an earpiece in. She, herself, thought that maybe placing security with a lowly nobody was drawing more attention than it was doing any degree of help, but it made Oliver feel better, and so she let it slide.

They were saying good-bye one night when Oliver suddenly paused. “I wanted to bring something up again.”

“Oh?”

“Things got a little crazy there for a minute,” he said, trying his I’m-oh-so-charming-smile on her. The fact that she knew he was using it didn’t lessen its effectiveness, damnit. “And uh -- I kind of let some things slide which are important to me. I’m going to tell my mother this week about Maddie and Matthew and then we’re going to have to meet with some lawyers, okay?”

“Just to set up trust funds,” Felicity said firmly. “Right?”

“Right. I swear, we’re not going to be talking about anything other than that. If someone tries to bring the conversation around to custody, we’re just going to shut it down.”

“Okay.” Felicity sighed, and pushed her glasses up her nose. “I’m trusting you, Oliver.”

“And I trust you,” Oliver said, the corners of his mouth lifting in an almost-smile that was a million times more genuine than the grin he had tried out on her earlier.

“Okay.” Felicity opened the door, watched him step away. “I’m assuming you’ll call me.”

“Yes. As soon as I know anything.”
“Good.”

**

Oliver found himself dealing with the Royal Flush gang, and every time he tried to speak to his mother about anything, it seemed, something else went wrong. Diggle had been right, of course. He should… expand his view, try to be a better man, a better hero. But that didn’t mean it wasn’t making him set his teeth a little bit to constantly have to put off his mother.

But then he found out more about the Reston family, and discovered more about what had led them to make the choices they had made, what had led to Kyle Reston becoming the kind of cop-killing monster he’d become. Just a little turn his father had made, a little bump in the road, and all of a sudden, Oliver thought bitterly, Starling City was being terrorized by bank robbers.

Oliver had no choice, in the end, but to kill the man he’d offered a second chance to. Diggle praised him for being a good man, and said his father would have been proud, but Oliver found himself returning home to make good with his mother -- something his father would truly have been proud of, he thought.

Sitting across from her at Big Belly Burger, watching her devour a cheap, but delicious hamburger, Oliver waited until she had taken a large swallow of her shake.

“Uh, you said earlier that you used to know what I was thinking.”

“Yes.” Moira lifted her eyebrows. “You haven’t been as… easy to read as you used to be.”

“There’s a lot going on in my mind,” Oliver allowed. “But one thing I want to tell you -- one thing I can tell you is this.”

Oliver reached into his wallet and pulled out the by-now well-worn picture of Maddie and Matthew. He reached for his phone and pulled open the gallery of pictures from the park and the apartment.

“Oliver, what is this?”

“This is Maddie and Matthew Smoak,” Oliver said gently. “But by rights… they should be Maddie
and Matthew Queen.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, feel free to follow for Avengers and Arrow-loving nonsense on tumblr: storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com
Chapter Summary

Oliver tells his family that he's a father, and Felicity copes with the changes in her life when it gets out that Oliver has children.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was supposed to be, originally, three pages before I resumed the main storyline of Arrow, but Maddie, Matthew, Felicity and Oliver would not move on. So I've expanded my estimated amount of chapters for this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver watched his mother’s face for some sign of how she was taking the news. Her expression was carefully blank.

“Matthew and Madelyn… Smoak?” Moira reached for the picture, her perfectly manicured fingers just touching the edges of it. “That last name is familiar. But I don’t seem to remember you dating anyone with that last name.”

“Felicity Smoak is their mother,” Oliver said, “and I think the last name is familiar because she was a recipient of your scholarship for three years running.”

“Ah, I see,” Moira said softly. “You’re certain. You wouldn’t have told me this if you weren’t positive.”

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Mom --”

“How long have you known?”

“Two weeks,” Oliver said softly. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything sooner. I just wanted to… be sure. Have a plan.”
“Ah. So there is a plan,” Moira said, folding her hands in front of her, but Oliver couldn’t miss the way her eyes tracked to the picture.

“Admittedly, not much of one,” Oliver said. “I uh -- I don’t have much of an idea of how to be a parent to four-year-olds, you know what I mean? But I do know that I want to do my best by these kids. Whatever that means.” Oliver took a deep breath. “Starting with siphoning off some of my trust fund. Setting it up so that if something ever happens to me, the kids are taken care of.”

Moira reached for the picture once more, studying it carefully in the light. “You think that’s where you start, hm?”

“It’s the one thing I know for sure,” Oliver said, starting to feel a little irritated. “You don’t -- leave your buddy out in the cold when you’ve got shelter, you don’t let someone go hungry when you’ve got food, and you don’t leave this world not knowing that you’ve done everything you could do for your kids. Dad taught me that.”

“Robert and I failed you in so many ways,” Moira said softly. “I -- I was not much of a natural mother. Oh, I loved you. Don’t get me wrong. You were always so charming and quick-witted. But the kissing the boo-boos and wiping noses and setting boundaries… none of that ever came easily to me. And your father was more interested in building our empire, keeping the family business going than being a father to you.”

“You and Dad did your best,” Oliver said.

“No. I don’t think that we did, unfortunately,” Moira said, reaching for his hand. “But then I look at you, my brave, strong boy. And I think about what you survived on that island. You don’t have to tell me about it -- I know it must have been -- unspeakable.”

Oliver felt hot tears rush to his eyes and he hastily took a sip of water.

“And I think about how you are working so hard -- I mean, you must be. All hours of the day and night you’re running around, and you always seem to be occupied, whether I know what’s going on or not. And now. You sit me down at this restaurant, and you tell me…” She brushed a thumb over the twins’ faces. “You tell me that you want to do your best by your children, that you didn’t even know that you had until two weeks ago. Baby.” She reached for his chin, and stroked his face tenderly, in a way she hadn’t allowed herself since he first got home. “I know that this must have been weighing heavily on you. And you must have been worried about what I would think.”
“It’s… not the easiest conversation I’ve ever had to psych myself up for,” Oliver admitted, leaning into his mother’s touch for just a moment.

“I think that you can do just about anything you set your mind to do, darling. So -- of course. Start with the money, if that’s what makes you comfortable. But don’t you dare end it there.”

“I don’t know if I could walk now if I wanted to,” Oliver admitted. “Mom, you ought to meet them. I can hardly believe that any part of them came from me.”

Oliver let himself get swept away. This was something he could talk about. This was something he could … admit to. Be open and honest with his mother about. He could show her, mostly, what he was feeling. Maybe not all of the terror that ran underneath his excitement and his apprehension, but perhaps she wouldn’t see that.

So he told her about Maddie’s bug collection and Matthew’s obsession with Spider-Man. He told her about trying to figure out how to be helpful without stepping on Felicity’s toes. He told her about reading books and tucking the children in bed.

And his mother sat there and listened, asking questions, the picture still in her hands. They talked, clear until the waitstaff was wiping off tables and mopping floors. Oliver left a generous tip on the table for them to split amongst themselves and walked his mother to the car.

“I… don’t know if this is something that you want,” Oliver admitted on the way home, “but I… I want to bring Maddie and Matthew to the mansion and have them meet you and Thea and Walter.”

“Your sister is going to be very upset that she’s been deprived of the chance to be an aunt all of these years,” Moira said, smiling.

“What about you, Mom?”

“Am I upset?” Moira asked, handing the picture back to him so he could secure it in his wallet.

“Yes. Felicity --”

“Had her own reasons for making the decisions that she made,” Moira said. “I … cannot deny that I am…. resentful of the fact that I have missed four years… four and a half, nearly. And I can’t help
but think what a comfort it might have been to know them while you were gone. But.” Moira straightened her shoulders. “What’s done is done, isn’t that right?”

Oliver kissed her cheek and watched her start in surprise. “Thanks, Mom. I want you to like Felicity, too. She’s… a really good mom. You’re going to see that.”

“I’m very certain that I will,” Moira said grandly.

**

“Felicity, I’ve spoken with my mother.”

Felicity nearly dropped the tablet she was studying, she was so startled by Olivers’ intrusion into her workspace. “Don’t you knock?”

Oliver’s mother twitched, and a smile nearly crept up the corners of his mouth. Felicity was irrationally disappointed that she hadn’t drawn the full thing out. One of these days, she thought. “This is the IT department, not the ladies’ room, Felicity.”

“Yes, well, we are decidedly lacking in the privacy I would appreciate for this particular conversation,” Felicity said, looking around. One or two of her coworkers was studying them in a manner she was sure they all thought of as “stealthy”, but in reality it was pretty obvious.

“So take a walk with me.” Oliver extended his arm gallantly. “I’m reasonably sure that your boss will not object if I borrow you for a few minutes.”

Felicity pushed her glasses up her nose and looked around for her jacket. Oliver had it in his hands -- apparently it had been near him, and he held it open for her. Awkwardly, Felicity slipped her arms inside and then gestured for Oliver to lead the way.

“What, you don’t want to hold my arm?” Oliver teased. Felicity shifted. She hadn’t seen this side of him for a long time. Not since the night they’d… well. She adjusted her expectations. If this was the kind of mood he was in, she would have to change the way she interacted with him.
“The rumors are going to be bad enough as it is, thank you,” Felicity said evenly.

“I told Mom about... everything,” Oliver said, once they were some distance away from the Queen Consolidated building, the illusional levity slipping off of him like a robe. “And I set up a meeting with the lawyers for tomorrow. But I would like it -- I would like it very much, if you would bring the kids by tonight. We’re going to be having a family dinner, and I think having everyone in one room might be nice.”

“Tonight.” Felicity stopped and stared at him. “At the Queen mansion?”

“Yes.” Oliver stuck his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry, I know it’s short notice.”

Felicity tilted her head to the side. “You think?”

“I can ... I mean, if it’s a bad time, I’ll just, you know, say that we’ll do it later, or...” Oliver paused. “Wait, you’re not worried about -- I mean, just bring the kids in whatever. Jeans. Tennis shoes. They can look like kids, Felicity. It’s nothing special. It’s just a family dinner.”

“It’s the first time we’re going to meet your family,” Felicity said. “And -- okay, it might be dumb, but I don’t want your mother thinking less of me, or thinking I can’t keep her grandkids fed and clothed and clean, you know? I want to make a good impression.”

“Felicity, she’s going to love you and she’s going to love the kids.”

“Hm,” Felicity said, looking down at her phone. “I’ll just -- call my supervisor. Maybe I can get off a few minutes early, run the kids through the bath -- I know Madelyn’s got a dress that will fit, but...”

“Felicity.” Oliver reached for her arm, but then dropped his hand as if he thought better of it. “I don’t want you to worry. And I’m sure your supervisor will let you off a few minutes early tonight. If he doesn’t, I’ll just give him a call.”

Felicity leveled him with a look. “No, Oliver, we’re not going to start that.”

“Start what?”
“You swooping in to save me at Queen Consolidated. When it gets out that Maddie and Matthew are your children -- and don’t make that face, it will, with you changing your will and spending so much time with us, it’s going to be bad enough for me at work. I mean, not that I would be ashamed, if we were sleeping together, but they’re going to think we’re sleeping together, which we aren’t. Not that I want to be!” Felicity closed her eyes. “Three, two, one…. It’ll be that much worse if you start stealing me away from my desk or talking to my supervisor to get me out of work.”

“Ah.” It was obvious that such a thought hadn’t ever really occurred to Oliver. Felicity nearly sighed in exasperation.

“I know this wasn’t stuff that you worried about with many of your past girlfriends, but Oliver, I’m not your girlfriend, and dating billionaires is not my career path. In my line of work, it’s hard enough to be female and be taken seriously. Without the… you know. Undeniable fact that once upon a time I made children with you.”

“Felicity, you know I would never…”

Felicity lifted a finger to her mouth as though to stop herself from saying anything more. “So. We’ll just keep that in mind, right?”

Oliver sighed. “Felicity, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.” Felicity reached out and lightly touched his arm. “Oliver -- it’s okay. We’re going to figure out how this works. But I can’t let you start doing this kind of stuff for me.”

“I get it,” Oliver said. “And I’m sorry. I guess I haven’t really grown out of all of my bad qualities.”

“I think you’ve gained some new good ones,” Felicity said, smiling. “Like the ability to admit when you’re wrong, occasionally.”

“I uh -- do you want some help getting the kids ready tonight? I mean, I know I sprang this on you.”

Felicity thought for a moment. “Sure, Oliver. I think that might be good.”
“Okay. My driver can take us all up there then, too. I will meet you outside the IT department a few minutes before your shift ends, okay? Text me if you can get off any earlier.”

“Sounds good.” Felicity patted Oliver’s arm, and started to walk back to Queen Consolidated.

“Hey, Felicity?”

She turned to look back at him. “Yeah?”

“Thanks, you know. You didn’t have to be this way when I showed back up. You don’t have to be this… open. I know that. And I appreciate everything you’re doing.”

Felicity shrugged. “I wanted you here all along,” she said simply. “I know it’s not going to be perfect. Or easy. But I wanted you here. And so did Maddie and Matthew.”

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Oliver watched her walk away, rubbing his hand over his face. He was doing his best -- just like he swore that he would to everyone who listened, but it seemed like even his best was sometimes not good enough. A lesson he’d first learned on the island was being reinforced in equal measure here.

His phone chimed at him. If he wanted to pick Thea up from school, then he was going to have to leave now. He waved to Digg, who had been watching him and Felicity, signalled him to stay on her the rest of the afternoon.

Digg nodded, and Oliver took his keys out of his pocket and half-jogged to his motorcycle in the parking garage.

It roared to life underneath of him, and he maneuvered it with adept familiarity through the streets of Starling City to the upper-class neighborhood that Thea’s private school was in. He’d spent two years here before he’d been sent to a boarding school more equipped to handle rebellious boys. He hadn’t lasted long there, either.
Thea, though, seemed to do better here. Perhaps with a reason for her delinquency the staff was more tolerant than they had been of his. She had friends (for all that he did not approve of them), and did well in the classes that interested her.

Oliver roared to a stop in front of the school just as the bell rang. Thea left the building a few minutes later, surrounded by her friends. They appeared to be engaged in a serious conversation until one of them caught sight of him and let out a high-pitched squeal. He hadn’t heard anything like that since Speedy had been young, following him and Tommy around. From the age of seven to nine, he swore, she hadn’t known how to speak at anything other than a high-pitched squeal.

That had changed, obviously. Now she scold with the best of them, including his mother. She poked him and prodded and pulled at his layers, and he was so fond of her that it was hard not to let her see the real him underneath the mask he was obliged to wear.

But he also remembered her in diapers. Taking her hand and guiding her first steps. The exact shade of pink of her first tutu, and how she’d cried when she’d missed a step at the first recital. He remembered her awkward and gangly, with an obvious crush on Tommy. He remembered her sweet and cuddly just before she went down for the night, kissing him on the cheek before she was sent upstairs to the arms of her nurse.

He couldn’t take a risk. Couldn’t put her in harm’s way. Not any more than he would inadvertently, anyway. Letting Thea know who he really was wasn’t an option. And it never would be.

But, like his mother, he could share this with her. He could share his children, and hope that, if something happened to him -- well. He wanted Felicity to have something to turn to, something solid. Something of his.

And he knew he could count on Thea.

Once she came around to the idea, anyway.

“What are you doing here?” Thea asked, crossing the schoolyard to stand in front of his bike. “I thought the driver was going to come pick me up today.”

Oliver shrugged. “I figured -- you and I haven’t cut loose, hung out in a while. It’s a beautiful day for a bike ride and I could use some ice cream. What do you say? Take a ride with me, or is it too lame to be seen with your castaway brother?”
“Please. My friends are going to flip their lids. More than half of them have enormous crushes on you. It’s only because they’ve never had to share a bathroom with you,” Thea said.

“One time! In one hotel!”

“I will never erase the horror,” Thea said dryly, but her eyes sparkled with mirth. “Seriously, Mom’s let you pick me up on the bike?” She attached the helmet that Oliver offered and swung her legs over the bike’s seat.

“What Mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her!” Oliver shouted back over the roar of the engine, and he eased them out of town and out along the twisting and winding roads just outside of Starling City.

Thea moved easily behind him. He doubted very much that, despite how she was acting, this was her first time on a bike. She leaned into the turns and eased up out of them, her hands resting on his stomach lightly.

By the time he pulled up to the Dairy Barn, Thea was laughing with exhilaration. It hit him then, what Tommy had noticed -- that she had grown up, was becoming (although she definitely wasn’t there yet) a woman. It made him distinctly uncomfortable.

He thought about Maddie. Wondered about who the first person to take her on a motorcycle would be. What her relationship with her brother would be like. If they would be close enough to sneak out of the house on warm afternoons and go to the Dairy Barn. And he thought about how he had all of these memories of Thea that he would never have of Maddie and Matthew.

“What’s with your face, Ollie?” Thea asked, setting the helmet on the sissy bar. “I thought that was a pretty good ride.”

“No, it was.” Oliver forced his face back to the jovial expression he’d been wearing before. “I’m really glad we’re doing this.”

“Me too.” Thea shrugged. “I mean, what were my other options? Go out with my friends, get all the latest gossip, use my credit card?”
Oliver laughed. “Yes, I can see I’ve dragged you away from very important, unmissable activities.”

Thea smirked at him as they entered the old building. It smelled just like it had the first time his father had taken him here -- the distinct scent of caramel and peanuts in the air, the hustle and bustle of the after-school crowd. They waited in line and watched while the attendant ice cream maker shoveled big scoops of one-of-a-kind flavors onto cones for them.

“I’m going to have to run for six hours,” Thea said wistfully. “But it will be worth it.”

“That’s not even real ice cream,” Oliver said, watching while his super chocolate-and-peanut-butter concoction was being put together. “There’s way too much fruit in that for it to be ice cream.”

“It’s delicious, is what it is. Look at all these berries!”

“Might as well have sherbet.”

“Ass,” Thea said, sticking her tongue out. Oliver laughed, and, taking his cone, directed them over to a booth, where they sat, concentrating on their ice cream for the large part, talking about school and the parts of work that Oliver could talk about. “Okay,” Thea finally said after a long while. “Why did you bring me here, really?”

“Why are you suspicious?”

“Because this is the place that you bring me when you want to tell me that you fucked up again in some way,” Thea said. “This is where you brought me the first three times you went to court for public intoxication and punching that reporter guy. And where you explained to me that you and Laurel were breaking up -- or getting back together -- or breaking up. So. What is it this time?”

“Hah. Nothing gets by you, does it?” Oliver sighed, and reached into his pocket for the by-now-well-worn picture. “This is what’s going on.”

“Oliver Queen,” Thea said lowly. “Are those, I mean…”

“Yes,” he said simply. “They’re mine. That’s Madelyn, and that’s Matthew, and they are four years and three months old.”
“I’m seventeen, and I’ve figured out the whole ‘no love without a glove’ bit,” Thea said, rolling her eyes. “How old were you when this happened? 20? Come on, Ollie. Are you sure this is genuine?”

“I’ve had all the tests run. I’m certain.”

“But -- weren’t you with, I mean… Laurel. So.”

“We were on a break. I met their mother at a party. She was… surprising,” Oliver said. “One thing led to another, and then… boom. Twins.”

“One thing led to another,” Thea scoffed. “Oliver! You’re the one who gave me the safe sex speech.”

“So let this be a lesson to you that no method is one hundred percent effective. Especially when you’re too intoxicated to use them properly,” Oliver added under his breath.

“Ugh, too much information, brother-mine.”

“Mom wants to meet them,” Oliver said gently. “And their mother, Felicity. They’re going to be at the house tonight for dinner. And I was thinking that maybe you would want to meet them, too.”

Thea looked at the picture for a long moment. “I’m an aunt, huh.”

“Yes.” Oliver lifted her chin with his fingers. “And I’m a Dad, and I am scared shitless, Thea. I have got… no idea how to do this.”

Thea laced her fingers through his and squeezed. “It’ll be okay, Ollie.”

“So… you’re not mad at me?”

“Oh no, I’m furious. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me the instant you suspected that you might be a
Dad. There will be swift retribution,” Thea said. “And I’ve got so much shopping to do, it’s ridiculous. I have four years of spoiling to make up for missing. Someone else might already have the title of favorite aunt!”

“I don’t think so,” Oliver said carefully. “I think it’s just Felicity and her mom, actually….”

“So. Tell me everything I need to know about Matthew and Madelyn,” Thea said, reaching for a napkin. “I’ll bet they’re pretty cute, right?”

“Oh, you have got no idea…”

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Oliver stood outside the daycare facility while Felicity keyed them into the security system. “I love having the daycare right here,” she said to him, trying to cover up her anxiety with words, the way she often did. “I mean, when I was choosing a place of employment, the Queen name wasn’t exactly a huge selling point. I didn’t know if I could come here everyday and keep my secret, but your family has made working for them a very attractive proposition, honestly.”

“I’ve never been here,” Oliver admitted. “I know this facility was a pet project of my mothers’, and that it’s helped employee retention, but I’ve never been to this part of the building before.”

“It’s good. The curriculum is fairly creative -- wait until you see all the art, everywhere. And there’s outdoor learning opportunities, and of course, now that the kids are old enough, they go on field trips and things. Their teacher is a little bit young, but then I remind myself that I’m a little bit young, so I try not to let that cloud my judgement of her.”

“Felicity,” Oliver said quietly. “Just one second.”

She stopped, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes, counting down from ten the way she often did. “Yes?”

“How are we going to do this, I mean…?”
“Rip the Band-Aid,” Felicity said. “I mean, there’s nothing we can do about it now. Maddie and Matthew are going to call you ‘Dad’. If someone doesn’t leak their identity after the meeting at the lawyers’ tomorrow, I will be very surprised.”

“Okay.” Oliver reached for her hand, again, just like he had earlier that afternoon, but this time Felicity took it and squeezed it gently before she opened the door and let him through.

Noise assaulted his senses. It wasn’t unpleasant. It was generally happy noises, actually -- projects were being worked on, conversations were being had, toys were being played with. Occasionally he could hear a fit happening as he walked down the hallway, but it wasn’t the prevailing impression he got.

“Here we are,” Felicity said, opening the classroom door marked, “Miss Tamara’s Fabulous Four-Year-Old-Frogllets”.

End of the day activities were clearly happening. A young woman sat in a chair, reading a story to children while others went to the bathroom and washed their hands.

“DAD!” Matthew jumped up from his spot in the circle and ran full-bore into Oliver’s arms. “How’d you get to my school?”

“I walked,” Oliver said. “Where’s your sister?”

“Peeing,” Matthew said, shrugging his shoulders. “It was her turn. She said she didn’t have to go, but Miss Tamara said try.”

“Well, we appreciate that,” Felicity said, trying to cover the mirth in her voice. Matthew was very sensitive and could tell when he was being laughed at and that never went well.

“Mom! Dad!” Maddie screeched, throwing open the door while she hurriedly pulled her leggings up.

“Wash your hands first!” Felicity and Ms. Tamara said together, laughing. “Tamara, this is… the twins’ father, Oliver Queen.”
Oliver extended his hand for the teacher to shake. “It’s nice to meet you. Felicity has very nice things to say about you.”

“Oh wow. Mr. Queen. I guess I should have…. It’s just that this is not where I would expect to…”

“No worries.” Oliver waved a hand. “I’m not offended at all.”

“Are you guys ready to go?” Felicity asked brightly, collecting the twins’ things, exclaiming over their papers and trying to ignore the way her heart tightened when Oliver took Madelyn’s hand, and she took Matthew’s and led them down the hallway towards the waiting car.

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In the long run, Oliver’s “help” in getting the twins ready might have actually cost them some time, but it was worth it to have him there to comb Matthew’s hair the same way he combed his, to get to spend some time as a family before they went to the mansion. Felicity left the three of them looking presentable on the couch while she went to change. She didn’t have time to shower, but she straightened her hair and put her contacts in.

She found a dress that she liked that was casual enough -- hot pink and flirty, with a cut-out keyhole detail that was very in at the moment. She slipped her feet into cute but comfy shoes and retouched her lipstick.

By the time she came out of the bedroom, they were, all of them, engrossed in an episode of Super Why. Oliver was the first one to notice that she was ready, jumping to his feet and turning the TV off.

“Time to go, guys!” he announced cheerfully.

They grumbled a little, but their grumpiness quickly changed to exuberance when they realized that the “car” that had taken them to the apartment was replaced with a limousine.

Felicity’s eyes widened. “Oliver Queen,” she hissed.
“I thought the ride over was a little uncomfortable. This gives us some room to stretch out,” Oliver said, smiling his charming smile.

Felicity grit her teeth.

“Just this once, Felicity. Come on.”

The ride out to the Queen Mansion was filled with questions. Matthew and Maddie always asked ‘why’ but on this ride they were all about Oliver. They asked about his car. They asked about his house. They asked about the small scar on his wrist that Maddie had discovered when she held his hands. Felicity was glad, for once, that they’d inherited some of her tendency to babble. It disguised her nerves. Or so she thought.

“Don’t be nervous Felicity,” Oliver finally said, when there was a pause in the relentless stream of questions. “My mom is going to love you guys. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“I’m… understandably concerned,” Felicity said, twisting her hands in her lap. “I have that thing where I run off at the mouth whenever I’m nervous and I don’t want to embarrass myself in front of your mother, and let’s face it, at this particular juncture, embarrassment is pretty much inevitable.”

“I like it.”

“What?”

“The way you talk when you’re nervous. I like that you say whatever you’re thinking. It’s… nice. To be able to know exactly what someone is thinking. I liked that the first time I ever met you.”

Felicity ducked her head and tried to cover her blush. “Ah, thank you. I mean -- I still wish that maybe I had better control over this affliction, but…. thank you.”

Oliver smiled at her. A genuine smile. Not a charming smile. Not an “I-want-something” smile. Not a cajoling smile. The smile she’d let herself fall for the first time they’d ever met. She smiled back and caught Maddie and Matthew staring at the two of them.
“Whoa boy, Felicity,” she thought to herself, digging her fingernails into her palm. “Get a grip, honey. This is the last thing you need. You can’t let Maddie and Matthew get the wrong idea.”

She swiftly changed the topic of conversation, asking Oliver to tell them a story about his sister, and she sat back and listened to him talk enthusiastically about his family until they reached their destination.

They pulled up to the Queen house -- and immediately all of the panic that Felicity had been trying to get control over flared up again. It was beautiful and … historic. Very historic. Felicity closed her eyes and wished she had warned the twins to be careful one more time, to not touch anything without asking.

“Maddie, Matthew,” she said, before the door opened. “I want you to be careful, okay?”

“Don’t worry, Felicity,” Oliver said again. “They’ll be okay. Remember, this house survived my childhood. I doubt very much that Maddie and Matthew will be any harder on it than I was.”

“Right,” Felicity said, drawing in a deep breath.

Matthew took her hand and smiled up at her. “We are good, Mama.”

“I know,” Felicity said, bending to kiss his cheek. Oliver got out of the limo first and helped Felicity out, then Maddie and Matthew.

“Whoa, it’s a castle!” Maddie said excitedly as Oliver opened the door to the mansion.

“I certainly like to pretend it is,” Moira Queen said, stepping forward. She had clearly been waiting for them to arrive. She was dressed in an impeccable pantsuit in an ice blue color. Felicity suddenly felt like her outfit was too loud for the Queen Mansion. “Hello. I’m Oliver’s mother.” She crouched down, waving her hand shyly to Maddie and Matthew.

Maddie twirled for her. “Mama said I could wear my new dress cause you live in a fancy house. My name is Madelyn Rose Smoak. Everyone calls me Maddie.”
“Oh, it’s a very pretty dress, darling,” Moira said. “I love all the flowers on it. And what’s your name?”

Matthew was hiding behind Oliver’s leg, holding the material of Oliver’s dress pants wide enough to cover most of his face.

“Matthew Oliver Smoak,” he said softly, and then hid his face again.

“Well, it’s very nice to meet you both,” Moira said, and rose to her feet again, extending a hand to Felicity Smoak. “Moira Queen, lovely to meet you, dear.”

“Felicity Smoak,” Felicity said, holding Maddie’s hand while she continued to dance. “It’s nice to meet you as well.”

“Thea will be down in a few minutes,” Moira said. “I think she had some last-minute shopping to do this afternoon. She didn’t get back until late. Do you two want a before-dinner treat?”

Felicity opened her mouth and closed it. Oliver just shrugged as if to say ‘what can you do’.

“Grandmother’s prerogative,” Moira said, smiling. “I have to spoil them every chance I get. Come on, darlings. Tell me all about your days.”

That was apparently that, Felicity decided. From then on out, Moira was pleasant to her, but mostly engaged with Matthew and Maddie, listening to their babble, asking them questions. Dinner, when it came, was tailored for four-year-old taste buds -- on very expensive china.

Oliver seemed entranced, rarely speaking, his eyes flicking between Felicity and Moira and his children, who were as polite as anyone could expect preschoolers to be, Felicity decided.

Thea Queen burst into the room halfway through the meal, and Felicity could see that Maddie was about to fall in love. Her sparkly top was one thing. The bags of toys and clothes she handed out like a mini-Christmas was another. Felicity thought about protesting, but couldn’t bring herself to say anything.
It was clearly that the Queen family had been running a little low on happiness and reasons to celebrate in recent days. And they had decided to embrace Maddie and Matthew, it was clear.

It didn’t take long, though, for the long day at daycare and the exuberance and excitement of the past few hours to catch up to them. When they all moved to the living room to sit and chat some more, Maddie curled up next to Thea, her new favorite person, and went to sleep. Matthew found a spot on the couch next to Oliver and Felicity and, although he didn’t fall asleep completely right away, let his eyes drift slowly shut.

“So, Oliver didn’t get a chance to tell me much about you, Felicity,” Thea said, playing with one of Maddie’s honey-colored locks. “What do you do?”

“I work in the IT department at Queen Consolidated,” Felicity said. “I… answer questions, fix computers, and handle special projects for board members.”

“Wow, that’s awesome,” Thea said. “Is it hard work?”

Felicity shrugged. “It’s like any other job. Some things about it are hard, but most of the time it’s just routine. Every once in a while someone brings me a … unique challenge.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Like recovering information off of a laptop whose motherboard had been destroyed in a… coffeeshop incident.”

Moira chuckled. “You must be very talented, Felicity. And I hear that you must be very smart. I’m sorry that I don’t remember you from the scholarship breakfasts.”

“It’s okay.” Felicity played with the hemline of her dress. “I think I was doing my best to fly under the radar at those things. But -- without that money, I never would have been able to finish, so I’m truly grateful, ma’am.”

“Well -- if I had known,” Moira shook her head. “The past, of course, can’t be undone, but ….”

“I know and I’m so sorry.” Felicity said, and she felt Oliver’s hand reach for hers once more. “I just - - I didn’t think you would believe me, and I….”
“We’ll just have to move forward,” Moira said. “I’ve spent enough of my life being upset about things over which I have entirely no control.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said.

“I would very much like to take you to lunch tomorrow,” Moira continued. “I would like to get to know you better.”

Felicity swallowed and tried not to think about the fact that Oliver’s hand hadn’t left hers, and what impression that might be making on Moira Queen.

“I think that sounds… nice.”

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The next morning, Felicity had a fight on her hands, trying to get her kids ready to go to school on time, but finally, hair and teeth brushed, faces washed and breakfast consumed, they were on their way to Queen Consolidated.

She was steering her Mini Cooper through traffic when her phone rang. It was Oliver’s custom ringtone, but as a matter of habit, she didn’t pick it up while she was driving. But she could see as drove past the front of the building, what he might be calling her about.

Paparazzi lined the streets, cameras out at the building. Felicity gripped the wheel. “Whoa….”

“What’s happening, Mama?” Matthew asked her.

“I don’t know, baby,” Felicity said, reaching into her purse for her phone. “Daddy tried to call me. Let me see if he…”

Her phone rang again, just as she was pulling up Oliver’s information.
“What’s going on?” Felicity asked.

“The story leaked to the press, about the kids. I think someone at the daycare must have called the media,” Oliver said. “Fortunately, they can’t access the parking garage. Diggle’s going to meet you there and have you guys ride up in the family’s private elevator. The lawyers will meet us here.”

Her long morning came to a single, pounding point in her left temporal lobe. “Okay. Great.”

“Are you having any trouble?”

“No -- I don’t think they know what I drive,” Felicity said, turning into the parking garage. “Oliver -- we can’t let Maddie and Matthew be the center of all of this attention. It’s not safe.”

“I know,” Oliver said shortly. “We’re going to have to figure out a plan. But right now I’m just focused on getting you guys from the parking garage to the offices without being assaulted.”

“Okay, I’m in and I’m getting parked.” Felicity looked up and saw John Diggle, standing near the elevators with his hands crossed in front of him with typical security guard fashion. “And I see Mr. Diggle.”

She was getting out of her car when another man in a suit approached her. “Ms. Smoak? I’m Rob Smart. I’m here to help, as well. Do any of you need anything?”

Felicity shook her head. “The kids can carry their backpacks and I’ve got my bag, so…”

“All right.”

Her heart raced all the way across the open floor of the building as she kept her children between her and the security guards.

“Good morning, Ms. Smoak,” Mr. Diggle said. “Glad to see you again.”

“Good to see you, too,” Felicity said, breathing a sigh of relief as the elevator doors closed. “It’s nice to see a familiar face.”
“Mr. Queen is waiting for you guys,” Mr. Diggle said. “I think he wanted to be there to drop the children off at the daycare. He’s already spoken to the director.”

“Ah.” Felicity rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “I wish he hadn’t done that. I’m sure it will blow over.”

Diggle thought for a moment. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, Ms. Smoak.”

“Oh?”

“Oliver Queen’s had a lot of experience being a Queen -- dealing with paparazzi interest, off and on, his entire life, and he knows better than anyone else what a security leak at the place you entrust your children to could mean for their security overall. You might trust him to handle at least this part of your children’s lives -- or explain why he did what he did.”

“It’s just… all happening very quickly.”

“Well, get used to that,” Diggle said with a small smile. “I’ve only known Mr. Queen for a few months, but I get the feeling slow and steady aren’t really in his vocabulary.”

“Hm.”

When the elevator doors dinged, Oliver was waiting for them on the other side. “Oh good, you guys made it.”

“I think we managed to avoid them completely,” Felicity said.

“That’s only because they’re just on the case from thirty minutes ago,” Oliver said, bending down to hug Maddie and Matthew hello. “They didn’t have time to pay off the security guard at the parking garage or stalk your apartment.”

“Awesome,” Felicity said.
“The lawyers will be here in about an hour or so. I thought we’d drop the kids off, then you and I can head back to my office and wait for them. We can start… talking things through there.”

Felicity nodded. “All right.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Maddie?”

“Are you going to take us to school every day now?”

“I’m going to take you to school today. I don’t know about every day, sweetheart.”

Maddie’s face fell. “Oh. Okay.”

Drop-off was… a little rougher than normal. Felicity knew she had sensitive kids. They picked up on her mood and responded when she was anxious or frightened, happy or sad. They clung to her and to Oliver and didn’t really want to let go. Felicity didn’t really want to let them out of her sight, either, but she waved to Ms. Tamara and said goodbye, closing the door firmly behind them.

“Ms. Smoak?” The director: a calm, placid woman that Felicity had always liked, rushed out of her office. “Can I speak to you and Mr. Queen for a moment?”

Oliver nodded and laid his hand on the small of her back, following her back to the directors’ office.

“I just wanted to say here and now that I am so sorry -- one of custodians overheard the conversation in the classroom, and saw an opportunity to make some extra cash. I want to assure you that we take security very seriously here.”

Oliver didn’t say anything, his eyes hard and cold. Felicity found herself speaking to make up for it. “We can understand, of course, but I went so many years without any kind of issue like this and it’s really disappointing to me that the leak came from here.”
“We understand, Ms. Smoak. Mr. Queen -- we want to make sure that you both feel very secure here. We’ve had to let the custodian go as a result of this incident. We’ve also reissued our privacy policy to all of our employees and made them sign it. We can assure you, Maddie and Matthew will be as secure here as they ever were.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said, and Oliver nodded, leading her out of the office and towards the elevator which would take them back up to the executive floor.

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Oliver watched Felicity out of the corner of his eye. She’d seemed nervous and on-edge since their dinner last night, and he could hardly blame her. He, himself, had more experience with this type of thing and it was disconcerting to him to have his children, his family, at the focus of it. He couldn’t begin to fathom how Felicity felt.

Aside from that, he couldn’t quite figure out how he felt about her. He couldn’t seem to stop himself from touching her. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to protect the twins. He wanted to get to know her better. He found her fascinating.

But he also had a mission to accomplish -- a goal. Maybe someday there would be light at the end of that tunnel, and he could sit down and sort all of this out. For right now, though, he felt like he was plugging holes in a dam, unsure of how long he could hold all of this together.

“You really went quiet all of a sudden,” Felicity said, as soon as they were in the Queen Consolidated Executive Private offices.

“I’d already said everything I needed to say to her.” Oliver shrugged. “She apologized to me over the phone. It wasn’t necessary to do it again in person, although that was nice.”

“What did you say to her?” Felicity sat herself in one of the comfortable arm chairs arranged around a low table.

“I expressed my concern that this was the quality of care provided by Queen Consolidated.” Oliver shrugged. He’d also suggested that he was going to look into the job records of everyone working with his children, including her, but he didn’t feel like he needed to tell Felicity that. “It’s important, Felicity, that everyone takes this as seriously as we do. I’m going to do my best -- I’ve called every reporter I know. I’ve made it clear that my children are off limits.”
“And they just folded?” Felicity asked, crossing one leg over the other, clear disbelief on her face.

“Clearly not. But the more reputable ones understand what I’m trying to do. They get it. I’ve leveraged a few interviews to try and soothe the savage beast. And our lawyers are going to try and do what they can, as well. But to a certain extent, we might just have to put our heads down and get through this.”

The door opened, and Moira stepped inside. “Thea sent me a text -- I came to make sure everyone’s okay. Were the kids scared?”

“I don’t think they understand what’s going on,” Felicity said, obviously trying to figure out if she should stand or not. Oliver shook his head at her minutely and she relaxed back into the chair.

“Douglas and the other lawyers from his firm will be here soon,” Oliver said. “We’re going to try and get all of that taken care of this morning.”

“I have some other business to take care of here, but you know if you need me I’ll be available,” Moira said, patting Oliver’s shoulder. “I’ll understand if you want to cancel our lunch date, Felicity.”

“I think it might be nice to get away from the office when this is all over,” Felicity said.

“Good. I’ll keep my schedule clear around noon. Just let me know when you’re done, dear.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said. After Moira had left, she turned to Oliver. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but your mother is a little hard to read.”

“You’d know if she didn’t approve of you,” Oliver said. “She’s got a way of making that pretty clear.”

“Ah. So then she hasn’t made up her mind yet,” Felicity said. “I mean, that’s not the worst outcome in the world. I didn’t really have any good expectations. Or bad expectations!”
“I don’t think you have either, have you? Made up your mind, I mean. About the Queens.”

Felicity smiled. “I guess not.”

The next time the door opened, it was the lawyer that Oliver had known most of his life. An old friend of his Robert Queen’s, Arthur Douglas walked in the door trailed by paralegals and junior partners. He was a larger man, and fit the stereotypes of that type. His voice was booming and his cheeks were rosy.

“Oliver! So glad to see you alive and kicking! And I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Mr. Douglas!” Oliver smiled back, the man’s joviality was catching.

“Arthur’s just fine, now that you’re a man yourself,” the lawyer said, extending his hand to Felicity. “And how are you, young lady? Overwhelmed?”

“Maybe a bit.”

“While we get all of this financial stuff set up you’re probably all right without your own lawyer but I wouldn’t feel right mentioning that it wouldn’t be out of line for you to want your own representation in a meeting like this.”

“Ah, thank you. That’s very kind, but I think I’ll be okay for today,” Felicity said.

“If ever we’re discussing custody, however…”

“That’s a long ways off,” Oliver said firmly. “The twins don’t know me very well yet and there’s a lot going on.”

“All right. We’ll let you two sort it out but I just wanted to make that clear.”

The next three hours involved Felicity and Oliver trying to navigate the world of inherited money. They set up trusts that the twins would inherit if Oliver lived. They covered what would happen if
Oliver died, or if Felicity died. They talked benefactors and supervisors and contingencies.

It was enough to make Oliver’s head swim, and he’d grown up around it. When he looked over at Felicity, carefully reading through the terms they’d agreed upon, he could see that it was straining her, as well.

By the time they were finished, Oliver was itching to get out behind of the boardroom and down to the foundry. He wanted to punch something, work up a good sweat. So he dropped Felicity off at his mother’s office for their lunch date, and left.

He was halfway to the Glades when he got Felicity’s panicked phone call.

“Oliver?” There were sirens and shouting in the background.

“What’s going on, Felicity?”

“Your mother -- she’s been shot!”

Chapter End Notes

As always, feel free to follow me for fic updates! storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com
part iv: "muse of fire"

Chapter Summary

This chapter follows the events of "Muse of Fire". Helena Bertinelli shoots Moira Queen, and the paparazzi are all over Felicity and the children.

Chapter Notes

So I said each chapter would cover three episodes.

I'm a lying liar who lies.

Except this: when I was thinking through this story, that really, legitimately seemed feasible. But then themes needed to be fleshed out, characters wanted actual lines. So this particular chapter covers "Muse of Fire" -- a chapter that covered "Vendetta" and "Year's End" as well would be three times the length of this one... I chose to give you this chunk rather than writing a novella and posting in two weeks' time. I hope you can forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It happened so quickly that Felicity didn’t realize what was happening until it was almost over. The ride down in the executive elevator had been, at best, awkward. Felicity’s mind didn’t quite know where to land -- Walter had asked her to look into Moira’s activities before he’d left, of course, and Oliver sometimes spoke of her in their conversations when they were putting the kids down, but Felicity hadn’t really been able to get a good handle on the woman.

Or figure out exactly why she wanted to take her to lunch. Maybe this was where she threatened to take the kids, Felicity thought, or tried to bribe her to disappear, although that didn’t seem likely, given how enamored she seemed of the children. Maybe this was, after all, what it seemed on the service: Moira Queen taking an interest in her because she was the mother of her grandchildren.

Perhaps Felicity might even survive this.

They exchanged pleasantries -- How was the meeting? Good. Did you have a good morning? Busy. But then every morning is a busy morning.

On the way out of the building they were approached by a businessman in a suit. “Mrs. Queen, I was wondering if I could take a minute of your time!”
“I have told your boss multiple times. I have seen the Bertinelli bid, and we are not going to be moving in that direction.”

“Mrs. Queen…”

Felicity would remember late the squeal of the motorcycle, the overwhelming sound of the pop of the bullets. The way the man whose name she had yet to get fell to the ground in a broken pile, and the sharp sound of the bullet hitting Moira’s flesh as she pushed Felicity out of the way.

“Hit the ground!” Someone yelled, and Felicity pulled Moira down to the ground with her, ignoring the way blood was seeping through the wound in Moira’s shoulder.

With a screech and a roar, the motorcycle disappeared, the shooter with it. “Someone go get a license plate number!” Felicity shouted, and whipped her scarf off of her neck, pressing it to Moira’s shoulder. “Someone! You!” She pointed to a man who already had his cell phone out. “Call the police. Tell them we need an ambulance.”

Already, there were sirens in the distance. A shooting just outside of Queen Consolidated apparently drew immediate emergency response.

Moira let out a groan from deep in her belly as Felicity kept firm pressure up on the wound. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Queen, but I have to try and stop the bleeding.”

“Felicity? I think I hit my head.”

“You might have,” Felicity said, “on the way down. Thanks, by the way, for pushing me out of the way. I mean -- I’ll say it again. I’ll probably say it a lot. Oliver will -- oh my god, Oliver. He’s gonna see this on the news.”

“Call him,” Moira gasped. “Tell him that I’m okay.”

“Okay,” Felicity said, still pressing down on the wound. “Just as soon as someone comes and takes over for me, okay?”
Moira closed her eyes. Felicity half-remembered something about concussions and not falling asleep so she squeezed Moira’s shoulder. Moira looked up in shocked pain.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but I need you to stay awake, Mrs. Queen. You might have a concussion and… you’ll freak me out if you lose consciousness, okay?”

Moira chuckled. “Well, we would hate that, wouldn’t we?”

A flash of inspiration hit her. “Maddie likes pink.”

“Excuse me?”

“You wanted to know about the kids. So I’m telling you. Maddie likes pink. I tried to do the thing -- you know, where you don’t push it down their throats and you give girls blocks and all and she likes that stuff, but she also really likes pink. And sparkles. And bugs. If there was such a thing as a pink, sparkly bug I believe she would lose her mind.”

Moira laughed. “Matthew?”

“Matthew’s current obsession is Spiderman. His friend Patrick at school is into it. So now it’s Spiderman backpacks and Spiderman lunchboxes and socks and everything I can get my hands on.”

“Oliver... liked superheroes,” Moira said, covering Felicity’s hand with her own. “When he was -- oh, probably just a little bit older than Matthew. He liked Iron Man and Hulk, I remember. Then it was cars. And then it was girls, God help us.”

Felicity laughed. “I can’t think about that. I don’t know what I’m going to do when they get to be that age. I’m just trying to make it through today.”

Finally the sirens screamed loud enough that Felicity knew she only had seconds before help arrived. “Over here!” she screamed at the paramedics. “We’re over here!”
She stepped out of the way just as the uniformed men and women took action. “She hit her head,” Felicity said. “I didn’t want to move her. She hit her head.”

“It’s okay, we’ve got her now. Are you a relative?”

Felicity sighed. “I’m her son’s… ex….”

“Then I’m sorry, ma’am, but I don’t think we can allow you to ride in the ambulance.”

“That’s okay. I think Queen Security will be here for me any second, anyway,” Felicity said, pulling her phone out.

“Ms. Smoak!” Robb Smart rushed out of the building towards her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m calling Oliver. He’s going to want to hear this from me.”

“That’s fine. I’m going to insist you come inside the building with me, however. We can’t be sure this isn’t a targeted attack on the Queen family.”

Felicity looked up, noticing for the first time that the paparazzi was furiously taking her picture from behind the lines the police had set up so quickly. She tried not to think about it, but her voice shook.

“Oliver?” She asked, as soon as he had picked up the phone.

“What’s going on, Felicity?”

“Your mother -- she’s been shot!” Felicity covered her mouth, the enormity of that statement hitting her. “They won’t let me ride in the ambulance with her, but they’re taking her to Starling General. It’s not bad. I don’t think. But she hit her head. Oh God. She was pushing me out of the way. There was… a shooter. Of course there was a shooter, because people don’t get shot without there being shooters.”

“Take a deep breath. Diggle’s with me now. He’s getting an update from Queen Security -- he says
Mr. Smart is with you?"

“Yes. Looking very intimidating, by the way. How does one get that impressive shoulder to waist ratio?”

“Felicity.”

“Sorry. I’ll calm down. In 3… 2… yeah, no. That’s not happening.” Felicity covered her mouth. “Oh God. I’m a horrible mother. I just thought -- everyone knows they’re Queens now, so…”

“If you’re worried about Maddie and Matthew, the school’s already on lockdown,” Oliver said, “at least, they’re initiating lockdown procedures now. I’m sure when you hang up with me, the text I just got from the school will go through to your phone. Felicity, I’m on the way. I’m not that far away. Stay there until I get there. Stay right there.”

“I don’t think I could leave, even if I wanted to. Pretty much surrounded here.” Felicity said.

“I’m five minutes out. Do you want me to stay on the line with you?”

“No,” Felicity said. “Just concentrate on getting here as fast as you can. Mr. Smart is waving at me. I think the police want to get my statement.”


“How do you know?”

“I know you.” Oliver’s voice was almost fond. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

**

Oliver ran, even before the car had stopped all the way, up the Queen plaza, pushing aside the policemen who didn’t really try that hard to stop him.
“Felicity!”

She paused in her conversation with the police, and Oliver was aware of how every paparazzo had turned their camera lenses towards them. It was clear they were looking for how they would react to seeing each other. Oliver Queen returns home a father was a salacious enough story, but if they could somehow get evidence that he was still involved with the mother, then that might be even better.

Oliver knew how that all worked, yet, when he saw her, his mother’s blood on her hands and her blouse, her eyes frantic, he couldn’t bring himself to react coldly.

“Oliver!” She ran up to him and he wrapped his arm around her, briefly, perhaps, but long enough for the paparazzi to get their fill of shots with them together.

“First things first. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Your mother -- I think she pushed me out of the way. I was just telling this Officer that she pushed me out of the way. She probably could have avoided getting hit altogether.”

“Okay.”

The police officer stepped forward, extending his hand. “Mr. Queen, I’m Officer DeGrasse. I’ve been taking Ms. Smoak’s statement.”

Oliver shook his hand, releasing Felicity. “Yes, of course. I can… let you finish.”

“I think we’re about done. But I wanted to let you know -- both your mother and the other victim have arrived at Starling General.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said.

Mr. Smart approached him next, Diggle right behind him. “Sir, they’ve secured your children at the
school. Members of our security team are there now. Do you want to --”

“Yes. We want to pick them up,” Felicity said firmly. “Then we’re going to go to the hospital.”

Olivier nodded, turning to ask the officer one last question. “Any leads on who might have done this?”

Officer DeGrasse shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, sir. Someone tried to get a license plate number, but our shooter was on a motorcycle, able to weave through traffic. No luck there. We’ll do what we can, sir, but these drive-by shootings are notoriously hard to solve.”

Oliver set his teeth and tried to remind himself to be polite. “Thank you. I guess we’ll hope for a miracle, then.”

“Oliver -- the children.” Felicity laid her hand on his arm, and instantly, the paparazzi resumed their crazed activity. Only now they were shouting -- urging Oliver and Felicity to look over at them, just for a moment.

Oliver turned to Diggle. “Will you please confirm that the parking garage is still relatively safe?”

A significant look passed between them -- Diggle raised his eyebrows and nodded towards Felicity. Oliver shrugged. If he had to expose his skills to her in an effort to protect her and Maddie and Matthew, it would be just one more thing he had to explain to her. At this point he could really care less.

He found that he wanted to see his children. Wanted to verify their safety himself, have them in his sights as soon as possible. He knew better than anyone how dangerous this city could be, but somehow he thought if he just kept this vigilante thing under wraps, his family would avoid harm.

How wrong he’d been. He’d left Felicity and his mother alone for only minutes, and this happened.

“Yes, Mr. Queen,” Diggle said, interrupting Oliver’s spiraling train of thought. “Just let me know when you’re on your way down.”
“Will do.” He gestured to Felicity to precede him back inside the building, trying to ignore the truly vile things the photographers were shouting at him, and at Felicity. Anything to get a reaction, he knew -- but when one photographer shouted that his whore had saved his mother, it took everything he had not to turn around and correct the man’s speech.

Felicity had no trouble ignoring them, apparently, as she went through the glass doors, a woman on a mission. She walk-ran to the elevator, pressing the key for the daycare floor immediately. Oliver whipped his jacket off as soon as they got in it, laying it over Felicity’s shoulders. She looked up at him. “Oliver, thank you, but I’m not going into shock. I mean, I’m not cold or anything, and I’m going to get blood all over your jacket…”

“Exactly. Your shirt is covered in blood. Not exactly the best ‘picking your kids up at daycare’ outfit.”

“Oh yeah. Right.” Felicity shifted, adjusting the jacket so it fit better around her shoulders, though she was still practically swimming in it.

“It seems like I’m always saying thank you for something,” Oliver said quietly, as the elevator car moved slowly upwards. “But… thank you. For being with my mom.”

Felicity let out a ragged sigh. “You’re welcome. I… It could have been me. It probably should have been me, really. It was the least I could do.”

The doors opened, and they rushed through the school to Maddie and Matthew’s classroom. The children were in the middle of lunch. Oliver had never seen mashed potatoes in that great a quantity on the floor, on the tables, on the chairs… on faces. And barbecue sauce, everywhere.

Still, when Matthew let out an excited yell, and knocked over his chair and rushed over to hug him -- Oliver didn’t care. He just picked him up and held him close, noticing that Felicity was doing the same with Maddie.

“My director let me know what was happening. Of course, we haven’t said anything, but… is everyone okay?” Miss Tamara asked, while she wiped another child’s face.

“Everyone should be fine in time,” Oliver answered her. “We’ll be taking Maddie and Matthew home. I… very much doubt they will be in tomorrow. We will let you know for sure just as soon as we’re aware of what our plans are, going forward.”
Felicity shot him a look. But she didn’t correct him, instead leaning over to kiss Matthew’s cheek, leaving an impression in her purple-pink lipstick. “You two need to wash your hands.”

Picking them up during lunch time turned out to be quite an affair. Neither one of them wanted to finish their food, so Felicity and Oliver watched them throw their plates away, wash their hands, and stack their chairs. Then, since the next day was a Friday, naptime supplies had to be collected to be taken home and washed. Oliver found himself loaded down with backpacks full of blankies and nighty-night aids.

Felicity, on the other hand, ended up with Maddie and Matthew holding her hands as she led them down the corridor, to the elevator, and out to the car.

Diggle and Mr. Smart and their team managed to hold off the photographers who, having literally smelled blood, were practically foaming at the mouth, as they piled into the back of a town car.

“Remind me that I need to have Digg acquire something with booster seats,” Oliver told Felicity in a low voice.

“They’ll be fine for now,” Felicity said. “One thing at a time.” She looked down at her shirt and sighed, distracted for a second, until she said, “Matthew, Madelyn, you two need to buckle your seat belts. When Mr. Diggle gets here to drive us, we need to be ready to leave.”

“Why are all those people chasing us with cameras?” Matthew asked. He got up on the seat and waved to them before Felicity took his hand and helped him down.

“They want to get pictures of you because your father is… who he is,” Felicity said evenly. “People are interested in his story because everyone was very sad that he was dead, and now he’s alive again.”

“Oh.” Maddie crinkled up her nose. “But what does that have to do with us?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid, baby,” Felicity said. “They’ll go away eventually, but for right now we’re going to pretend like they aren’t there. And while they’re… interested, you need to listen to whatever Mr. Diggle or your father tells you about how to behave around them, okay?”
“Okay, Mama,” Maddie said, and Oliver was shocked that that was the end of the conversation.

Diggle got in the car, started the engine, and drove them through the city to Starling City General Hospital. On the way, Felicity and Oliver explained that Moira had been in an accident, and they were on their way to see her and tell her to get better.

“Oliver, I’m thinking that maybe we ought to drop you off here,” Felicity said suddenly. “I should probably change my shirt, and the kids…”

Oliver felt his hands clench. “I can understand your concerns, but Felicity, we don’t know if my mother was the target, or if you were, and until we know for sure, I would just rather us stick together.”

Felicity sighed as Diggle pulled into a parking space at the hospital. “All right.”

“Ms. Smoak?” Diggle turned to her. “If you’re that uncomfortable, I keep a bag of Ms. Thea’s things in here. I’m sure she won’t mind you slipping into one of her tops.”

Felicity tilted her head to the side and considered this offer for just a few minutes before she sighed. “Okay. Everyone out. I’ll just change in here. Assuming I can find something that fits.”

Diggle handed her Thea’s emergency bag of clothes, and Oliver, Maddie and Matthew stepped outside the car and waited for her to change. Diggle kept scanning the area, Oliver on high alert as well. He knew the media couldn’t be too far behind them. Sooner or later they’d figure out that he and Felicity and the children had left the building.

His sister and Felicity definitely had different tastes -- the flowy, nearly-transparent flowered top was not something he would have ever pictured her in, but in some ways, it reminded him in an instant of that girl he’d met at a party five years ago, who had so thoroughly captured his attention for one night.

Felicity immediately crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t stare, Oliver.”

“You look…” Like I remember you. “Nice.”
“Thanks,” Felicity said, blushing. “Okay. Let’s go get this show on the road.”

**

And a show it was. Oliver’s face turned to stone as a crowd of media waited at the hospital entrance for them. Mr. Diggle and several other security personnel formed a protective barrier around them.

“Get out of the way!” Mr. Diggle said, voice firm as he cleared a path. “We’ve got children here. Back up.”

Maddie and Matthew both looked up at her, terrified. Felicity wished with everything she had that she’d stood her ground with Oliver and taken the children home with her. This wasn’t what she wanted for them. She didn’t want them scared.

Oliver must have heard Maddie make a distressed cry, because he turned and, without a word, picked her up, tucking her head into his shoulder, and walked faster. Matthew reached for Felicity’s hand, her shy boy, and squeezed it for all he was worth.

Felicity bent to whisper in his ear. “Do you want me to pick you up? You don’t have to look if you don’t want to.”

He nodded, and she handed her purse to one of the security employees, picking Matthew up in her arms.

That was the picture that would run for the noon paper -- Felicity and Oliver, each clinging to a twin, entering Starling City General. The headline read: QUEEN CHILDREN USHERED INTO FAMILY TRADITION OF TRAGEDY: MOIRA QUEEN SHOT, ILLEGITIMATE CHILDRENS’ MOTHER ACCOMPANIES QUEEN FAMILY HEIR TO THE HOSPITAL.

**

When they got to Moira’s room, she was asleep, and Felicity decided that, since they were both tired and over stimulated, it might be good for the twins to sleep too. She laid them down on the couch in the private hospital suite, and covered them with a blanket.
Just in time for Detective Lance to come talk to Oliver. When Lance told them that the shooting had probably had nothing to do with Moira or Felicity, but more to do with the Bertinelli crime family underling that had been trying to talk to them, Felicity thought that perhaps Oliver would be relieved. But he wasn’t. Instead, it seemed like the windows in Oliver’s eyes shut, like he hardened somehow. “Thank you, Detective.”

Felicity wondered if he even listened to the Detective expound on the tensions between the Triad and the Bertinelli family, or what was going through his mind. He had never been this hard to read before the island.

But then, people changed. She’d grown up enough to realize that. Experiences weathered and hardened, or eroded and softened. Oliver, it seemed, had been forged, made harder, colder -- better at hiding his heart than he had ever been before.

Which would, of course, frustrate the little sister who had longed for a memory of the brother she had lost to return to her. Felicity watched as Thea tried to give him grief over not riding in the ambulance with Moira, but Oliver was having none of it.

“I’m sorry, Thea. But I couldn’t exactly stop the ambulance from leaving, and I wanted to make sure my children were safe.”

Thea blinked. Felicity could see that this big life change in her brother hadn’t really sunk in for Thea. She felt some degree of sympathy. When she’d first found out she was going to be a mother, accepting that into her self-image had been hard enough. Let alone how difficult it had been for her mother.

“Oh yeah. Of course.” Thea crossed her arms. “It’s just -- Ollie. She was alone.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Felicity said calmly. “I was there. She was doing just fine. She’s going to be okay, Thea.”

Thea nodded, and gestured dramatically. “I think I need to take a walk.”

Oliver turned to Felicity as soon as Thea was out of the room. “The threat of a shooting may be gone, but the threat to your privacy is not. They’ll be camped out at your apartment.”
“It’s probably best you come stay at the mansion, darling,” Moira said, from the bed. “We’ve got plenty of room, and a fence that is impossible to jump.”

Felicity started. “I… I didn’t realize you were awake.”

“Yes, well. I am on some marvelous drugs. The pain is minimal. And thank God, I didn’t knock all of the sense out of my head.”

Moira struggled to sit up, and Oliver rushed over, pushing gently on her good shoulder. “Lay down Mom, rest.”

“I’ve been resting.”

“Yes. You’ve also just been shot. More resting than a thirty minute sleeping off the pain pills nap is in order.”

“No. Felicity needs to hear this. Then I’ll go to sleep.” Moira reached out her hand, and Felicity awkwardly stepped forward and took it. “My darling -- I have been in your shoes. Or, perhaps not your precise shoes, but close enough to the same neighborhood to have walked almost a mile in them. You’ve been alone in raising your children, all these years. You’re starting to wonder if you’d made the right choice, letting someone else in. And now you’ve got the added pressure of the paparazzi -- and the last place you want to be is at the mansion. I know. But this is how we can help you, in ways we couldn’t help before. We can help keep you safe. We can help keep the children safe. And we can help make the press go away, given time.”

Felicity swallowed. “It's just that -- all of their things.”

“We’ll send someone to pack for you,” Moira said, waving a hand.

“Raiza,” Oliver supplied.

“Yes. No one will know better than Raiza what young children need. We’ll set you up in the family wing of the house. Just for a few days, my dear, until Oliver and the good people at Queen PR get this all straightened out and some boundaries established.”
Felicity sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Why do I feel like I’ve been double-teamed?”

Moira squeezed her hand and closed her eyes. “Because you have, darling. It’s impossible to resist two Queens with their minds made up.”

Oliver flashed her a smile. It was almost genuine.

***

Oliver set Diggle on the case of finding out more about the Bertinellis, and setting up a meeting with Frank Bertinelli as soon as possible while he settled Felicity and the kids into a guest suite down the hall from his room. He was helping unpack Maddie’s suitcase when a knock disturbed their chaos. Oliver went to the door, and smiled broadly at the woman on the other side of it.

“Does Ms. Smoak require anything more?” Raiza asked. “There are always blankets in the hallway, or pillows, if the children need anything else.”

Oliver felt his heart squeeze. He had missed her, while he was on the island. In many ways, she had been his mother growing up. Nursing his wounds, kissing him goodnight.

“I don’t think they require anything else,” Oliver said in English, then changed to Russian. “Thank you for taking such good care of my family today, Raiza. It’s -- everything.”

“You make beautiful babies, Oliver, but then I always thought you would,” she said in English. “And they are so well-behaved, for which, I think, we must thank their mother.”

Oliver chuckled. “Definitely didn’t get that from me.”

“You were never a bad boy, you know,” Raiza said, cupping his cheek. “Difficult, yes -- but you so wanted attention, you see? Always had a good heart.”

Oliver ducked his head, and Raiza let her hand fall back to her side. “Thank you, Raiza.”
“I am going home now. If you need anything, you will call, yes?”

“Always.” Oliver bent and kissed her cheek -- something he hadn’t done since he was a child. “Thank you, Raiza.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Oliver.”

His cell phone buzzed insistently in his pocket, and he nearly cursed. “Diggle.”

“Got a lead on Bertinelli. Your Bratva connections got us a meeting but we need to go tonight.”

Oliver glanced over at Matthew and Maddie, who were, by now, sitting side-by-side on the couch, watching a Disney movie. Felicity was still bustling about the suite -- it seemed she never sat still.

“Okay. I’m on my way.”

Felicity stepped out of the bathroom. “Do you need to leave?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Oliver said. He walked over to the couch, and kissed Maddie and Matthew’s cheeks, giving them long hugs. “I don’t know how late I’ll be. I’ll see you guys in the morning, okay?”

“Wasn’t your sister planning on you staying with your mother?”

Oliver winced. In his rush to get them all set up, he’d forgotten that Thea had said something about that. “She’s just going to have to wait. This is urgent, or I wouldn’t be leaving.”

“Hm, okay,” Felicity said, sitting down on the couch next to Maddie and Matthew. “I think you’re gonna have one upset teenager on your hands.”

Oliver shrugged. “I suspect I will survive.”
“Bye Daddy!” Maddie and Matthew shouted at him as he left the room. And ran smack into Tommy Merlyn.

“Hey, pal,” Tommy drawled. “Rough day?”

Oliver chuckled. “You could say that. I’m sorry, Tommy, I’ve just been called away.”

“Not a problem, man. I was just coming by to see how everyone was… adjusting.”

Oliver stopped and sighed. He knew he owed Tommy’s friendship more than a quick brush-off. But at the same time, he was running low on time. “Mom’s already home. They’ve got her on some good meds, and she’ll be fine once she gets rested up. Felicity and the children will be here for the time being while we try to get the press sorted out.”

“Wow.” Tommy was looking up the staircase at someone coming down. “That’s quite a dress you’ve got there, Thea. Where you headed?”

Thea’s grin made an attempt at sexy temptress. Oliver wanted to grind his teeth but reminded himself that everyone grew up eventually. It was hardly Thea’s fault that she’d gone from preteen to young woman where he couldn’t see her. “Somewhere loud and smoky.”

Oliver hissed, pretending like he hated asking her to stay home. “Thea, I have to go out.”

“No!” Thea all but stomped her foot. “Oliver, I was with her all day.”

“Yes, and I was with her, and with Felicity and Maddie and Matthew, and now there’s business stuff that I have to take care of. Will you please do me a solid and stay with Mom tonight?”

“Ugh.” Thea rolled her eyes, but trooped back up the stairs.

“That’s a shame,” Tommy said. “That is a truly excellent dress.”
“What are you saying, exactly?”

Tommy waved a hand. “Just saying -- cut, color -- on her, just… very nice.”

“Uh huh,” Oliver said, jingling his keys in his pocket. “Well -- we need to catch up, but…”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Tommy said, following him out the door. “I completely understand. I just hope you’ve got this as much under control as it appears like you do.

“Thanks.” Oliver sighed. “Me too.”

**

Oliver found himself seated across from Helena Bertinelli. Maybe it was the good red wine. Maybe it was the soft candelight of the restaurant or the demure cut of her dress. Maybe it was red sauce like no one else in Starling City made red sauce, but he found himself… opening up to her. The stress of the day fell away as he found himself almost longing for the simplicity of the island.

He entertained a brief, but laughable fantasy, of taking Felicity and the children back there. There, at least, he wouldn’t be spending every waking minute terrified that some paparazzi was going to take things too far and compromise the safety of Maddie and Matthew.

“You seem like you’re a million miles away, Oliver,” Helena said.

“Just got a …” Oliver chuckled. “Just got a lot on my mind. That’s all.”

“Hm. I saw in the papers. Are congratulations in order?”

Oliver took another swallow of his wine, let it sneak its way down his throat. “I prefer to think of it in those terms, yes. But of course, the media will make it as salacious as they can.”

“And it’s not?”
“Not to my mind.” Oliver shrugged. “I have beautiful, healthy children, with a woman with whom, admittedly, I did not have a relationship. But neither of us were drugged. Neither of us came away from the experience scarred. There are worse ways to come into the world, I’ve always thought.”

“Like out of duty, perhaps?” Helena asked, astutely.

“Perhaps.” Oliver laughed. “But I don’t need to tell you my poor-little-rich-boy-story.”

Helena’s eyes sparkled with something that was almost close to mirth. “I can’t think of anything more boring. What’s interesting about you, Oliver Queen, is all of that anger that you’ve got bubbling underneath of the surface.”

Oliver remembered, with striking clarity, nearly beating a man to death, having his hands around his neck and being so blinded by that rage that Helena was so fascinated by, that he couldn’t hear Laurel screaming at him, pleading with him to stop. Her fascination left a bad taste in his mouth.

But he could see there was something similar in her. She was trying to forge an identity for herself away from the family, much the same as he was trying to forge an identity apart from Queen Consolidated.

So when Diggle called him, it was with genuine regret that he made his apologies. “I would stay, but it’s regarding my children,” he said.

“Ah. Already the proud papa, I see.”

Oliver twisted his mouth up in a smile. “Or something like that.” He laid out more than enough cash to cover their bill on the table.

“My father will kill me if I let you pay,” Helena said, reaching for his hand. Oliver let her cover his hand with hers for just a brief moment before he pulled away, buttoning his jacket.

“I have a confession to make,” he said.
“Oh?”

“I didn’t want to come out with you tonight.”

“That makes two of us.”

“But.” He smiled. “I’m glad I did. See you around, Helena.”

“See you later, Oliver Queen.”

**

The next few hours -- shifted things. Oliver rushed back to the restaurant, eager to defend the wait staff that had been so kind to him and Helena. Then the shooter burst back onto the scene, and Oliver found himself going blow for blow.

When the helmet came off, and Helena Bertinelli was revealed, Oliver felt like the wind had been knocked out of him.

All of their talk came rushing back to him. And all of her hate, all of her anger was so clearly revealed to him. The dead fiancé, he would bet money that had something to do with it. He gripped his bow and fairly marched back to the Foundry, where Diggle was waiting for him.

“I should have seen that coming, Digg!” Oliver shouted. “Why would she go after her own family?”

“I don’t know. Here I thought you had parental issues…”

“Not a joke, Diggle!”

“Since when do you care about the baddy guys’ whys, anyway? And she is a bad guy, Oliver. She shot your mother.”
Oliver shook his head. “She’s got to have… reasons. There’s got to be a purpose for why she’s doing this.”

“She murdered four men in cold blood. I’m not so sure we should care about her reasons, Oliver.” Diggle shifted. “Listen up, man. You can’t afford to get all psychologically fucked up about some chick wearing black leather with a good sob story. I’m sure her daddy was mean to her. Doesn’t mean she gets a pass.”

Oliver shifted. “Maybe we can… help her.”

“That’s a terrible idea.”

Oliver found himself digging in his heels. “I know what I’m doing.”

Diggle scoffed. “Sure you do. Now I know how your family feels when you lie to them.”

**

The next morning, Quentin Lance arrived to give Oliver a warning about Helena Bertinelli. He was more than a little surprised to find the billionaire dishing out Cheerios and refilling orange juice glasses.

“Mr. Queen?” Quentin said, from the entrance to the kitchen, where Raiza had told him Oliver was.

Oliver looked up from his apparently intense conversation with a pair of beautiful children. “Detective. Nice of you to drop by.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Save it.” Detective Lance could smell coffee in the air. And not the slop that they served at the stationhouse and attempted to call coffee. But truly excellent, fresh-ground coffee. He might have committed murder just then for a cup of it. “Can I speak to you in private, please?”

“Sure. Maddie, Matthew, do not disturb your mother, okay? I’ll be right back.” Oliver gestured out into the hallway. “Felicity had a long day yesterday. So we’re trying to let her sleep in.”
Detective Lance felt his stomach turn. “Listen, if you’re playing the same kind of game that you used to play, I gotta tell you, it makes me sick to think there’s kids involved now.”

“What are you talking about?” Oliver looked genuinely confused. But then, the kid had always been a decent actor.

“I’m talking about the fact that you were seen out last night with Helena Bertinelli.”

“Ah.” Oliver shrugged. “A business meeting.”

“If it was, that’s a business you want to back away from. The Bertinellis are bad news, and things are heating up between them and the Triad. I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with either side, so as to avoid getting caught in the crosshairs.”

Oliver’s mouth lifted in an almost-smile. “Duly noted, Detective.”

“Listen, not for nothing. But a few months back I made a mistake, and you nearly got killed. And I would have felt real bad, depriving those kids of a father figure, you see what I’m saying? But if there was a debt between us now, I consider us all paid up.”

“Thank you, Detective.”

He spent the day with Felicity, Maddie and Matthew, exploring the house and the grounds. Wandering through rooms he hadn’t really been in in years, showing the kids his old playroom, which had been somehow miraculously restocked with Legos and Lincoln Logs, My Little Ponys and Army Men. Some of Thea’s dolls were arranged on shelves. Maddie and Matthew nearly lost their minds.

Felicity was a good mother. Oliver noticed that right away. She was patient, smart, anticipatory. She put the needs of the kids first. But by the time naptime rolled around, she was ready to lay them down for a few minutes.

“Thank you for all of this, Oliver, but I think next week, at the very least, I should get back to work,” Felicity said. “I can’t keep calling in ‘being stalked by the paparazzi’.”
Oliver nodded.

“You’ve got a pretty serious face on. Something you’re thinking about?”

Oliver opened his mouth, and closed it. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to have someone listen to
him, someone tell him what to do with all of this anger in the middle of his chest, so much that he
couldn’t hardly breathe with it sitting there.

But he didn’t. Instead, that night, he found Helena standing vigil over her fiancé’s grave. And he
thought more and more about how angry he was, but more about how lonely he was.

And then they were abducted, and all hell broke loose.

**

Felicity was coming down the stairs as the front door opened. Walter Steele stepped inside. She
almost turned around and went right back up the stairs, but his voice stopped her.

“Ms. Smoak. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Right back atcha.” Felicity flushed and then shook her head. “Except I didn’t mean that all, because
you actually live here, and I’m just staying here while I’m being hunted like an animal. So of course,
I should have expected to see you here. Sorry.”

“Well, if you should have expected to see me, then with the news this morning, I should have
expected to see you,” Walter said gently.

“Ah. Yes. I suppose that makes sense, of course,” Felicity said. “Sorry, by the way. I don’t know if
anyone called you, or --”

“I’ve spoken to Thea today,” Walter said. “I hope you realize, Ms. Smoak, that you could have come
to Moira or I at any time.”
Felicity cleared her throat. “I’m uh -- starting to see that. But I’ve been, you know, mostly on my own all these years. It’s a little hard to wrap your mind around all of… this.”

“And all of the Queens,” Walter said, a knowing smile on his face. “Well. I look forward to meeting the children in the morning. I’m going to go up and greet my wife.”

“Oh. Of course you are. I’m just -- heading to the kitchen. Have you seen Oliver?”

Walter shook his head. “I don’t believe he’s in yet.”

“Okay.”

Felicity made her way down the stairs, and back to the kitchen. She found a piece of fruit, poured herself a tall glass of water, and sat down to read the paper that had been left sitting on the table, in hopes that with a full stomach and a soothed mind, she might be able to sleep. Then she read the headline of the newspaper.

OLIVER QUEEN SPOTTED WITH BERTINELLI HEIRESS HOURS AFTER BEING PHOTOGRAPHED WITH THE MOTHER OF HIS ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN.

“Pretty woman,” Felicity muttered, running her fingers over the paper. “Well, Oliver, at least you’ve got good taste there.”

“I’ve got good taste where?” Oliver strode into the kitchen, looking like he’d had a bad night.

“In women,” Felicity said lightly.

Oliver narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“Helena Bertinelli. You were photographed with her.” Felicity shrugged, going for cosmopolitan, mature woman of the world. She had no claim on Oliver Queen, and refused to pretend like she had.

“Oh.”

“I almost did.” He twisted a cap off of a bottle of water he retrieved from the refrigerator, and sat down next to her. “I went to her house. I was going to try and -- lose myself in her the way that I used to be able to, you know?”

“I know,” Felicity said softly.

“She’s just -- so angry. And sad. And I’m those things, too -- you know. Just pissed. Pissed at the world. Pissed that I missed Maddie and Matthew for so many years. Pissed that Thea’s grown up on me. Pissed that everyone expects me to be some scion of business, like my father, when no one ever asked anything like this of me while he was still alive. Pissed that my mom moved on. Pissed that I’m pissed about that, because Lord knows he wasn’t always Husband of the Year.” Oliver felt a hand over top of his, the fingers lacing themselves between his.

“You’ve got a lot to be pissed and sad about. I think that’s fair.”

“I felt like she might understand me.” Oliver shook his head. “But she won’t, you know? Because I can’t…”

“You can’t tell her everything.” Felicity smiled at him. “You know you don’t have to tell me everything, either, right? Not if you don’t want to. You don’t owe me anything, Oliver.”

“You keep saying that.” Oliver shook his head. “I wish you wouldn’t. I wish you’d get mad at me. I wish you’d demand stuff of me. I wish you wouldn’t just…”

“You want me to behave like a teenager? Oliver -- we knew each other less than twenty-four hours. The odds of what happened to us actually happening are… astronomical. I’m just trying to be an adult about this thing. I knew when I slept with you exactly the kind of person you were!”

“And I’m not that person anymore. I want to be better. I need to be better. But I’m not going to be better if you keep just…” Oliver stood up. “I come here, and I talk to you about sleeping with another woman and all you can say is ‘she’s pretty’?”
“Wait a minute. You’re offended that I’m not going bull-in-a-china-shop jealous over you kissing someone else? Newsflash Oliver, in the weeks between the conception of our children and the boat going down, you kissed more women than I have kissed men in my lifetime so excuse me if I decided early on that this was how I was going to have to handle this!”

Oliver swept in, pushed her hair aside, and kissed her. It was demanding, ruthless, but she didn’t say no and she didn’t pull away. She buried her hands in his hair and pulled him closer, savoring every second of his taste and expertise.

When it was over, they were both panting.

“That was a mistake,” Felicity said, tears filling her eyes. “That was a huge mistake, Oliver.”

“It was a good kiss,” Oliver said.

“Oh, no objections there. But it was a mistake.” Felicity stood up, taking care of the trash accompanying her midnight snack. “I’m not going to go down that road with you, Oliver -- I mean the kissing road, which leads to touching, which leads to fucking -- unless that’s what you really want. And only then if you want the whole deal, and I’m talking -- everything. I’m talking your heart and your mind and your soul in vested in us because I also decided a long time ago that that’s what I deserve. That’s what our children deserve: to see me in that kind of relationship with a man. It doesn’t have to be you. So don’t you come around here, kissing me, because some other girl didn’t heal the wound in your soul quite the way you thought she would. When you kiss me again, it had better be because I’m the only one in the whole wide world you want to kiss that way.”

“No, I know you’re not sure.” Felicity crossed her arms over her chest. “And that’s fine. You just found out you’ve got kids. You just got back from a deserted island. You’ve got Laurel… business to straighten out. I get all that. But I’m not waiting around for you to heal, Oliver Queen. Decide what you want, and then go after it. You want to be a better kind of man? Be that kind of man.”

She marched up the stairs to the guest suite she shared with her children, shut the door firmly, fell into bed, and cried herself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes
Maddie woke up first. She often did. Matthew took longer to go asleep, so she had to wake him up every morning. Her mother told her over and over again to let him sleep, but in this strange new house, with a bathroom she didn’t know, it was far better to have someone awake with her. She crawled down out of her bed and tiptoed over to Matthew’s bed. The bedroom they were sharing now was far larger than the bedroom they had at home, where there beds were close enough they could be jumped from one to the other, so their feet wouldn’t have to touch the ground where monsters could get them.

Here, though, Maddie just had to risk it.

“Wake up!” She poked Matthew in the side. “Wake up, Matthew! Wake!”

He opened one eye. “Don’t wanna. It’s not waking-up time. It’s a stay-home day. Go back to bed.”

“Can’t. I have to pee.”
Matthew opened both eyes. “So?”

“So. You know.”

Matthew sighed, because he did know, and rolled himself out of bed, walking with her to the bathroom hand-in-hand. Maddie went first, then Matthew did. Hands were washed and dried, and Matthew was headed back to bed when Maddie put her hands on her hips.

“Let’s go wake up Mama.”

“Nuh huh. No way.” Matthew shook his head. “Not waking Mama up on a stay-home day.”

Maddie didn’t know much about having a daddy yet. Except that he smelled good, and gave really good hugs, and made terrible macaroni and cheese. But maybe daddies were for waking up on stay-home days.

“Wake up Daddy?”

Matthew considered it. “We can try, I guess. What if he yells?”

Maddie’s stomach growled. “I’m too hungry. Let’s try.”

“Okay,” Matthew said, but it was clear he was not as enthusiastic about this as she was. He grabbed his trusty Spiderman from his bed and tip-toed down the hallway with Maddie. “Which is his door?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to open ‘em all up till we find the right one,” Maddie whispered back.

Her stomach grew growlier and growlier as they pushed open several doors -- they found their grandma’s room, and several rooms with lots of books and statues and one room with lots of computers, before they found their Daddy’s room.
They stood at the doorway whispering at each other for a few minutes. “You!”

“No, you go!”

“No, you!”

“All right, you two,” Daddy said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “What are you doing up?”

“I had to pee,” Maddie said.

Daddy looked a little panicked at that. “Did you find the bathroom in time?”

“Yes. But now I’m hungry. Mama says not to wake her up before our clock says six on a stay-home day.”

“Your mother is a very intelligent woman,” Daddy said. And then he swung his legs out of his bed and got to his feet. “But I suppose I can’t talk you two into going back to bed?”

“Not while her tummy is growly. Mommy says Maddie’s a grump when she doesn’t get to eat.”

“Okay then,” Daddy said. “Give me just a minute.”

A few minutes later, Daddy appeared out of the bathroom wearing pajama pants and a loose t-shirt, and he took them downstairs to the kitchen and sat them on barstools next to the counter.

“All right. What do you guys like to eat for breakfast?”

It took him a minute, but he found them cereal and toast and big glasses of juice.

Maddie finally got her stomach to stop growling, and so she could ask the question she’d been wanting to ask him. “Daddy, do all your owies hurt?”
“What?”

“You’ve got owies all over.” Maddie pointed to her tummy and chest. “Do they hurt?”

“Not all of them, and not all of the time,” Daddy said honestly. “Thank you for worrying about me, though.”

“Mama always kisses my owies to make them get better,” Matthew said seriously. “You should ask her if she’ll give you kisses.”

Daddy smiled. “Your mom’s not going to be kissing me, but it sure is a nice thought.”

Daddy started mixing together his breakfast drink, and then he sat down with them and turned on Scooby-Doo.

Maddie thought maybe, just maybe, she was going to like this having-a-daddy-thing.
Chapter Summary

This is where we start to slowly separate from canon, folks! Walter asks Felicity for her help gathering information on the notebook he's discovered in Moira's room. Oliver struggles to keep all of the balls he's juggling in the air.

Chapter Notes

Oh. My. Goodness. I'm so pleased by your responses to this story and now that this chapter is done, I can allow myself to go back and respond to your lovely comments and thank you each personally, but for now let me say that I am *so. gosh. darned. pleased.* by the response to this story that it makes me want to write like the wind. Thank you. Thank you so much!

Oliver found he couldn’t settle. He tried to sleep, but he kept thinking of her lips, and the tears in her eyes. He couldn’t help thinking that it seemed he could do absolutely nothing right these days. He didn’t have a clue how to be a parent or a businessman or a playboy anymore. He was good at one thing: strapping on a bow and arrow and becoming the killing machine he’d been trained to be.

So when he couldn’t quiet his mind, he gave up the fight, slipping out of the house as easily as he had as a teenaged delinquent, and took the motorcycle back to Verdant, where he changed into the uniform that fit as well as a second skin, and went looking for trouble. He heard the gunshots loud and clear over the roaring of his engine, and swiftly turned his bike in their direction.

He arrived too late -- he saw in horrible slow motion the white car, members of the Triad piling inside of it as it sped away, he saw a pool of blood… He saw her.

“Dammit!” He jumped off the bike, flinging his helmet to the ground. “Helena!”

They’d had the decency to move her body to the side of the alley, on top of a pile of garbage bags. He fell to his knees and desperately checked for a pulse. “Helena!”
She started to laugh. Oliver felt chills go up and down his spine. “Helena, come on, stay with me.”

“It’s over.” She pressed her fingers to her abdomen, where the largest wound was. “Oh my God, it’s finally over.” She gripped his hand. “I did it, Oliver. It’s all over now. He’ll pay for what he did to me.”

Oliver reached for his phone and dialed the emergency line. “I’ve found a gunshot victim in the alleyway at 4901 Evergreen Place,” he told the operator. “I don’t know how much longer she’s got. Tell them to hurry.”

He hung up the phone, feeling Helena’s fingers slacken on his. “I don’t want to live,” she told him. “I don’t want to. You call them back and tell them not to come. This is my reward.”

“I’m sorry, Helena, I really am. I hope in the end this was all worth it.”

As soon as he saw the sirens, he had to leave -- he’d be arrested on sight and he hadn’t exactly brought with him a change of clothes and makeup remover. He found a rooftop to watch the action from, his arms crossed over his chest.

They loaded her into an ambulance, paramedics shouting orders at each other. It was chaotic and Oliver couldn’t tell, in the end, whether she lived or had died by the time they drove away, squealing around the corner.

It was just another way he’d failed -- he hadn’t been able to get through to her. He’d been too wrapped up in his stuff. His life. His needs.

He was in a foul mood by the time he got to Verdant.

“I heard on the scanner,” Diggle said, appearing from the shadows, “that Helena Bertinelli was found shot in an alleyway, and several members of the Triad besides.”

“There was nothing I could do,” Oliver said flatly. “She didn’t exactly write out her plan on the back of a napkin for me so I could follow along, you know. By the time I got there, it was all over. And now it’ll be flat-out war between the Bertinellis and the Triad.”
“No one’s blaming you, Oliver,” Diggle shrugged his shoulders. “You’re not omniscient. We’ll just have to do what we can. Like we always do.”

Oliver scoffed. “I do what I can and I fail. I couldn’t keep Helena sane and alive. I can’t… figure anything out with Laurel. I don’t know anything about how to be a good father. I’ve got these names in a book, Digg. And that’s it.”

“You may not know how to be a good father, but you haven’t had a lot of practice at it yet. And let it be known that you are not responsible for the sanity of any other human being on this planet, Oliver Queen. You start taking on that kind of burden and of course you’re going to fail. And as for Laurel…” Diggle shrugged. “Can’t help you there, man. If I could figure out how to be in a healthy relationship, I’d have it made. But you got to figure ‘don’t fall in love with the woman your brother married’ to be step one in that process, right?”

Oliver ignored his attempt at humor and reached for a tennis ball, throwing it as hard as he could against the wall. “I need a win, Diggle. I need to feel like something’s going right, for once.”

“So fix something you broke,” Diggle said. “Start with something fixable… Patch that hole in the wall, for example. Apologize to someone you’ve been an ass to…”

Oliver snorted. “That’s pretty zen master of you, Digg.”

“Nah, man. It’s all about putting one foot in front of the other. You just told me what you needed. No one knows you better than you. Once you know what you need, that’s most the battle. Just go out and get it.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“I don’t know, it sounds simple enough to me. Listen, Oliver, take my advice, don’t take it, but don’t spend all night laying around here sulking. Go home, get some rest. Shake it off.”

**

For once, it wasn’t her children that woke her up, but rather the annoyingly poppy sounds of a came-with-the-phone ringtone. She grappled for her phone in the unfamiliar room and swept her thumb across the screen blearily before she saw who was calling.
“Hello?”

“Good morning,” Barry said. “Did you sleep good?”

“It’s seven-thirty. I’m still sleeping good,” Felicity muttered. “What do you want?”

“I just wanted you to know that I’m looking at a tabloid that’s got your face on the front of it.”

Felicity sat up and reached for her glasses. “What?”

“I went out to get my morning coffee, and there you were.”

Felicity closed her eyes. “There’s been… a lot going on.”

“I know.” Barry sighed. “Now I know why you were being so weird when I called you about Oliver Queen a month ago. He’s the kids’ father, isn’t he? It’s not just the media putting two and two together and getting six.”

Felicity wished desperately that she had a cup of coffee in front of her, something to help her cope with the situation at hand. Barry might have been an ex -- but more importantly he was a friend, and she could hear the hurt in his voice.

“Yes. He’s Maddie and Matthew’s father.”

“I can see why you didn’t tell me,” Barry said, but it was clear that he might understand but he’d taken it hard.

“I didn’t tell anyone, Barry. There was nothing to tell. Oliver was dead. And the last thing I wanted was… well. What’s happening now.” Felicity sighed.

“Are you guys okay? Are you being looked after? I mean, if you’re in one tabloid that means all the
others are going to want your picture as well, right?”

Felicity closed her eyes. “We’re staying with Oliver for the moment until the hysteria dies down, or I move apartments. Or get better security at our current apartment. One of those three things has definitely got to happen.”

“Wait. So you’re staying at the Queen mansion right now?”

Felicity rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes we are.”

“Are the toilet seats gilded? I mean -- Oliver Queen has got Bruce Wayne -level wealth, Felicity.”

“I’m well aware. And no, thank goodness for my sanity because I have four-year-olds who sometimes miss, the toilets are not gilded.” Felicity sighed. “Oliver has been really nice.”

“Has he?” Barry sounded intrigued.

“Yeah -- he’s given up his home, his time. He spends every spare second, as far as I can see, trying to get to know the kids.”

“Okay.” Barry thought for a second. “Do you… I mean, are you happy about that?”

“I am.” Felicity pushed her glasses up on her nose. “I want him to have a good relationship with Maddie and Matthew -- I’ve said it all along, you know? That that’s what I want.”

“You’re hiding something, then. Something that’s upsetting you, or something that you think will upset me. I can hear it in your voice.”

Felicity laid back on her bed and thought for a long moment. “Oliver -- I think being on the island really did a number on him.”

“Well, you would think so,” Barry said dryly. “Being alone for five years has got to warp a person.”
“Yes, of course. He’s just… different. Genuine in some ways that he wasn’t before, but much harder to reach….” Felicity sighed. “He kissed me last night.”

“Whoa.” Barry’s voice slipped up an octave. “He did what?”

“He kissed me. I think he felt lonely, or something, and thought maybe… I don’t think he thought I was easy, but I think maybe he thought I understood him, or something. Ugh.” Felicity waved a hand. “It’s hard to describe.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you mean what did I do?”

“I don’t know. You might have liked it. You might have hated it. You might have punched him. You might have kissed him back. What did you do?”

“Barry…”

“Felicity…”

“I told him it couldn’t be like that if he wasn’t, you know… invested. I just don’t want… I mean, it would be too complicated.”

“Okay,” Barry said slowly. “But just to be clear, you didn’t hate the kiss?”

“No. Of course not. The man kisses like it should be his job.”

“Stop it. I’m swooning.”

“Shut up, you dork, you asked.”
“Do you want me to come up there? I mean, I could help you… do… something.” Barry coughed. “Fend off over-amorous billionaires or help you pack your apartment or intimidate security companies or… something.”

Felicity laughed. “No, Barry. Thank you, though. You can’t just drop everything and run every time it looks like I might possibly run into some trouble.”

“Why not? That’s what friends do, right?”

Felicity felt her throat close up and she coughed to clear it. “Friends, yes… but we were more than that once upon a time, and we both decided to let that go away, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we did. I know you’re right, Felicity. I just wish this was… less awkward.”

“Someday it will stop being awkward,” Felicity said, though she thought that perhaps there would always be a layer of this awareness running underneath all of their conversations now. She didn’t know how to erase it, or how to go back. And it made her nervous for her and Oliver. Had their interaction last night shifted something permanently the way that her relationship with Barry had changed their friendship?

“Yeah, I hope so,” Barry said. “Well, listen. I should go.”

“Me too. I should go rescue Oliver from the twins. I’m sure they’re driving him nuts.”

“They’re good kids, Felicity. I’ll talk to you later.”

Felicity sat back up. “Thanks for calling, Barry. I appreciate it. More than you know.”

“You’re welcome. Take care, Felicity.”

“You too.”
Laying in his bed hadn’t shut the voices in his head up, so when Oliver first heard the twins coming down the hallway, he reached for his shirt and opened the door before they could.

“You guys hungry again?” he asked them, trying to put on a smile for their benefit.

Maddie and Matthew both nodded, and he led them down the hallway to the kitchen. It was no longer Raiza’s day off, so she greeted them with a smile. “Mr. Oliver! Mr. Matthew, Ms. Maddie, good morning! Oh, Mr. Oliver, did you not sleep well?”

“No. Weird… dreams…” Oliver said, glancing at the kids.

“I get nightmares sometimes,” Matthew said, unexpectedly. He rarely talked first, especially with people he didn’t know very well. “Maddie makes them go away. You gotta sister. You should make her make them go away.”

“I’ll have to ask Thea where she’s keeping her nightmare repellant these days,” Oliver said with a smile.

Matthew nodded, perfectly serious.

Raiza quickly determined what the kids would like to eat -- ice cream and graham crackers were gently but firmly shot down. But toast and eggs were not, and Oliver enjoyed the time he spent with them, watching their faces as they worked to spread the jam over their toast evenly. Maddie attacked the task with gusto, while Matthew was thorough and precise. He loved the look on his little boy’s face, tongue out in concentration.

Oliver took a sip of coffee to hide the grin growing across his face.

Maddie took a big gulp of her milk and sighed, apparently satisfied. “Daddy?”

“Hm?”
“Can we go to the zoo sometime? Brandon’s daddy takes him to the zoo.”

Oliver blinked. “Yeah, I mean… of course we can go to the zoo. Probably not today,” he hedged, thinking of all of the reporters currently camped outside the private grounds of the Queen family estate, just waiting for them to leave the house. “But I think we can do that sometime.”

“Okay, good,” Maddie said. “Can I go play now?”

Oliver wondered if Felicity made sure they ate all their food, or if she didn’t care. He hadn’t paid attention when he was with them. He took a glance at Maddie’s plate -- it seemed like she did a reasonable job, so he shrugged. “Sure. Uh -- wash your hands, right?”

“Right.”

Matthew finished chewing his food and reached for his milk. “Is there anything you want to do?” Oliver asked. “I mean, I’m sort of new at this dad stuff so if you’ve got ideas, let me know.”

“Do you like cars?”

Oliver thought for half a second of his private collection of toys -- he’d started when he’d first got his license and had only stopped when the Gambit went down. He hadn’t bought a car in ages, he realized, but he doubted that was what Matthew was asking.

“I do like cars.”

“I’ve got lots of cars. Wanna play with me?”

“Sure.” Oliver cleared off their dishes, and went to follow a four-year-old to his room to play with cars.

**
Felicity was grateful for whoever had packed their things -- they’d grabbed her facewash and moisturizer, her special brand of shampoo -- she felt more like herself than she’d felt in ages by the time she got herself put back together. Hair straightened and drawn back into her favorite ponytail, favorite jeans, favorite shirt. Oliver Queen might have kissed her and turned her head the night before, but she was ready for him this morning.

She walked down the hallway, ponytail swinging, to her childrens’ room. She heard the shouted giggles and delighted screams from several feet away. Pushing the door open, she stopped in the doorway and covered her mouth at the sight. Oliver and Matthew were playing some sort of complicated racing game all over the carpet. They’d built a racing circuit with wooden blocks that Felicity had never seen before. It stretched over beds and around dressers.

“Well,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “This is certainly… intricate.”

“We’re drifting!” Matthew shouted.

“I can see that,” Felicity said with a smile. “Hi, Oliver.”

He sat up, the smile which she’d been lucky enough to catch swiftly running away from his face. “Hi. Uh, good morning, Felicity.”

“You guys having fun?”

Matthew couldn’t hardly contain his excitement. “Daddy likes cars!”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “Yes, I remember that about him.”

“It turns out Matthew has quite a collection.”

Felicity smiled. “And someone packed it all up for him, hm?”

“Raiza has a way of knowing what’s important,” Oliver said. “Felicity -- I want you to know.” He stood up. “I’m really sorry. I know what -- what happened last night is…”
Felicity waved a hand. “Forget about it. It’s in the past.”

“Mr. Oliver?” Raiza appeared behind Felicity. “I’m sorry but, I think you should come with me and turn on the TV.”

“What’s going on?” Oliver asked.

“You’re all over the TV, Mr. Oliver, you and that Bertinelli woman.”

Felicity set her mouth and pushed her eyeglasses up her nose. “Someone must have got a picture of the two of you together.”

“No, Ms. Smoak, so sorry. I think Ms. Bertinelli has been shot.”

Oliver clenched his fists. “And of course, the media has a picture of me from hours before, don’t they.”

“Yes, Mr. Oliver, sir.”

“Stay here for just a minute, you two,” Felicity told them. “Come on. We don’t want to have this conversation right here. Little pitchers have big ears.”

“Yes, of course, Ms. Smoak.”

Oliver led them down the hallway to a study. “How bad is it, Raiza?”

“I think it is very bad, Mr. Oliver, but it is not my job to know how…”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Oliver sat down behind a desk and rubbed his hands over his eyes. “Dammit.”
Felicity felt her heart twist in her chest for him. He looked genuinely defeated, his shoulders falling. All of the joy she had seen in him earlier was replaced. “Oliver… I’m sure she’ll be okay. Do you want to call the hospital? I know she was your… friend.”

“We had dinner once,” Oliver said softly. “Just the once. That hardly makes her my friend.”

“No. But I imagine it’s still upsetting that she got shot.”

“Mr. Queen?” Robb Smart knocked on the open door. “Detective Lance is here to see you.”

Oliver let out a harsh chuckle. “Yes, of course he is. Well. Let him in.”

“He doesn’t have a warrant, sir.”

“He doesn’t need one,” Oliver said firmly. “Just let him in. It’ll be fine.”

“Do you want me to… go somewhere else?” Felicity asked.

“No. You’re fine. You should probably hear me answer these questions. It might be easier to explain once.”

“Okay,” Felicity said. “But Maddie and Matthew…”

“I will take them with me,” Raiza said, dusting her hands on her apron. “We will go shopping, just like I used to do with Mr. Oliver. A big house like requires many groceries. And then we will stop and get ice cream, yes?”

“Oh, Raiza, you don’t have to, I mean…”

“It is a very hard job, being a mother on your own,” Raiza said, and her eyes were full of knowledge. “I only offer because I know it might make today easier for you to not have to worry about your children. I watched Mr. Oliver many days when he was a small boy.”
“Watched?” Oliver laughed. “No, Raiza, you raised me.”

“Well, we don’t have to let it get quite that far, but I’m sure it’s fine for an afternoon,” Felicity said, smiling. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure, Ms. Smoak,” Raiza said, disappearing through the door. “We will be back this afternoon.”

“Thank you.”

Felicity found a seat across the desk from Oliver and an uncomfortable silence stretched between them while they waited for the Detective to appear.

“I should warn you,” Oliver said suddenly. “The detective… he’s not a big fan of mine.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “I can’t imagine why.”

Oliver chuckled. “I just don’t… I don’t take it personally. I mean, I take it personally, because I deserve every bit of it, but…”

“It’s okay, Oliver.” Felicity found herself wanting to reach for his hand to comfort him, but knew that with last night hanging in the air between them, it wouldn’t be the best idea. “I’m just going to sit here and listen. And maybe call a lawyer if it turns out you need one.”

“Queen. You just can’t seem to keep yourself out of trouble, can you?” Detective Lance said as he entered the room.

“I’m not the one in trouble this time, Detective,” Oliver said evenly. “It sounds to me like one of my friends has been the victim of a crime.”

“Yes -- that’s the way it seems to me, too,” Detective Lance said, stalking around, looking at the various books and awards in the room. “Again, huh? I mean, it’s starting to look like maybe being
“Your friend is kind of a dangerous pursuit.”

“I can’t help you, Detective. It’s like I said, Helena Bertinelli and I had a business meeting regarding the construction of the new Applied Sciences center. I haven’t seen her since.”

Felicity felt her blood ran cold. Oliver had told her that he had almost slept with Helena… maybe he meant at this business meeting he was talking about. But probably not.

“You’re sure about that,” Detective Lance said.

“Absolutely sure. I suppose I did stop by her house later -- but our conversation was, at best, brief.”

“Did she seem worried about anything to you? Anxious?”

“No, but then, I didn’t know her that well, Detective, and reading people has never been one of my strong suits.” Oliver smiled tightly. “You know how it goes with us rich, self-absorbed brats.”

Detective Lance fairly growled. Felicity crossed one leg over the other and began to play with her earring while she watched the scene unfold.

It was clear, Oliver knew more than he was letting on. For one thing, he didn’t ask enough questions -- like how she was shot, or where, or why. For another, he was very obviously playing a role -- a caricature of how he thought Oliver Queen, playboy billionaire was supposed to act. If this was the Oliver that Detective Lance knew, no wonder he loathed him, she thought.

Detective Lance turned to Felicity and smiled tightly. “You might want to step out of the room for this line of questioning, Ms…?”

“Smoak,” Felicity said helpfully. “Nice to meet you, Detective Lance.”

“Nice to meet you too. Now, get lost.”

Felicity lifted one corner of her mouth. “No.”
“Listen, I’m about to ask your boyfriend here if he slept with Helena Bertinelli. I’m about to tell him that we’ve got her bedsheets and her clothing and we’re testing for DNA. So there’s not going to be a chance he’s going to get to lie to me about it. So I’m telling you, you might want to leave the room.”

“I don’t need to leave the room. I suffer no illusions about Oliver,” Felicity said evenly. “Besides, if he had slept with Helena, I would have no reason to get upset. I’m not his girlfriend.”

“Then what are you? Publicist? Secretary?”

“I work in the IT Department of Queen Consolidated,” Felicity said evenly, “and one night, five years ago, I slept with Oliver.”

“You. You’re the…”

“Whore of Babylon, or so the media thinks? Why yes.” Felicity smiled tightly. “Yes I am.”

Oliver looked at her sharply. “Felicity… you…”

“It’s okay, Oliver. It’s hardly your fault.”

Detective Lance coughed. “Yes, well, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… I guess.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Ah, hell, Queen.”

“To answer your question -- you will not find any of my DNA on Helena Bertinelli’s bedsheets, or on her night clothing, because I never slept with her. I’ve got no reason to want her to come to any harm at all,” Oliver said. “Surprisingly enough, even I occasionally have too much on my mind to sleep around indiscriminately.”

“If that is the case,” Detective Lance said, “then it is certainly a new development. Listen, Queen, just cause you’ve got kids now doesn’t mean I won’t lock you up in a second if any of this comes back to you.”
Oliver exposed his teeth. Felicity thought if one was being generous it might perhaps be called a smile, but it lacked any of the joy or mirth really required for such an expression. “I don’t doubt you for a minute, Detective Lance.”

He was shown out of the room, and Felicity watched as Oliver found a fixed point to stare at.

“So. That was pleasant,” she said evenly. “Oliver -- I believed you the first time when you told me you didn’t sleep with Helena.”

“You shouldn’t, though. You know why Detective Lance doesn’t trust me, right?”

Felicity wondered if she should bring up the obvious obfuscation he’d been doing earlier, but went with the pat answer instead. “I imagine it has something to do with you being in a relationship with one of his daughters while you were sleeping with the other.”

Oliver laughed like all the wind had been knocked out of his stomach. “You don’t pull any punches, do you?”

“No. Not when the answer is obvious.” Felicity sighed. “So you’re saying I shouldn’t trust you, because before the island you were kind of dick, and now after the island you’re still kind of a dick?”

“Y… I mean. Yes. Basically.”

“I don’t care, Oliver. I don’t care if you sleep with someone else or drink too much on a Saturday night. We’re not together. We never were together. So it… it’s a moot point. All I care about is that you love our children. That you’re there for them. I mean -- they love so much that they get to get up and have breakfast with you, that you play cars with them. That’s what I’m invested in.”

“But if we were in a relationship?”

Felicity’s face sombered. “Then I…. I wouldn’t tolerate it, Oliver. I wouldn’t tolerate the lies, the half-truths, the ducking questions you don’t want to answer. I couldn’t stand being in a relationship like that. It would be the end of things.” She drew in a deep breath. “But. Like I said before. We aren’t in a relationship.”
“No. We aren’t.” Oliver ducked his head. “Hey, Felicity?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I take you out for dinner tonight?”

“No.”

“Not as a date.”

“No.”

“Would you just listen to me for one second?”

Felicity got to her feet. “I’m not going to do this, Oliver.”

“Do what? You don’t even know what I’m suggesting.” Oliver stood in front of her, his hand extended, holding her in place. “Felicity -- I’m just saying. Let’s get out of here. Let’s go somewhere and talk, okay? We didn’t spend a lot of time talking five years ago, and we haven’t got a chance to really get to know each other yet now, either. Call me crazy, but I’d like to know a little bit more about the mother of my children than she wears a lot of blue and looks good in heels.”

Felicity sighed. “We’ve already had Raiza watch the kids today --”

“Thea wants some babysitting time. And Mom will be here, too,” Oliver said, insistently. “Felicity, please. Do this for me.”

It was hard to say no to him, with his eyes looking so blue -- his friend had just been shot, after all, and he hadn’t asked for much from her…. Felicity sighed, and acquiesced.

**
Felicity was putting her earrings in when she heard the knock on her door. “Just a minute!” she called, and stepped into her pair of peep-toed pumps. She opened the door to find Walter Steele on the other side.

“Mr. Steele! Hi! Again. Oh. I didn’t ask you! How was your trip down under? I’ve always wanted to go!” Felicity coughed. “Not that, I’m sure, that’s what you want to talk about, since you came to my room at the Queen mansion and you’re looking very disgruntled with me, so… three, two… one. Hi. What can I do for you?”

“Ms. Smoak -- I just -- I came by to tell you to forget about… what we had discussed earlier.”

Felicity tilted her head to the side. “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t realize, at the time, of course, that…”

“Well. It’s an awful lot of information for me to forget. For instance.” Felicity ran to her work bag, and took out a file. “That money that your wife took from the company?”

“Ms. Smoak…”

“She had someone covering her tracks. We’ve discussed that earlier. But whoever was tracking her was good. Like scary good. But as you know, I’m good too.”

“Ms. Smoak.”

“Even though they left almost no trace in our system -- well, almost no trace, I was able to find one image.” Felicity pulled the paper, with its odd circular symbol out of the file and handed it to Walter.

“Ms. Smoak.” Walter’s face was closed. “I… appreciate your diligence on this matter, but I must insist that you forget about it.” Felicity looked askance at him, but all he did was cough. “I’m afraid this is non-negotiable, Ms. Smoak.”

“Yeah, of course.” Felicity stuffed the paper back in her file. “I’m sorry that you uh, didn’t get to meet the kids yet.”
“And I, as well. It seems our paths have yet to intersect. That is one of the great tragedies in living in a house like this,” Walter said, a touch of sadness in his voice. “You can spend a great deal of time with someone in a space and yet not really get the chance to know them at all.”

He turned and left, and Felicity sat back on her bed, contemplating what had just happened.

**

Oliver had picked the restaurant off of the internet -- a quick Google search for trendy places had put this eatery at the top of the list. With valet parking and an owner who would take bribes, he was insured smooth sailing, he thought.

For the most part, it did go well. Felicity exclaimed over the car, teasing him about his toys not being that much different than his son’s. Diggle followed them at a safe distance. They managed to make it inside the restaurant without being assaulted by photographers and so-called-journalists.

Then they got inside the restaurant and Oliver spotted Tommy right away. “Hey!” he said brightly, before the woman next to Tommy turned and he could see that it was Laurel. “Hey.”

“Oh, hey! It’s Oliver and.. someone,” Tommy said, raising his eyebrows at Oliver, who nearly grit his teeth. Tommy knew perfectly well who the woman standing next to him was. He wasn’t a complete idiot, and he had access to cable news.

“Tommy, this is Felicity Smoak. Felicity Smoak, Tommy Merlyn.” Oliver watched as they shook hands. “And this is Laurel Lance. Laurel’s an attorney with CNRI.”

“I’m familiar with their work,” Felicity said brightly, and extended her hand to Laurel as well. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Laurel said, a sour note in her voice.

“You look beautiful tonight,” Oliver said, trying to fill the dead space in the air.
“Thanks, Ollie,” Laurel said.

The hostess approached, and Oliver felt pure relief as she indicated that their table was ready for them whenever they were ready.

Then Laurel spoke. “When is our table going to be ready?”

“When it’s ready,” the hostess said, snootily, and before he could make his apologies and get them out of there fast, Felicity spoke.

“Well, there’s no reason for you two to wait around. Why don’t you join us?”

Oliver turned to her, his eyes wide. “Felicity…”

“You wanted to get to know me better. I want to get to know you better,” she said evenly. “I think meeting some of your oldest friends would go a long way, don’t you? There’s no reason why we can’t all be pleasant.”

Laurel looked at Felicity and smiled. “Exactly. No reason at all.”

Oliver smiled painfully at the hostess and slipped her some extra cash, signalling four with his hands. “That… sounds great. It’s going to be great.”

“So.” Tommy said, as they all got seated around the table. “Why don’t you tell us a little bit more about yourself, Felicity?”

“I work at Queen Consolidated,” Felicity said, smiling up at the waitress who laid the wine list in front of her. Oliver unbuttoned his suitcoat and sat down, listening with one-ear while Felicity told them about her job. He could hardly focus for all the thoughts running around in his head.

Laurel and Felicity -- he could separate them out so easily in his mind, in their proper, separate categories -- separate lives, separate Olivers. This collision was really messing with him.
“So -- you’re a single mom, then,” Laurel said bluntly as soon as there was a lull in conversation. Oliver opened his mouth to say something, again, but Felicity beat him to it.

“Yes.”

“I know how hard that is -- I’ve been… I mean, I’ve caught some of the news footage,” Laurel said. “I just wanted to say that I’m so sorry. I know it can’t be easy to be in the position you’ve found yourself in.”

“It’s certainly not something I ever dreamed of being an issue… before,” Felicity said, taking a small sip of water. “I’ll have a glass of the house red, please,” she said to the waitress. “But it’s… life. My children deserved to know their father.”

“Speaking of, how’s it been, adjusting to parenthood?” Tommy asked, his arm sliding around the back of Laurel’s chair. Laurel, Oliver noticed, leaned back into the touch. “I’ll have the same thing as Felicity, thanks.”

“Me too,” Laurel said.

“Same,” Oliver said. “Um -- it’s been…” he looked to Felicity for help, but she just sat there, watching him. “Different? I mean, the easy stuff we did right away.”

Tommy and Laurel nodded. They both came from his world and knew precisely what he meant when he said that.

“But now -- we’ve got these two four-year-olds running around the Queen mansion, you know? Finding our old hiding places. Using my old toys and… being brilliant and surprising all of the time.” Oliver coughed. “It’s been… something else. But I feel like Felicity’s done all the hard work.”

“That’s because I did do all the hard work,” Felicity said lightly.

“Did you show them that spot in your father’s study…”

Tommy and Oliver were off, then, exchanging stories about what it was like, growing up Queen or
growing up Merlyn. Felicity’s eyes widened in spots, but she laughed along with everyone else, shaking her head from time to time.

“So, how did you all meet?”

Laurel spoke up. “We uh -- we’ve all…”

“We’ve all known each other forever.”

Felicity grinned. “That’s a cop-out answer. Did you meet in preschool? Elementary school?”

“Tommy’s mother and my mother ran in the same circles,” Oliver said. “And they got pregnant around the same time, so we’ve known each other since we were in diapers. Laurel, we met in private school in the second grade. She punched Bobby Delance in the nose cause he stole her pencil, and I fell in love.”

Laurel laughed uncomfortably. “The way that children do sometimes.”

“Oh, that leaves an impression, though,” Felicity said. “Childhood loves… for instance. Mickey Graves. This little redhead boy.” She fanned herself. “Oh, I had it bad for him.”

Laurel was desperate, he could see, to change the subject, so she turned to him. “So. How’s the nightclub coming along?”

“Very slowly,” Oliver said. “I mean -- much slower than I was expecting. Managing the construction, getting in touch with suppliers… and I’m sure you’ve noticed there have been, uh… ample distractions.”

“Friends getting shot,” Felicity said softly, “kids popping out of the woodwork.”

Oliver quirked his mouth up. “Some are very, very good distractions. For the record.”

“So you must be happy to have the extra help, then,” Laurel said breezily.
“What do you mean?”

“Laurel --” Tommy’s voice had a warning tone.

“You didn’t ask him?” Laurel whispered back through gritted teeth.

“Ask me what?” Oliver asked, trying to get a read on either one of their faces.

“Tommy said that he was going to talk to you about coming to work for you at the nightclub,” Laurel said.

Oliver laughed -- he just couldn’t picture his friend looking for actual, gainful employment. Tommy’d never had a real sense of ambition. But then he saw that both of their faces were deadly serious. “Wait. What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Laurel said, trying to drum up a sense of enthusiasm. “You two have always talked about wanting to go into business together. Don’t you remember, we went to Aspen and you wanted to open a ski resort together?”

“The only thing I remember about Aspen,” Oliver said, because he couldn’t stop himself from saying it, “is that your father was furious cause we shared a room with one bed.”

Laurel ducked her head -- and he could see, for a minute, the teenager he’d lost his virginity to -- the woman he’d focused all of his energy on, on the island. Something stirred inside him again.

Then Felicity spoke up. “I think he’s serious, Oliver.”

“Oh. I mean -- yeah. We can… talk about it.”

Tommy got up and pushed himself away from the table, stalking to the bathroom. Laurel followed after him quickly.
Felicity hissed and took a sip of her wine. “Ouch.”

“Ouch what?”

“You just laughed at your friend when he asked you for a job.”

“I didn’t mean to. It’s just… you don’t know Tommy, alright? Looking for gainful employment, that’s not usually his style.”

“You’ve changed a lot in five years. I imagine he has as well,” Felicity said. “I mean -- look past the fact that he’s dating your ex, which is probably not awkward at all. He’s almost certainly a different person than the boy you knew five years ago.”

“I know that.”

Felicity shot him a look. “Do you?”

“Look, Felicity, I’m doing my best here, okay.”

“And I suppose that’s enough for you, hm? You just pat yourself on the back and say ‘oh well, I tried’, and then you can sleep at night?”

“Why are you upset at me right now?”

“Because you are better than this.” Felicity said. “I’m going to the ladies room, and then I’ll be ready to leave.”

**

Felicity entered the ladies room fighting mad. Oliver could be perceptive, when he chose to be, she decided. For some reason, he was just choosing to be obtuse tonight. Which was disappointing -- she hadn’t known him very long, but she still, somehow, wanted the best for him. And not just because she was now basically tied to him for the rest of her life, thanks to the children, but also because she
thought she saw something in him that was worth caring about.

She opened her purse and went for her lipstick -- whenever she was upset, a fresh coat sometimes helped her see the world from a different perspective. As she was reapplying, Laurel Lance came out of one of the stalls, where it was clear she’d been crying.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Felicity said. “I can… go.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Laurel said, painting a bright smile on her face. “I have this feeling that we’re going to be seeing each other from time to time. We might as well get used to it.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Particularly if you’re going to be spending any time with Oliver,” Laurel continued. “Since I’m with Tommy now and they’re best friends, not to mention the whole…”

“You and Oliver have a history,” Felicity said, tired of dancing around this topic already. “I completely understand that. I get it.”

“That makes one of us, then,” Laurel said. “Because for whatever reason, I have just got no clue how to navigate this whole… situation.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Felicity said.

“Can I say something to you?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“You’re not at all what I pictured.”

Felicity laughed. “I have a feeling I was… am… an aberration from the norm when it comes to Oliver. It’s my understanding he doesn’t usually go for blonde, socially awkward, and nerdy.”
“He’s always liked smart,” Laurel said, loyally. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have been with me.”

“Point,” Felicity said with a smile.

“No, I meant -- and I know this is awful. But Ollie and I -- we could never make it work between us. I think because we got started so young, you know? And Ollie would get bored. And then he’d break up with me -- and then he’d miss me, and I’d take him back. And I would know that in between the times were together, and sometimes, you know, during… he’d have these other women. But I pictured myself, well, you know.”

“You thought he was sleeping with golddiggers and bimbos, basically,” Felicity said.

“Basically. But I can see that you’re not that. And I can see that Oliver cares about you. And he loves those kids.”

“Yeah -- I don’t want to say that part surprised me, but I didn’t know how he’d react to finding out,” Felicity admitted. “Never in my wildest dreams did I think he’d be so enthusiastic about being a family and having us all around.”

“You know it’s a cliche, but sometimes cliches are such for a reason. It was really lonely, growing up the way Oliver did. Thea came along much later in his life, and he loved being a big brother. But when you’ve got the kind of wealth the Queens have got, you’ve got to spend your whole life looking over your shoulder, wondering if the people that claim to love you really love you, or if they want your money and the conveniences of wealth. Oliver learned very early to wear a mask. The island only hardened it. Family means a lot to Oliver. It means trust and security. It… doesn’t surprise me at all. And in a way, it’s kind of nice, you know? To see him talk about kids like that, to see him look at you like that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You two clearly started something and never finished it,” Laurel said. “Just like it’s pretty clear that Tommy and I still have some Oliver issues of our own to work out.”

Felicity shook her head. “I couldn’t… go down that road with Oliver right now. He’s not ready. I’m not ready.”
“I’m not saying you need to jump him right now. I’m just saying: life is short. No one knows that better than us. We’ve already lost him once, you know?”

“I do,” Felicity said. “I just don’t….”

“And now I’ve made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.” Laurel ran her fingers through her hair and set her shoulders. “I just -- I am never going to stop loving Ollie. We’ve got too much between us for that to ever be an option. I want to see him happy. And he smiles at you like he means it. I think that’s worth something.”

**

By the time they got back to the mansion, Felicity and Oliver hadn’t spoken a word in nearly an hour. She went straight up to her room and started taking off her outfit. Kicking her shoes off, viciously unzipping her skirt.

She was wearing pajamas when there was another knock at her door. “Oliver, I am not in the mood right now,” she called.

“I’m afraid I am not Oliver,” said the voice on the other side of the door. “And I have come to ask for your assistance.”

Felicity opened it. “Mr. Steele?”

“Yes. I… I apologize for how we ended our earlier conversation. I was short with you when I had no need to be. And what I’m about to ask of you I… If I felt anyone else approached your level of competence that I could ask, I certainly would ask them.” He handed her a little bound book. “I’d like you to find out everything you can about this notebook. Where it was made, where it was purchased.”

“Yes, of course…”

“I asked Josiah Hudson to look into this matter. He died the next day, under questionable circumstances. What I am asking of you may be dangerous, Ms. Smoak. If you’re unwilling…”
Felicity shook her head firmly. “No. I hate mysteries. They need to be solved. Plus it sure seems like there are six thousand Queen Consolidated Security employees watching my every move.”

Walter nodded and turned to leave. “Again. Thank you, Ms. Smoak.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Steele.”

Eager to find something to quiet her racing mind with, Felicity fired up her laptop and got to work.

**

“Oliver?” Diggle appeared out of the shadows while Oliver was sharpening arrows in the foundry. “I have some bad news.”

Oliver turned off the machine and turned to face Diggle. “Yeah?”

“I tipped off the FBI like you asked. With the information we had on the Bertinelli family, they were finally ready to make an arrest. But by the time they got to the house, it was too late.”

“What happened?”

“Frank Bertinelli is dead.” Diggle stuck his hands in his pockets. “And so is Helena Bertinelli.”

Oliver got up and kicked one of the tables as hard as he could. “Fuck!”

“I’m sorry, Oliver.”

“I got distracted,” Oliver said through gritted teeth. “I got distracted and I lost focus.”
Diggle rocked back on his heels. “So what are you going to do about that?”

“I’ve got to figure out a way to make some of this… less.”

“Oliver, there’s a reason they say if you live by the sword, you die by the sword. Far as I can see, Helena and Frank got what was coming to them. I’m not sure we could have done things any different.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Hey man -- listen. I know we fucked up. Part of it was on me, part of it was on you. We’ll get it right next time.”

“It’s just that every time we don’t get it right, people die.”

Digg flattened him with a look. “Welcome to war, man.”

“We’ll get it right next time.” Oliver nodded, and stood. He fired off three quick arrows into the target on the opposite wall. “We have to.”

**

Felicity studied the notebook carefully, turning it this way and that… Something tingled in the back of her mind. Something she’d read once before….

She ran off to see if one of the guards had a lighter.

And then, as words appeared in front of her… and not just words… names… Felicity ran upstairs and knocked on Walter’s door.

“I have something to show you,” she said breathlessly.
Oliver got back to the house and found Tommy waiting for him. “Hey man,” he said easily. “What’s going on?”

“Ah -- I came to talk to you about something.” Tommy stuck his hands in his pockets. “And I guess the first thing I should say is that I’m sorry about tonight. Laurel was trying to help but I felt like she was backing me into a corner and…. Anyway. I am sorry.”

Oliver looked up the stairs, towards the room where Felicity was probably sleeping. He still hadn’t spoken to her. He had no idea where they stood. Except that right now, she was another name on the long list of people who were disappointed in him.

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Oliver said easily. “It’s forgotten.”

“Actually -- I need to say something else,” Tommy sighed. “I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

Oliver went for shocked -- he’d discovered, on the island, and before, that people were rarely entirely honest.

“My dad cut me off. He froze all my funds. I am living on fumes.”

Oliver felt his eyes widen -- that was shocking. They’d both been threatened with such action before, of course, but they’d both nearly managed to make it to thirty without it happening. “Really? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Embarrassment, shame… jealousy. Probably a few other things that I’m not used to feeling.”

“Hey, my trust fund is your trust fund.”

“No, Oliver… I mean. You’ve got kids now, Felicity -- people you need to take care of. I don’t need to be taken care of. I just … what I really need is a job.”
Oliver thought about it for a minute. Just a minute. Perhaps, if someone else took over managing Verdant, he could find more time to be the Arrow, and more time to be a Dad, and more time to be better at being a brother and a son…

“Well,” he said, with a slow smile spreading over his face. “It just so happens I have a manager position open…”
part vi: "year's end" (i/iii)

Chapter Summary

Felicity and Oliver navigate the realities of being a family around the holidays, and something must be done about the paparazzi.

Chapter Notes

OMG, you guys, with your kudos and your comments and your love. I just can't believe how awesome you are!

I sincerely apologize for this chapter not being a full episode, but it just got way out of hand. I think it might take me three chapters of this length to get through this episode because SO MUCH happens and we are really heading in a different direction than Show did now.

Thanks for sticking with me and being supportive and continuing to let me know how much you like the story, both here and on Tumblr. I appreciate it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Felicity spent the next week mostly mad that Oliver was avoiding her. He spent time with the children, but ducked out as quickly as he could whenever it appeared that they might possibly be stuck in a room alone together. In the beginning, she'd been forgiving. Now, however, she was about to lose her patience and give him a piece of her mind, the next chance she got to get a free second.

Felicity was thinking about this and getting ready for work when she heard the knock at her door. “Who is it?” she called -- if it was one of the children, then they could wait. Actually, if it was almost anyone, they could wait. At least until she got a bra on.

“It’s Thea.”

Felicity’s eyebrows rose nearly to her forehead. “Okay. Just a second.” She hastily buttoned her shirt and slipped her glasses on her face while she walked to the door and opened it, letting the teenager in. “No school today?” she asked, when she noticed Thea wasn’t wearing her uniform.

“No. It’s an in-service day,” Thea said. She looked around the room, and Felicity tried to imagine what she must see -- Felicity’s workclothes, overflowing out of a suitcase, toys and cups. Probably
more debris than she was used to seeing. Felicity flushed.

“What’s going on?”

“I just -- wanted to say thank you.”

Felicity paused. “Oh?”

“Yeah. It was really cool of you to leave Maddie and Matthew with me last night. They’re pretty awesome kids.”

“I never get sick of hearing that,” Felicity said, grinning. “And I think they had a really great time. They’re in their room right now playing but last night when I came in to kiss them good night all they could talk about was how awesome Aunt Thea is.”

“Good.” Thea smiled at her -- and Felicity thought there must be something in the Queen genetic code about devastating and unexpected smiles, because Thea Queen was a very attractive young woman when she smiled. “You know -- not everyone trusts me like that.”

Ah. Felicity instantly understood what Thea was talking about. “It’s hard to see the people you’ve known from childhood become teenagers and young adulthoods. You never really let go of the fact that you once changed their diapers.”

Thea sighed impatiently. “Oliver just -- he won’t let me in. And he used to, you know? They called me Speedy because I always was chasing after him, but I really think he used to let me catch him, more often than not.”

“Yeah.” Felicity sat on her bed and slipped her shoes onto her feet before she brought them into sit-cross legged on the plush mattress. “I… don’t know, Thea. Oliver wasn’t exactly easy to get to know five years ago, let alone now. It’s hard to get a read on what he’s thinking or feeling.”

“I wonder if he’s feeling anything at all,” Thea said, crossing the room to pick up a picture of Maddie and Matthew in a frame that Raisa had brought for Felicity. “It just seems like he’s so… blank. Like he doesn’t really feel anything at all anymore.”
“Still waters run deep,” Felicity said, absentmindedly. “It’s a cliche, but in this particular case, it happens to be a truthful one. I think he lets you see as much as he possibly can let you see, Thea. He genuinely cares about you. I remember that much.”

“Yeah. Can I ask you about that?” Thea leaned forward. “I mean -- exactly how well … Oliver didn’t tell us much, but…”

“We met at a party. We were there for separate people from the same frat. I was -- pretty messed up at the time. I’d just broken up with a boyfriend, and my parents were on the brink of divorce.” Felicity fingered the pendant around her neck. “Oliver was bright -- attractive, and he seemed… surprised by me. One thing led to another.”

“Wow.” Thea shook her head. “And then nine months later…”

“Boom. Twins at twenty, almost twenty-one,” Felicity said. “It took me a year longer to get out of school than it should have, and I probably couldn’t have done it without my folks. Moving down here to Starling City was the right choice for us -- nothing in Coast City would have paid this well, but it’s still hard to be away from them. Especially with all of this going on.”

Thea’s face was all sympathy. “I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t even think of what it must be like for you to have all of this attention all of a sudden.”

Felicity chuckled self-deprecatingly. “My mother’s having a fit. She keeps sending me e-mails with all of these horrible tabloid headlines about how I’m a golddigger and the DNA test results must have been faked and how I must be part of some grand conspiracy to bring Queen Consolidated to its knees.”

“All of those people just need to spend two minutes with Matthew and they’d know he’s Oliver’s son,” Thea said, chuckling. “He’s got his crossed-arm pout down to a tee.”

Felicity laughed as well. “Yes, well -- I don’t think letting the media just hang out with my kids is a good idea, actually.”

“Just hang out? No. But you guys should totally do some positive press.”

Felicity felt her ire rising. “I’m not exploiting the kids to placate…”
“No. Not the kids. Although they’re cute and if you were horrible people, you could totally use them to boost the image of Queen Consolidated, not that we need it, just saying.” Thea drew in a deep breath. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

Felicity grinned. “I do that all the time.”

“No, I’m just saying -- I’ve grown up around this stuff all my life. You and Ollie should get in front of the story -- take charge! Tell them a rosy version of the truth. Answer some questions. If they’ve got something to chew on they’ll stop making stuff up. Well, that’s the theory anyway.”

Felicity sighed. “I don’t know. I’ll have to talk to Oliver about it.”

“Don’t just talk to Oliver. Talk to Mom. She’ll have some great ideas about who to talk to in the press,” Thea said, “and the PR department will probably want in on it, as well.”

Felicity laid back on the bed. “How is this my life?”

“I know, it seems like a lot,” Thea said. “It’s a lot, even for me, and I grew up around this crap. It’ll drive you crazy if you let it. Like -- loony tunes and pills crazy, so don’t let it.”

“You’re pretty smart for a seventeen-year-old kid,” Felicity said, smiling warily. A knock startled both of them. “Yes?”

“Felicity, it’s Oliver.”

She sat up, and dusted her shirt off, ignoring the knowing look Thea threw her. “Come on in. I was just chatting with Thea.”

“This… makes me nervous,” Oliver said, smooth and charming playboy armor in place. “Ignore anything she tells you about me,” he said to Felicity. “It’s all the ravings of a madwoman.”

“What makes you think we were talking about you?” Felicity asked, crossing her arms over her
chest. Thea sniggered.


Felicity looked down at her outfit. “Yes, this is what I wear when I go to work.”

“You’re going into the office today?”

Felicity shrugged. “I think it’s probably a good idea to try and get back to my routine, don’t you? I mean, maybe if these tabloid people followed me around for a day or so they’d get the idea that I’m not out to like, steal your soul or your money or whatever.”

“You’ve got to ignore them,” Oliver said. “They’ll go away eventually.”

“Actually, probably not,” Thea said, crossing the room to stand next to Felicity. “We were just talking about that, actually.”

“You were?”

“Thea thinks maybe we should try and do some positive press and get out in front of the story as much as possible to try and quell the invasive nature of the so-called press.”

“What, you mean like an interview?” Oliver asked.

“Yes, I mean like an interview. Pick someone responsible, who has a good relationship with the family and with the company and just... answer some questions, Ollie. People would be really invested in the bad-boy castaway turned family man story, and maybe that would shut them down.”

“Or fire them up,” Oliver said. “And I’m just not sure that’s the real story here, anyway.”

“Then what is the real story? Cause that’s what it looks like to me,” Thea said, taking a couple of steps toward her brother.
“I’m just -- trying to do the right thing,” Oliver said. Felicity thought this sounded an awful like what he had said the week before, and fixed him with a glare. Catching sight of her, he hasted to add: “I don’t know if I’m a family man, Thea, cause I don’t really know how to be a dad yet. I mean -- I want my kids to know more about me than my chequebook, I know that much.”

“See!” Thea crowed. “That would work great in the press! They like humble, Oliver, and they like a reformed hooligan. And maybe that would take some of the pressure off of Felicity.”

Felicity flushed as it was Oliver’s turn to look at her, this time with more concern in his eyes. “I know it hasn’t been easy. If you want to try this, then I suppose we can try it.”

“I don’t know. I think we should talk to some more people,” Felicity said, “not that I don’t trust Thea. I just want… to think. And some space. But I know one thing: no photos of the kids, no interviews with them.”

“Agreed.” Oliver's eyes were just as hard. “We keep them away from the press for as long as possible.”

Felicity nodded. At least she felt secure about that one thing: she and Oliver were in completely agreement there.

“I’m going to leave you two crazy kids to discuss it,” Thea said, leaving the room.

Felicity waited until the door shut. “Oliver -- I just wanted to say sorry.”

“Excuse me?”

“I was harsh with you. Last week, at the restaurant. And I know things haven’t really been the same between us since.”

Oliver shrugged. “I was just trying to give you space.”
“You know that’s not the solution to everything, right?” Felicity smiled at him patiently. “We might fight and disagree about some things -- we certainly will about the kids, I’m sure. Just -- avoiding me until you think I’ve cooled off isn’t a good strategy with me. I start thinking that I’ve done irreparable harm. Que amazing Jewish guilt and a craving for my mother’s cinnamon cake and a spiral of anxiety that’s really not pleasant for anyone to deal with.”

“I don’t want to fight with you.” Oliver was very carefully looking somewhere else. “But I’m also not used to… people expecting me to be… good. Better. I mean, Thea wants me to be a good brother. Mom wants me to be a CEO. Walter -- knows so little about me except what they’ve told him that he thinks he’s still trying to get his bearings, but it’s like you’re the only one who believes I could be a good man.”

“No ‘could be’ about it, Oliver Queen.” Felicity said. “I think you are a good man, when you remember to be.”

Something crept into his eyes -- if she didn’t know better she’d say it was the shadow of the island. Whatever he’d done there, whatever he’d done to survive, it had definitely changed him. The Oliver of before may not have been very fond of himself, but he certainly didn’t have this… resignation to him.

Suddenly, Oliver coughed, and it was like a hand had pushed away all of that debris. The mask was back in place.

“Wait, you’re Jewish?” He asked.

“Yes.” Felicity raised her eyebrows. “So?”

“Nothing. Just -- does that mean I get the kids, what is it? Hanukkah presents?”

“If you want,” Felicity said easily. “My mom’s Jewish and my Dad’s Christian, so they’re kind of used to getting both holidays. Besides, you missed it this year. Hanukkah was a couple of weeks ago.”

“And… what is today?”

“December fourteenth,” Felicity said. “I’m sure it’s on your smartphone.”
“Wait. Christmas is coming up, isn’t it?”

“Yes. We usually go down to Coast City for the actual day,” Felicity said. “But… I mean, obviously, that can change if you want it to, because your family’s…”


“Yeah, I noticed there weren’t any decorations or anything going up around the house,” Felicity said. “I thought that was kind of odd.”

“It is,” Oliver said. “I… listen, Felicity. I’m going to go. I’ll track down some of Mom’s people, see what they think about doing an interview, all right?”

Felicity nodded. “Don’t set anything up without clearing it with me.”

“Of course.” Oliver turned to leave. “Uh, Felicity?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll talk some more about holiday arrangements, yeah? I wish I’d known about Hanukkah. I think I would have liked to be there.”

Felicity flushed. “I… know. I’m sorry. I just didn’t think…It’s just as big a deal, you know, we do little things, but… of course. You’re right.”

“It’s okay.” Oliver said, though clear it wasn’t, since he was high-tailing it away from her as fast as he could. “I’ll talk to you later.”

**
“It’s a good thing you’re here, man,” Diggle said, as Oliver entered the foundry. “I was getting a little bored, waiting for you to show up.”

“I stopped in and had a visit with Walter and Mom,” Oliver said, removing his shirt and dropping to the mat, doing a slow push-up to start his warm-up.

“Oh yeah, something on your mind?”

“Felicity’s getting antsy, I think.” Down, up. Down, up. It would be a while before his muscles would start to protest. “She wants out of the mansion, back in her own place.”

“Understandable,” Diggle said. “I’d be going nuts if I’d spent more than a week as a houseguest, too.”

“Mom and Thea both think it would be a good idea to do an interview, try and get out ahead of this monster,” Oliver said, “but I think it might be too little, too late, and I don’t want it to make life even more difficult than it already is.”

“Can it get much worse?” Diggle asked. “I mean, she’s already being stalked everywhere she goes. I’ve got a security team following her discreetly. But it’s not the paparazzi we’ve got to be worried about, really. It’s the coworkers who tweet or Instagram or, worse yet, sell lies to the tabloids. At least this way she’d have her side of the story out there.”

Oliver paused in what he was doing and looked up at Diggle. “You like her, don’t you?”

“What’s not to like? She keeps you in line,” Diggle said, a faint smile on his face.

“Want to spar?” Oliver asked, jumping up off the mat. He wasn’t nearly tired enough, and he still had some aggression to work out. No matter what he’d told Felicity, he was still a little taken aback and hurt that she hadn’t told him about Hanukkah -- he knew it wasn’t the Jewish equivalent of Christmas, but he would have liked to see it. Now that he thought about it, he could vaguely remember a menorah in a window…

“Sure,” Diggle said, tossing him a short club.
Diggle was a challenge: kept Oliver on his toes. It wasn’t often that Diggle won a match, but it was often enough that Oliver didn’t take victory for granted. And Diggle had been a soldier all of his life. He absorbed new fight techniques and information like a sponge, and could expand on them without much instruction, which meant he sometimes took Oliver by surprise.

Soon the foundry was filled with the sounds of clubs clashing, and deep breathing. There was no time to think about old wounds or fresh new ones, just time to sweat.

And then Diggle began to talk. “The Hood’s been busy this week, too!”

Oliver smirked. He’d used some of his time away from Felicity to hit the gas on the list. The sooner he’d saved the city, the sooner he could hang up his hood and be the father his kids deserved.

“I don’t even have to threaten a lot of these guys anymore,” he said. “They just see me coming and fold.”

“Nice,” Diggle said appreciatively, deflecting Oliver’s blow. “Maybe then you can take a Christmas break.”

He thought of Felicity’s words -- we usually go down to Coast City…. He picked up the pace, and easily threw Diggle to the ground. Oliver extended his hand to help Diggle up, signalling he was done.

“Oh. That’s, uh… coming up, isn’t it? What are you doing?”

“Taking my nephew down to see Santa Claus,” Diggle said, going for a bottle of water. “What about you?”

Oliver shrugged. “I don’t know. Christmas used to be kind of a big deal in my family, but… nothing so far this year. Christmas is… one of those things that I… missed.” Oliver cleared his throat. “You know, on the island.”

Diggle’s eyes were understanding, but he didn’t say anything.
“Every day was about surviving, making it to the next day. To do that, you had to forget things like Christmas. I was really… looking forward to it.”

“So maybe you should take the reins this year,” Diggle said. “Kids make Christmas so much better, man.”

Oliver closed his eyes. “I don’t know if I’m going to get to see the kids on Christmas. I guess they usually spend it with their maternal grandparents. And I don’t want to get in the way of tradition…”

“I know that’s tough, Oliver,” Diggle said.

Oliver shrugged it off. “We’ll do our Christmas thing some other day. The date’s kind of arbitrary, right?”

“Right,” Diggle said. “Well -- if you’ll excuse me, if we’re not going to be putting an arrow into some scum bags, I’m going to take off early. Mr. Smart’s going to be taking Felicity back to the mansion.”

“Tell him no thanks on that. I’ll take everybody myself,” Oliver said. “They can follow if they want, but part of Christmas is supposed to be spending time with family, right?”

“Good man, Oliver Queen,” Diggle said, smiling. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

Oliver’s phone rang, and he swiped his thumb across the display. “What’s up, Speedy?”

“Not much. I’m just getting hungry and I was wondering if maybe my big brother wanted to tear himself away from his extremely fascinating work of trying to make it look like he’s running a nightclub, and join me for lunch.”

Oliver glanced at his watch. “Yeah -- I think that sounds like a great idea.”
Felicity, before her most recent exposure in the media, hadn’t gotten much attention at work. She’d done her job, and been praised for it, occasionally, but for the most part, she’d been considered pretty average.

And then the story had broken, and everything had changed.

For the most part, her colleagues in IT had been welcoming when she returned back. She’d earned her stripes here -- everyone knew she was talented, that she was one of the best. It was pretty obvious (to them) that she’d gotten her job based on merit.

But not every department had that first time knowledge, and so Felicity had to get used to being the subject of water cooler gossip. Even well-meaning coworkers were overly concerned with how she was handling the attention and unwittingly made it worse with their constant inquiries.

Oliver, on the rare occasions they’d spoken that week, and again that morning, had promised her that eventually the attention would die down and become something more manageable, but Felicity wasn’t sure she could handle that. She missed her bed. She missed her apartment. She missed having her children all to herself.

Ah, there it was.

Felicity sighed and rubbed her eyes. She could tell that she’d hurt Oliver’s feelings earlier by admitting that she’d excluded him. She tried to tell herself it wasn’t intentional -- this was their private tradition and she just wasn’t used to having that part of her life… open. She hadn’t been trying to be mean. She just hadn’t been as… considerate, as she usually was.

But that had been in the early days -- before she’d seen how committed he was to the twins, how thoroughly he’d absorbed his role as their father into his life. Not that that was much of an excuse.

She’d have to think of some way, she thought, to make it up to him. Somehow.

“Ms. Smoak?” Mr. Steele’s private secretary asked her over the intercom.
She jumped a little and cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“You wanted me to make you aware of when Mr. Steele had a free moment?”

“Yes,” Felicity said -- glancing at the scrolling newsbar running across her browser: ADAM HUNT, DEAD AT VIGILANTE’S HAND, it read.

“He’ll have a free moment in five minutes, and he’d like to see you,” Lisa said. “He said you can use the private elevator and that you’d know the passcode.”

Felicity flushed. There was a note of censure in the secretary’s voice. She should only know the passcode to the private elevator if she was a Queen or a board member -- lowly IT girls who slept with the heir apparent weren’t deserving of such information, apparently. Felicity swallowed the bile rising in her throat and said. “All right. I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

She gathered her information -- and hereafter resolved that she would only make trips upstairs if, like now, someone’s life was at stake, and clutched the file folder to her chest as she crossed the crowded floor, feeling every set of eyes track her movement to the elevator. She quickly keyed in the number and laid her palm flat on the reader.

Access granted, she read to herself, and sighed as she stepped inside.

The ride up was quick -- perhaps a little too quick, but that was one of the reasons for the elevator -- it meant the executives could get where they were going with minimal interruption. Felicity looked down at her watch -- just a few more hours until she could go… well. Not home. But she could pick her children up from school, and wrap her arms around them and feel a little bit better about the world, maybe.

She stepped off the elevator, and into the foyer of Mr. Steele’s private office.

“Just a few moments, Ms… Smoak,” Lisa said, as though she had to strive to remember her name. Felicity nearly rolled her eyes at the woman. Just a few weeks ago, they’d been pleasant. Now she was less than dirt in this woman’s eyes. She decided it wasn’t worth getting upset over.
“Mr. Steele, thank you for taking the time to see me.”

“Any time, Felicity, you know that,” Walter said, getting to his feet, “and please, call me Walter.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Felicity said, nervously. “Anyway. I just wanted to let you know that I came across something else that I think you should know.”

“What is that?”

“You know that list of names that you gave me?”

Walter’s face was carefully blank. “Yes.”

“There are a good number of people on that list who have something in common,” Felicity said. “They’ve all been confronted by the vigilante. And now one of them? Adam Hunt? He’s dead.”

“Felicity…”

“Do you know Doug Miller?”

Walter’s brow furrowed. “He works in Applied Sciences here at Queen Consolidated, does he not?”

“Yes, he does,” Felicity said, handing him a copy of the page his name was on, “and he’s on the list. Apparently this vigilante guy is cleaning up the messes he’s left behind, Mr. Steele. Maybe you should give him a head’s up.”

Walter studied the list carefully, and nodded absently. “Perhaps I should.”

Felicity turned to go.

“I meant what I said, Felicity.”
She paused.

“This apparently gets more dangerous the further we go. I want to make sure you’re maintaining absolute secrecy. I don’t want any… fallout to befall you.”

Felicity lifted one corner of her mouth. “I think it’s safe to say your secret is safe with me, Mr. Steele.”

“One more thing, Felicity,” Walter said, standing up and moving around his desk. “Moira and I are giving a dinner party tonight.”

“Oh, do you want me to take the kids and disappear? I’d hate to be in anyone’s way…”

“On the contrary, Ms. Smoak,” Walter said, “Moira and I would love it if you would attend. Raiza is more than willing to attend to the children’s bedtime routine.”

Felicity thought for a moment. She had nothing she could wear to something as fancy as a party at the Queen house -- she often thought she had nothing fancy enough to wear to wake up in the morning there, though -- still, she could sneak out and purchase something quickly. She had a little extra money this month -- Walter had given her a small bonus for helping him out, and while some of that was set aside for the trip back to Coast City, some of it could go to the purchase of a (reasonably priced) dress.

“Thanks. I think I would like that.”

**

Oliver’s miserable mood was slightly lifted by his sister’s invitation. She was as moody as she ever was, as a general rule, but today she seemed bright and interested. She had a pile of shopping bags on the booth next to her when he arrived.

“Whoa. Where have you been?”
“Every toy store in the world,” Thea said dramatically, “and Janie and Jack, and Guess, and everywhere else.”

Oliver’s eyes widened. “Christmas shopping.”

“Yes, my dear brother, Christmas shopping, for my favorite niece and nephew. And some of it’s for charity, of course.” Thea grinned. “And I might have picked up one or two things for myself.”

Oliver chuckled. “Did you leave anything for the rest of us?”

“Odds and ends.” Thea took a sip of her diet soda. “I adored you a milkshake. You still like those, right?”

“What’s not to like?”

“Good.”

Oliver took a seat, glancing out the window to see several photographers getting a shot of him and Thea. He sighed.

“Someone tipped the paparazzi off that we’re here,” he said under his breath.

“Good. Maybe if they’re following us, Felicity will get a minute and a half of piece. Though they are kind of like cockroaches. You step on one, six more show up,” Thea said viciously.

“So. I have a question,” Oliver said. “What’s with no decorations at the house?”

Thea shrugged. “I guess Mom and I aren’t feeling very festive this year.”

“Really?”
Thea raised an eyebrow. “Yes, really.”

“Don’t you remember -- when we were kids -- Dad would bring in all of those trees? And the lights? And tinsel and garland everywhere. You couldn’t walk through the house without something glitter-bombing you. Mom would buy those packages of candy canes and we’d race to see who could finish first. And now… nothing?”

Thea crossed one leg over the other and sighed. “Listen, Ollie. You died, all right?”

“So?”

“So -- by the time Christmas rolled around that year, Mom and I just… didn’t do it. We didn’t do Christmas. And we didn’t do it the year after that, or the year after that…” Thea shrugged. “I figured we’d do something little, maybe, with the kids around this year, and there’s no way I was missing out on the chance to buy them some more stuff, but….”

“We should throw the party.”

“Excuse me?”

“We … I should throw the party. Invite everyone just like we always did and have music and laughing and -- we should just do it, all right? We deserve Christmas.” Oliver reached for Thea’s hand. “You should have had Christmas without me, Thea. I’m sorry that you didn’t. But I had to go five years without it and now…”

“Thea?”

Thea looked up, a smile on her face. “Shane!”

“Hey, uh… a few of us are going to go out, catch a movie. Wanna come with?”

Oliver watched as his sister’s grin got a little silly. He could tell she was interested in this guy and figured he would be picking up the tab while she abandoned him any minute.
“Nah, thanks. I’m spending the afternoon hanging out with my brother. Apparently,” she said, taking in a deep breath, “we’ve got a party to plan.”

**

Oliver was waiting patiently outside Felicity’s office when quitting time rolled around. She strode out, coat over her arm, weighed down by a laptop bag and a purse.

“Here, let me take some of that,” Oliver said.

“Oliver! I thought Mr. Smart was driving us today.”

“They’re going to follow us,” Oliver said. “I wanted to talk to you without someone listening to every word that we’re saying.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “Okay.”

“It’s nothing bad!” Oliver said, taking her laptop bag. “I just… think we should talk about things.”

“I think you’re right,” Felicity said. “But I was kind of hoping to talk Mr. Smart into taking me to the mall on the way home.”

“Why?”

“Your parents are having a dinner party tonight,” Felicity said. “And we’re invited. Well, I am. And I have nothing to wear. Granted -- shopping for a dress with two four-year-olds isn’t ideal, but I can’t exactly sneak out of here. People watch my every move. If I got off even twenty minutes early, someone would be complaining to HR about preferential treatment.”

“We can go to the mall. I’ll distract Maddie and Matthew, and you can find what you want,” Oliver said.
“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Oliver said, smiling. It was almost genuine, even. “And then we can chat on the way home.”

“Sounds good.”

An hour later, an overtired Maddie and Matthew were in the play area of the mall, having being plied by their father with milkshakes and promises of dinner into good behavior. Oliver sat on a bench, never taking his eyes off of them for a second. Unlike some of the other parents, he didn’t take his cell phone out. He wasn’t watching with one eye while he gazed at a tablet. He looked after them like any minute they might disappear on him -- never mind the security guards that were now part and parcel of going out in public. Felicity wondered what his childhood had been like, what the island had been like, that he was so focused and alert all of the time.

Felicity ducked into one of her favorite stores -- a small boutique with dresses that were always at the higher-end of her budget but always cute.

As soon as she stepped inside, an assistant appeared. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Felicity smiled politely. “No thank you. I’m just looking for a dress for this evening.”

“Cocktail party?” the assistant asked, effectively ignoring Felicity’s expression. “We’ve got some newer items in stock -- no one else has been seen wearing them yet.”

Felicity’s eyes widened. “Oh,” she said. Of course. The assistant had seen her picture. Knew who she was. Assumed that she was… oh.

“Here!” The assistant bustled over, quickly selecting things off of the shelf. “Why don’t you start with these, see what you think? If you don’t like any of these, we’ve got more options, of course…”

“Thank you, but…”

The assistant lowered her voice. “Listen -- I didn’t want to say anything, but that guy over there is
taking pictures and I think he might be looking for a story, so -- let me help you out, okay? A lot of our more… recognizable customers shop this way. I’ll open up the private dressing room for you.”

Felicity flushed. “Thanks. I’m not used to this.”

“Not a problem. My manager is going over to kick him out but she can’t do much once he’s outside the door, so…”

Felicity shivered and shook her head. As the dressing room door shut behind her, an armful of dresses hung up on the hook on the door, she rubbed her eyes. What was her life turning into?

By the time she had selected a dress and accessories -- the outfit was amazing, the price tag even more so -- she was more than ready to get out of the mall and back to the car. She walked over to Oliver and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m ready to go.”

He smiled up at her. “Okay. I think they are, too. Maddie, Matthew, you guys ready to leave?”

Felicity laughed as they cheered. Oliver gallantly offered her his arm and she took it as they headed toward the mall exit, Matthew holding her hand while Maddie held Oliver’s.

“Thanks,” she said softly to Oliver.

“You looked kind of freaked.”

“I guess we were followed here,” Felicity said. “I didn’t even notice, until the sales clerk pointed it out -- they took pictures of me shopping. It’s just… incredibly invasive.”

“I know,” Oliver said. “Our security guys stopped a couple of them from getting pictures of the kids playing.”

“It’s got to stop,” Felicity said. “Somehow.”
“I know,” Oliver said. “That’s something I wanted to chat with you about. I think we should do the interview. My mom knows the right reporter -- she’s an up and coming star in Metropolis, apparently, but they met at a charity event. She thinks Lois needs a good human interest story and she’s got a good heart. And she won’t have nearly the baggage with us that a reporter from Starling City might.”

“Lois…?”

“Lane.” Felicity nodded, and quickly did a Google search. She saved several tabs to read later. “I’m saying yes, for now. Let’s get it set up and get it over with.”

“You know you don’t have to do this dinner party if you don’t want to,” Oliver said, pushing the mall door open.

Matthew brightened. “Yeah, Mama! You can stay and play with us!”

“Unfortunately, I gave Mr. Steele… Walter, my word that I would be there,” Felicity said tiredly. “And I don’t like going back on my word.”

Oliver smiled at her. “Come on guys, let’s quick march to the car. The dinner party starts at eight. Let’s allow Mom lots of time to get ready, okay?”

Maddie and Matthew cheered. Oliver’s car today was a silver BMW sedan. It was outfitted in the back with booster seats, which Felicity and Oliver carefully secured the children in. Felicity popped a Dora DVD into the seat-back player and then got in the passenger side. She closed her eyes at the leather seats heated up, thanks to the in-seat heater. Aches and pains she didn’t even know she had started melting away.

“I might fall asleep on the way home,” she said softly.

“It might take us some time to get back to the mansion in this holiday traffic -- at least to get out of town,” Oliver said. “So… feel free to rest if you need to.”

“No. You wanted to talk.” Felicity fixed him with her gaze. “And I think we should start with an
apology. I’m sorry about Hanukkah, Oliver. I was selfish and I didn’t think. I should have… trusted, right from the beginning that you were invested and you gave me no reason to think that you weren’t. I just….”

“Well, to be fair, I did sleep with you and then never call you again,” Oliver said lightly.

“Yeah, but that was part of the understanding,” Felicity said. “Oliver -- I’m not upset about it, okay? Nothing about you not being here for the first four years of the kids’ life is your fault. Nothing. And I owe you better treatment than excluding you from things, okay?”

“Okay.” Oliver’s hands gripped the steering wheel, and then relaxed.

Felicity sighed. There was clearly a lot of self-loathing going on in Oliver’s head. He had a lot of things to feel guilty about, but the conception of their children was not one of them.

“I wanted to talk about Christmas,” Oliver said. “I -- think you should take the kids to Coast City if that’s what you’ve always done.”

“Oliver, that’s really nice of you, but…”

“The press will probably leave you alone out there. We can send some people to keep a discreet watch, of course, but…”

“Oliver.”

“I don’t want to ruin a tradition.”

“Oliver!” Felicity took a deep breath. “I already called my Mom and Dad. We’re going to do Christmas on Boxing Day. We’ll spend Christmas Day with you. And uh -- you’re invited out to Coast City with us. Mom and Dad want to meet you.”

“Oh.” Oliver rubbed the back of his neck. “I… will have to think about that. I usually don’t do so hot meeting the parents.”
“Well,” Felicity said, “I think meeting you would do wonders for their perception of you. You’ve changed, Oliver. I only knew you for a night and I can see that. I think you should be proud of the man you’ve become. And you’re a good Dad, and I want my parents to see that, because I’m starting to think of you as a friend, and besides… I just think the father of my children should know their grandparents. But… you don’t have to. Just think about it.”

Oliver swallowed. “Okay.” He sighed and tapped his hands on the wheel. “There’s one other thing.”

“Oh?”

“When I was a kid -- the Queen family Christmas party was kind of a big deal. I have a lot of really good memories associated with it. I guess Mom and Thea kind of let the tradition slip but… with Maddie and Matthew here, I don’t want to let it go. So -- there’s going to be a big party at the house and I think you and the kids should come. I mean, obviously, the kids don’t have to stay for all of it - - when I was a kid we used to make an appearance and then go back upstairs to play, but -- I think you should be there.”

Felicity looked out the window. “Oliver…”

“It’s just like me meeting your parents, Felicity. We’re going to be part of each others’ lives forever, aren’t we? I mean -- we’re always going to be something approaching a family. So. I think maybe we should act like it. Don’t you?”

“If that’s what you really want,” Felicity said evenly.

“That’s what I really want,” Oliver said, and he looked over at her -- and damn, if he didn’t have the most expressive eyes of anyone she’d ever met.

The moment was interrupted by Maddie squealing. “Mom, we get to go to a party?”

“Yes, baby,” Felicity said.

“Can I wear a dress?”
“I think so,” Felicity said, smiling.

“With sparkles?”

“We’ll have to see if we can find one.

“Awesome,” Maddie said, sighing. “Dad, you’re so cool.”

Oliver looked surprised, and then burst out laughing. “I’m not the one who said you could wear a sparkly dress.”

“Mom is cool too.”


Chapter End Notes

Follow me here: storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com

Also -- I have a DVD extra segment of Thea babysitting the twins started for once this series of chapters is over! Let me know in comments if you’ve got a DVD extra scene you want to see, as well. :)}
part vi: "year's end" (ii/iii)

Chapter Summary

Oliver's paramount concern is to shut down the Black Archer, but is he willing to put Felicity at risk to do it? At the Queen family dinner party, Felicity meets Malcolm Merlyn for the first time and senses that something is not quite right. And oh yeah -- there's a classic Olicity line in this chapter, as well!

Chapter Notes

Um. WOW. Just Wow. You guys are so awesome. I appreciate all your comments and all your kudos -- I know I still have a few from the last chapter that I need to respond to but know that I am grateful and I will get to it! I just wanted to get this massive beast of a three-part-chapter written and edited!

This is the shortest chunk of the whole thing but stopping it any other place just didn't make sense. I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver found himself distracting the kids -- the business suit he'd worn to the office that day would suffice for a dinner party at his parents' house, though he'd change out the white shirt for something with a little more punch, if he had the time. For the moment, though, Raisa had brought in spaghetti and greenbeans, and Maddie and Matthew were sitting on stools in the kitchen, talking to Oliver while they ate. Raisa was putting finishing touches on the meal, listening to their conversation.

Oliver tried to remember a time when his father had done something like this -- just taken a minute when he was this young, listened to him talk about cars or superheroes or whatever he'd been into at that moment, and really paid attention. Maybe he had. Maybe time had just erased those memories. Maddie was telling him a long involved story about her teacher, Ms. Tamara, when the door swung open.

“Ugh, the borings will be here any minute,” Thea said, waltzing into the kitchen. “Please tell me we're serving real food, Raiza.”

“I always serve real food,” Raiza huffed.

“Mm, spaghetti and green beans,” Thea said, sticking her nose comically close to Maddie’s plate.
“Smells delicious. Can I have yours?”

“No, Aunt Thea, get your own!” Maddie said, shrieking with laughter.

“No pagetti for you!” Matthew agreed, raising his fork in the air. Thea plucked it from him and snagged a taste of the meat sauce. “Hey!”

“Mmm. Delicious.” Thea bent and kissed Matthew’s cheek, leaving a bright red mark.

“Thea, he’s a little young to have lipstick all over him,” Oliver said, raising his eyebrows.

“With a face like that I’m sure he’s had lipstick all over his cheeks before,” Thea said, and bent and kissed Maddie too. “Seriously though, are we having spaghetti?”

“For the dinner party?” Raiza shook her head and clucked her tongue. “No, no.”

“Darn,” Thea said mournfully.

“Raiza’s got more,” Maddie said. Oliver noticed she was always jumping to help. “She could probably save you some if you don’t like what’s for dinner. Sometimes Mom does that when we go to grandma’s house. Cause Grandma’s not a good cook, so you gotsa eat there and then come back and eat for reals.”

Oliver sniggered and Thea covered her amusement with her mouth.

“The Queen children always eat what I cook for them,” Raiza said, “because I am a good cook.”

“The best,” Oliver agreed affectionately.

“Where’s Felicity?”
Oliver shrugged. “Walter kind of sprung this party on her. She’s getting put together, I think.”

“Does she need any help?”

Oliver cocked his head to the side. “Doing… what, exactly?”

Thea huffed and rolled her eyes, disappearing out of the room again. Oliver leaned on the kitchen counter and stole one of Maddie’s green beans. “I gotta tell you, Madds. I just don’t get girls sometimes.”

Maddie shrugged her shoulders, and Oliver couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on her face. It was pure Felicity, through and through. It was good to see that -- they were so obviously Queens, with their coloring and their eyeshape and cheekbones, it was good to see some of Felicity’s expressions shining through.

He hoped they were more Smoak than Queen, at any rate. Felicity seemed, down to her core, steady, strong, Intelligent, smart and giving. He hoped his kids had all of those things, and hadn’t inherited the Queen family tendency to absorb all of the guilt in the world on their shoulders, and hopefully they’d missed out on the impulsivity and recklessness that had been so fundamental to his ending up on the island.

“Why do you have to go to the party, Daddy?” Matthew asked. “Can’t you come upstairs and play trucks with us?”

“No, I promised Grandma I’d be there. These are her friends and she likes for us to be around,” Oliver said evenly. “Some day you’ll have to come to dinner parties too.”

“Are they fun?” Maddie asked.

“Loads,” Oliver said, not seriously at all. Sarcasm is not easily deciphered by four-year-olds, though, so he shook his head. “They’re not my favorite thing.”

“But they are a necessary evil when it comes to business sometimes,” Moira said, as she entered the kitchen.
“Mom!” Oliver beamed at her. “You look… really nice.”

She flushed in the way that she always had when he complimented her. Before the island he hadn’t been big on it. He’d been a brat. He hadn’t really noticed her or what she looked like except when it affected what he wanted or needed from her. It still kind of hurt that a compliment from him made her slightly off-balance.

“Thanks, dear. What do we have here?” Moira asked, crossing the kitchen in her black outfit which shimmered as it caught the light. “Spaghetti?”

“Want some?” Maddie asked, offering her a forkfull.

“As much as I love Raiza’s spaghetti, and I do love it,” Moria said with a grin, “I think I had better save room in my stomach for the party food, don’t you?”

“Okay,” Maddie said, and she returned to working on her food.

“Just a couple more minutes then I’ll take them upstairs,” Oliver said.

“No worries, darling,” Moira said. “I snuck in here to get a few minutes with them myself.” She poured herself a glass of milk and sat on a barstool and listened to Maddie tell her story and Oliver took his phone out and surreptitiously caught a picture most of the world would have to see, of Maddie and Moira Queen with matching milk moustaches.

**

Felicity had just finished straightening her hair when she heard the knock on her door. A quick check of her lipstick and she bustled out of the en suite bathroom to open it.

“Just a second, Oliver. I thought I had more time…”

“Definitely not Oliver,” Thea drawled, her eyes raking over Felicity’s form. “Although, can I say? His jaw is going to hit the floor when he sees you in that thing.”
“Well it better, since it cost me like half a week’s pay,” Felicity said, but she was smiling. “What’s up?”

“I was just coming up here to see if you needed any help, but wow. You are really looking good.”

“Thanks.” Felicity flushed. “I just need to talk myself into wearing the shoes. I’m really clumsy. I’m afraid I’m going to fall down the three flights of stairs between here and the dining room wearing them. Or you know, I’ll trip and break another one of your mother’s priceless vases.”

“Oh, you should go for the really ugly one on the end of this hall,” Thea said, grinning. “Well, never fear. You and I can walk down together and I will save you from tripping and falling flat on your face.”

Felicity laughed. “I’d appreciate that, thanks.” She secured the back of her heels -- they weren’t terribly high, but they were high enough, and followed Thea out of the door.

“Here’s where I leave you,” Thea said when they got to the ground floor. “I’m going to bounce -- I don’t like to be forced to go to these things if I don’t have to.”

When she got to the kitchen she heard the tell-tale signs of her children being entertaining. Maddie’s high, piping voice was insistent as she wove a tale of bathroom woes, and Moira and Oliver listened to her with rapt attention.

“Don’t you think it’s almost time for them to go upstairs?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah, Raiza’s going to take them in a minute… wow.” Oliver stood up straight. “Felicity.”

She flushed, running a hand over the gold of the dress. “Was it too much? I just -- I put it on and I thought, you know…”

“No. Definitely not too much.” Oliver shook his head firmly. “You look amazing.”
“You do, Ms. Felicity,” Raiza agreed. Moira only looked from Oliver to Felicity and back. “Come now, Ms. Maddie, Mr. Matthew,” Raiza said. “Let’s get hands and faces washed, mm? Then we can go destroy a Lego City with dinosaurs.”

Matthew let out a shout of excitement.

“Come here, you two. Give me a kiss and a hug before you go upstairs,” Felicity said. She dropped to her knees and they clamored over, smelling like preschool and kid sweat and spaghetti. Her heart twinged. She didn’t particularly want to spend an evening away from them, but she knew they would be okay with Raiza, who was quickly becoming something of a grandmother figure in their lives.

Oliver stood on the other side of her, and they both gave him a high-five as they left. He stuck his hands in his pockets and turned to Felicity. “They’re… something else.”

She smiled. “Yes, they are. And they managed to get spaghetti sauce on your tie.” She reached for a napkin and without thinking, grabbed his tie. Quickly, she blotted the stain away. “There you go. Perfect.”

It was only after she lifted her eyes that she realized they were standing so close to each other, his hand fisted on the counter and his gorgeous eyes looking straight into hers. She remembered the last time they had spent any amount of time in the kitchen, and the feeling of his lips on hers. A shiver danced up and down her back.

A chime rang throughout the house, startling them apart. “If you’ll excuse me,” Moira said, a faint smile on her lips. “I do believe that’s the first of our guests.”

Felicity found herself in pretty austere company that night -- Malcolm Merlyn, the head of Merlyn Global and the competing job offer she’d turned down to come work for Queen Consolidated, sat directly across the table from her and Oliver. The chief of police was there as well, and numerous heads of prominent charities working to help low-income children and families in the Glades. Felicity might have felt nervous, except there was no time. During cocktail hour, Oliver handed her a glass of red wine and took her around the room, introducing her to people as he went.

“Felicity,” he said, as they approached Malcolm Merlyn, “this is Tommy’s father, Malcolm. Malcolm, this is my friend, Felicity.”
Malcolm’s eyes narrowed. Felicity didn’t like the way he sized her up, the judgement he was clearly making. Other people in this room had been shocked by her appearance, but at least outwardly welcoming. This man wore a mask, just like Oliver did, but something about him repelled her. “Felicity… Smoak, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She extended her hand and shook his his briefly.

“I’ve read that you’re an IT specialist.”

“I am.”

Malcolm smiled. “I’m sure that was nice while it lasted.”

“Oh, I’m continuing to work,” Felicity said, smiling. “I have bills to pay, after all.”

“Fascinating. I do admire young people that take responsibility for themselves.”

Felicity raised one corner of her mouth. “Well, I have other young people that count on me. It wasn’t so much noble as necessary, Mr. Merlyn.”

Malcolm tilted his head to the side. “Yes, of course. How could I have forgotten? It must be that dress. You look beautiful.”

Oliver took her arm. “I couldn’t agree more, Mr. Merlyn. I can see that we’re being summoned into the dining room. Felicity and I will follow you.”

As they settled into chairs, Felicity was surprised to find Oliver gently pulling hers out of her, and then taking his own seat. The first course, a light soup, was tasty, but there wasn’t much of it and Felicity was hungry. She wondered if she could convince Oliver that they could sneak out of the mansion and get Big Belly Burger without being detected when this was over.

Moira asked the chief of police a question quietly and he began to pontificate, catching Felicity’s ear.
“The thing people tend to forget is that Robin Hood was a criminal,” he said.

“Yes, and robbing from the rich to give to the poor is more the job of the Democrats,” said a snide businessman down the table.

“I don’t necessarily think that people forget he was a criminal,” Felicity said. “Isn’t that kind of the point of the story? The law was unjust -- a law, a system which provides no means for the people who must bear the weight of it to live freely and well -- being subject to that law was unjust. The story needed a man who could, and would, operate outside the system to bring it back to order.”

“And is that how you see this vigilante, Ms. Smoak?” Malcolm Merlyn asked her, his blue eyes piercing. “Someone operating outside the system to bring it back to balance.”

Felicity reached for her wine goblet, remembering a time when her mother had sharply told her that little girls were not supposed to express their opinions in adult gatherings unless they were asked for it.

“I think without knowing more about him, it’s just as logical a conclusion to draw as anything else,” Felicity said. “And times are tough in Starling City -- if it gives people hope, gives people something to talk about, then I can’t see what the harm is, unless you’re embezzling from your company or destroying stock portfolios of retirees.”

Moira laughed, an edge of nervousness in her voice. Malcolm turned to Oliver. “What say you, Oliver?”

Oliver shrugged lightly. “I think the vigilante needs a better name than ‘the Hood’ or ‘Hood guy’.”

The table laughed. Felicity narrowed her eyes at him. He had more to say. He had a real opinion, and she knew it. He was just reluctant in this company to say what that opinion was. Interesting.

“I agree,” Malcolm said. “How about Green Arrow?”

“Nah.” Oliver chuckled.
Two policemen walked in the room and bent to whisper something to the Chief of Police, who immediately stood. “I’m sorry, friends. I must take my leave of you early. An emergency has come up.”

“Is everything alright?” Oliver was practically sitting on the edge of his seat.

The Chief of Police shook his head. “No. I’m afraid not. The vigilante has struck again. Doug Miller is dead.”

The group around the table murmured in shock. Felicity gripped her napkin and looked through her eyelashes at Oliver and caught something -- a muscle twinge. The chief of police hadn’t been gone more than a few seconds when Oliver’s phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen.

“I’m sorry. I really have to take this. It’s my contractor.” With that, he got up and left the table. Felicity noticed that Malcolm Merlyn’s eyes never left him, so she cleared her throat.

“That name sounds familiar,” she said.

“It should.” Walter said, rubbing his eyes. “Doug heads -- headed, I should say, up the Applied Sciences division at Queen Consolidated.”

Moira went white. “Oh my God.”

One of the businessmen stood up. “I think perhaps we had better let you and Walter take care of what you need to take care of, Moira.”

“I hate to end an evening short,” she said, standing up as well, “but I… I think that might be best.”

The guests filed out, expressing regrets. Malcolm was the last to leave. He shook Felicity’s hand once again. “I’m quite certain that I will see you again. Oliver’s got a look in his eyes when he looks at you.”

Felicity flushed. “Well, there’s nothing going on. So. Perhaps you’ll see me again. Perhaps you won’t.”
“Hm,” Malcolm said, and he turned to Moira, wrapping her in a hug. “I am sorry.”

Moira returned it, but it was obvious her heart wasn’t in it. Apparently Felicity wasn’t the only one weirded about his demeanor, she decided. Walter shook hands with him, and then he left, and the three of them stood in the foyer.

“Is there… anything I can do?” Felicity asked awkwardly.

“No, dear, I… I don’t think so. Where has Oliver got to?” Moira asked. “Do you think he left the house just to take a phone call?”

Felicity shrugged. “It’s… possible, I suppose.”

Walter cleared his throat. “Actually, Felicity, if you could look up the home address and phone number of Doug… I think his wife’s name is Patty…”

“Yes, of course,” Moira said. “We’ll want to send flowers -- call. Tomorrow. Not tonight. They’ll be dealing with police tonight.”

“Of course. I’ll just access the staff directory from my tablet. It’s upstairs.”

Felicity ran up the stairs and got her tablet from her bag. That’s when she realized her hands were shaking.

Whoever this vigilante was -- they hadn’t been able to stop him. What had Doug Miller done that would warrant an arrow to the chest?

**

In the early light of morning Oliver was still buzzing with barely-contained fury. Quentin Lance realized that he had a copy-cat on his hands, of course, and that would help, but the murder of
someone like Doug Miller -- whose name was on the list, but Oliver hadn’t been able to manage to discover why yet -- that meant someone knew why he was targeting the people he was targeting.

Someone knew more about him than he was comfortable with them knowing.

That didn’t sit right with him. If they knew why he was killing then perhaps they were closer than he wanted anyone to get to finding out who he was.

He decided to take a risk. He used the burner phone and made a call.

“Detective Lance?”

“Who is this.”

“You call me the Hood. It’s a terrible nickname.”

The rest of the conversation didn’t last long. Oliver knew all he had to do was plant the seed in Detective Lance’s head -- when he hit a roadblock, and he was sure to -- he would get back in touch. Lance was a guy who wanted justice down to his very bones. He’d want to get the vigilante for crimes the vigilante had actually committed, and above all, he’d want the people of Starling City safe.

**

The next morning, Oliver came down the stairs to find that Thea had gathered Walter and Moira in the living room.

“Oh! There you are.” Thea sat down and crossed her legs. “I think that you should tell them your idea, Oliver.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What idea?”

“Oliver thinks we should have the annual Queen family Christmas party again,” Thea said.
Moira looked taken aback. “What? Really? I didn’t know you were so excited about Christmas, Oliver.”

“I went five years without it,” Oliver said, trying not to think about how he’d lost track of the days and how it had been cold all of the time and how every thought had been consumed with making it through to the next breath. “And then Thea tells me that you guys went without it too?”

“Listen.” Thea sat forward on the couch. “You two don’t have to do anything. Ollie and I are going to take care of it. Just show up and look fabulous, okay?”

“Well… I suppose,” Moira said, looking doubtful.

“I think this is one Queen family tradition we should keep around for Maddie and Matthew,” Oliver said. “Don’t you? I mean, a lot of the really good memories I have of Dad are centered around this party.”

Moira’s face softened. “I see.”

“I think that sounds like a fabulous idea,” Walter said, smiling.

“Good, because we’ve already gotten started,” Thea said.

**

A day later, Oliver found himself in the possession of an arrow. A custom job, no doubt, he’d told Diggle. He knew what you could buy when you walked into a sporting goods store, and it wasn’t this. But he had no idea how to track down more about it.

“Here’s a thought,” Diggle said. “Why don’t you ask Felicity?”

Oliver sighed. “I don’t know, Digg. I don’t know how much more often I can keep feeding her ridiculous stories and have her buy it. She’s… pretty smart.”
“I’ve noticed.” Digg crossed his arms. “So maybe you don’t tell her a ridiculous story. Maybe you tell her the truth.”

“Hi Felicity, mother of my children. Listen, I hope this doesn’t screw up our tentative peace or any chance that you will ever let me see the twins again, but at night, I dress up in green leather and go out and clean up the streets of our city. Which had been going alright until someone who isn’t me started killing people while he was dressed as me, which isn’t, truthfully, out of the realm of possibility but I swear it’s not me this time. Anyway. I have one of his arrows. Find him for me.”

Diggle raised both of his eyebrows. “I don’t know man, it sounds to me like she’s rubbing off on you.”

“I need to keep her safe. I need to keep her out of this.”

“Whoever this copycat is,” Diggle said, “he knows about the list, doesn’t he? And he probably knows who wrote it. Which means every day he’s out there walking around is another day that it’s only by the Grace of God that you are walking around. So. Maybe you need to figure out how to tell Felicity what’s going on without sounding like a moron.”

Oliver rolled his eyes at him. But Diggle did have a point. So he took the arrow and he went to see Felicity at her office.

“Hi.”

She jumped. “Oliver! Don’t you knock?”

He couldn’t help it. She looked just like Matthew trying to sneak a cookie from Raiza. He let out a full-bellied laugh. “Felicity, this is the IT department… not the ladies room.”

“Yes, well. What do you need. I imagine you didn’t come down here to laugh at me and distract me so…”

“I need to know more about this.” Oliver handed her the arrow, carefully. “My buddy Steve is really into archery and his birthday is coming. Thing is, he gets these custom arrows….”
“Your buddy Steve.” Felicity looked up at him, disbelievingly. “That’s the story you’re going with?”

Oliver let out a breath and smiled. “Yes. Felicity, for me. Please. Find out what you can about that arrow. I’d like to know where it came from.”

“I’ve never been into archery. It’s always looked… dumb.”

Oliver felt a pang but thought he covered it well. “Hm.”

“The shaft’s material is patented…” Felicity tapped several keys on her keyboard, and by the end of it, she’d handed him an address where he could start his search.

He took it from her, studying her handwriting for a second before he lifted his eyes. It hit him at odd moments, how much he admired her.

“Felicity… you are… remarkable.”

She flushed deep red and ducked her head. “Thank you. For… remarking on it.”

“Ready for the Christmas party tonight?” Oliver asked her as he stood up.

“Yes. I’ll have to start making room in my budget for all of these dresses,” Felicity said on a laugh.

“Oh, you should have said…”

“No. Absolutely not, no.” Felicity stood up as well. “Your mom bought Matthew and Maddie outfits to wear and that was… that was hard enough to accept so let’s just let it go and pretend I didn’t say anything, all right? Because I really and truly didn’t mean to.”

“Felicity, it’s okay if you need some help… you know this is one area in which I am uniquely equipped to help you.”
“And I appreciate that, but… it’s like I told Mr. Merlyn. I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time. I don’t have any intentions of stopping… any time soon.”

“All right.” Oliver knew this was a battle they could fight again some other time. “I’ll see you tonight, then?”

“Yes.” Felicity rocked back on her heels. “With bells on.”

**

Oliver heard the knock at his door as he was arranging his tie. His hair was a little singed, but it wasn’t anything noticeable -- a quick shower had gotten rid of the smell, although his heart was still racing. He’d very nearly died when the warehouse exploded, and he knew it.

“Daddy?” Matthew called through the door. Oliver opened it up.

“Hey little man, what’s up?” Oliver asked. “You look sharp.”

He did, too. His mother had arranged his hair so it spiked up, and his little suit was perfectly tailored. “Mama says I’m driving her and Maddie bonkers so I’m supposed to come in here and drive you bonkers.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “What were you doing to drive them bonkers?”

“I don’t know. Bouncing off the walls.” Matthew shrugged. “That’s what Mama says.”

“I used to get in trouble for that all the time, too. No worries. Someday soon it’ll be spring and we can go outside and get all that energy out. For now, though…” Oliver looked around his room. He’d very nearly died. He could afford to be a little bit silly. “You want to hear something awesome?”

“Yeah!”
Oliver bent down and took his shoes off. “This is absolutely the best bed in the history of beds for jumping up and down on.”

“You’re not for reals.”

“I am one hundred percent absolutely for reals,” Oliver said. He got on top of the mattress and tested his weight gingerly, bouncing a little.

“Ooooooooooooooooh,” Matthew said, his eyes wide. “Mama’s gonna kill you.”

“That would be grandma that would kill me and she won’t mind. Come on.” Oliver held out his hand, and Matthew took it, vaulting onto the bed.

Soon Oliver was taking his hands, jumping with him, helping him use Oliver’s thighs to launch himself into flips. They were both sweaty messes when the door opened.

“Oh good,” Felicity said dryly. “I was wondering when someone would get around to teaching him how to destroy furniture.”

“Hey, I was very clear. He’s only allowed to do this on my bed when I’m here,” Oliver said. “And may I say again… wow.”

Felicity’s dress was deep red. It clung to every curve of her body and exposed more cleavage than he had ever seen her show. Her feet were encased in high red high heels that made her legs look a million miles long.

“Yes, well. Don’t get used to this. This is a production, isn’t it Madds?”

Maddie nodded as she stepped out from behind Felicity. Her dress was all red tulle and velvet with a big black rose on a white ribbon ‘round the middle. Oliver realized that someone -- his mother, probably, had arranged it so they would all match.

“Oh, you look beautiful, sweetheart,” Oliver said, dropping to the floor for a hug.
“Thanks, Daddy,” Maddie said sweetly. “Can we go to the party now?”

“Daddy and Matthew need their shoes on. And to have their ties fixed.” Felicity said sternly. Oliver and Matthew quickly shoved their feet into their shoes and submitted to Felicity’s fussing. “There. Now you both look respectable.”

Then they walked down the stairs together.

Chapter End Notes

As always feel free to follow me on Tumblr for ranting and raving about Olicity and writing and stuff.

storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com

Thanks, guys! Again!
Chapter Summary

The Dark Archer has taken hostages, which means Oliver has to leave his family’s party early. And Felicity is having quite a bit of a day.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the support this story continues to receive! It honestly means the world to me that you read, and then you take the time to review and let me know how I’m doing.

From here on out I imagine the chapters will be about like this -- it takes me five to six days to write a chapter of this length while I’m doing school so I will probably break episodes into chunks so you get more regular updates of around 4 to 5K words a piece. I hope this is okay with everyone!

The party was mostly in full swing when Oliver and Felicity led the children down the stairs. Matthew hung back, staying close to Felicity’s side, but Maddie took off into the crowd, running up to her aunt Thea. “Hi!”

“Hello, cutie-pie,” Thea said, bending to capture her in a hug. “You look adorable! As a matter of fact, all of you look delicious. Felicity -- you have got the best taste.”

“Thanks,” Felicity said, a little uncomfortable with how bright the teen’s eyes were. Something about her demeanor wasn’t quite right. Oliver must have noticed too, because he saw the champagne glass in her hand and narrowed his eyes.

“Thea, do you…”

“I see my friend!” Thea brushed past them to greet Shane at the door.

Oliver raised his eyebrows at Felicity. She shrugged. No way was she getting in the middle of that.
“Oliver, Felicity!” Walter crossed the room with Moira to greet them. “Your family makes quite the picture tonight.”

“Thanks,” Oliver said, and he reaches for Felicity’s hand and squeezes it briefly before he lets it drop. “Do you think we should get a picture?”

“Yes, probably,” Felicity said, “before the kids completely destroy their outfits. We’ve got approximately ten seconds.”

Oliver laughed. The official photographer arranged all of them just so -- Walter with Moira standing close to him, but perhaps not as close as they normally would be, then Oliver next to them, Felicity next to him, with the kids in front, one of their hands on each of their shoulders. Felicity’s spine tingled. There was a lot… off about tonight. Everyone was wearing a jovial face but next to no one was actually feeling it.

Living here was beginning to feel exhausting.

“And now, how about just one of the four of you?” The photographer suggested. Felicity looked over at Oliver and shrugged.

Oliver lifted Maddie into his arms and Matthew clung to Felicity’s leg for the picture. The photographer looked down at his view screen and chuckled. “Very nice,” he said. “You look very happy.”

Maddie and Matthew were soon bored and, having made the obligatory appearance, Oliver bent down and whispered in their ears that if they went to the kitchen, they might find that Raiza was willing to play with them.

Felicity wished she could join them. This was not her world, and while it was fun to mingle for a little, the truth was, the only people she knew here were the Queens, and there was a thread of tension between all of their interactions that made the air thick. A waiter offered her some wine, and she gladly took a glass.

“Hello,” Laurel Lance said from behind her as she was taking her first sip. She nearly sighed in relief as the alcohol hit her throat, then she turned.
“Hello,” she said just as pleasantly. “Wow.” She looked Laurel up and down. “I must say -- you are beautiful tonight.”

Laurel seemed nonplussed. She chuckled. “I can see why Oliver likes you. I could say the same thing to you. That dress is stunning.”

“Thank you.” Felicity said. “Did you -- uh… come here with…”

“Tommy?” Laurel smiled. “Yes. He’s just talking club business with Oliver and so I thought I’d come over here and say hello. I hope you won’t take this the wrong way but you liked sort of alone over here.”

“Just taking a little bit of a break,” Felicity said. “This is all a bit… overwhelming.”

“Yes, I imagine it is,” Laurel said. “I grew up around… all of this and it can be overwhelming for me. Still I keep trying to escape it -- I told myself after Oliver, I wasn’t going to date anyone like him ever again. And then there was Tommy.”

“He seems like a good guy.”

Laurel smiled and her eyes sparkled and Felicity couldn’t help but smile back. There was something infectious about happiness on the other woman’s face. “He’s been… extremely patient with me. And it seems like he’s turning his whole life around. It’s like he decided to grow up, and just… did.”

“My mom always says it takes them longer than it takes us,” Felicity said. “I don’t know about that, but I do know sometimes it’s worth the wait.”

Laurel lifted her glass and Felicity let hers touch it in a silent salute. Then they both drank deeply.

Oliver crossed the room and bent to whisper in Felicity’s ear. “Have you seen Thea?”

Felicity closed her eyes, and half-remembered that she had seen earlier. “I think she went up the stairs.”
“I’d better check and make sure she’s okay. Merry Christmas, Laurel,” Oliver said, his face closed as he walked away.

Felicity winced. “I’m sorry. I’m sure he doesn’t mean to be…”

“Oh. I know. It’s just hard. I love Tommy,” Laurel said softly. “But there’s an imprint on my heart where Oliver used to be, and sometimes it still twinges. I imagine it’s the same for him. But we both agreed, we’re not ever going down that road again.”

“Oh.” Felicity raised her hands. “No. If you’re thinking that… no.”

Laurel laughed. “That’s what you said the last time that I saw you.”

Felicity shrugged. “That’s because nothing has changed.”

Laurel cleared her throat. “I was sorry to miss meeting Maddie and Matthew. From what I hear from the other guests, they were charming and adorable.”

“Well, I think so.” Felicity sipped again. “But then again I am extremely biased.”

**

Oliver had kept an eye on Laurel and Felicity while he chatted with Tommy, who was filling him in on all the progress at the club.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, man,” Tommy said. “Looks to me like the ex and the missus are getting along just fine.”

“What?”

“The ex and missus.” Tommy shrugged. “I just figure it’s time we all stop tiptoeing around it, right?
You dated Laurel. And then you … didn’t. And the way you look at Felicity…”

“I look at Felicity like what?”

“I don’t know. You look at her like there’s something there. Something more than just, you know… baby mama feels.”

Oliver winced. “Can we… not. I mean, let’s not reduce her to that, okay? It’s bad enough the media is doing it.”

“No,” Tommy waved his hand. “I get where you’re coming from. I can totally be respectful. I’m just wondering if there’s more there than you’re allowing yourself to think about.”

“Tommy, I’m just trying to make it through the day without fucking my kids up for life.”

“What would fuck them up for life if you had like a good, functional relationship in a romantic capacity with their mother?”

“Show me an instance in which I was able to have a good, functional romantic relationship with anybody and I will understand what you’re saying,” Oliver said. “I was in love with Laurel. I was. I loved her -- more than I ever loved anything. And instead of honoring that, instead of showing her that, I slept with her sister and got Sara killed. So maybe there’s something there with Felicity. But maybe I don’t deserve her. Maybe I owe it to Felicity to just -- be a friend. I know how to be a good friend.”

“Five years is a long time, buddy, and you’ve changed a lot on the island. Maybe you could handle it this time.”

Oliver shook his head. “There are kids involved, Tommy. I can’t take a risk on maybe.”

“Well, this is just fucking depressing,” Tommy said. “I’m going to need some more wine.”

“Speaking of wine, have you seen Thea? I saw her when we first walked in here but I haven’t seen her since,” Oliver said.
“No,” Tommy said, looking around. “I don’t see her anywhere.”

“I’m going to have to catch you later,” Oliver said. “Good talk, buddy.”

“Yeah, sure.”

He couldn’t resist -- Felicity might have seen Thea and so he crossed the room to her, bending to ask her if she’d seen his sister. And he caught a hint of the perfume he’d noticed that she wore only on rare occasions. He liked it, but he liked how she smelled normally more. Laurel gave him a piercing look, like she could see right through him and he wondered if he was that obvious with everyone or just the people he’d grown up with.

As soon as Oliver heard that Thea had gone up the stairs with her boyfriend, he set his face and headed up the stairs himself.

**

Felicity watched Oliver head up the stairs and shook her head. “Well, that’s going to end in tears.”

“You think?” Laurel asked.

“He just can’t quite wrap his head around the fact that she’s seventeen and indulging in all of the behavior that he indulged in at seventeen,” Felicity said. “Double standards at work.”

“Cheers to the patriarchy,” Laurel muttered, and they clinked glasses.

“I think I’m going to go check on the kids for a second,” Felicity said. “They should be going to bed right about now.”

“Absolutely,” Laurel said. “I think I see an old classmate. I’ll just go and say hello.”
Felicity fought the urge to take her shoes off as she took the stairs slowly so that she wouldn’t fall down them. Her feet were crying but it couldn’t be denied that she looked fabulous. She noticed Oliver turned down the hallway that would lead to Thea’s bedroom. She went the other way, hoping to avoid hearing their inevitable fight.

She was about to round a corner when she heard Moira.

“You lied to me,” she was saying. “You told me that you were going to let this go.”

“Is that what you think of me?” It was obviously Walter’s voice. Felicity turned to walk the other direction until she caught the next sentence. “You think I would find out about the Queen’s Gambit and I wouldn’t avenge my best friend’s murder?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh shit,” she said under her breath. “Oh… bucketloads of shit.”

“You embezzled from the company!” Walter was saying. “And you lied to me.”

“I was trying to keep you safe!” Moira said. “That’s all I’ve ever done. Everything I do is to keep everyone in this family safe.”

“Safe from who? Safe from what?” Walter’s voice turned pleading. Felicity covered her mouth and pressed her body against the wall.

“Dangerous people. People that you’ve made very upset, Walter.”

“If you tell me who then I can help you fight them, Moira. Please.”

“We can’t fight them,” Moira said, her voice tired and defeated. “I am them.”

Felicity’s heart pounded in her chest. Slowly, she turned to walk the other way, slipping out of her shoes and thanking God there was carpet underneath of her feet. She had to tell Oliver.

No. Telling Oliver would be a bad idea. What would Oliver do, knowing that the shipwreck that had
left him deserted had been apparently deliberate. What could he do? Felicity itched for her computer -- maybe with more information she would be able to figure out what to do. If she had all the facts or understood all of the players or…

She nearly ran into Thea who was storming down the hallway. “Your boyfriend is an idiot,” Thea said harshly.

“Wow. Okay.” Felicity’s eyes widened. There was just no escaping drama in this house. “First of all, and I cannot stress this enough, he’s not my boyfriend, and secondly, yes. He is an idiot. You will not get an argument from me.”

“Thank you,” Thea said, and strode past her.

“Oh thank God it ended there,” Felicity muttered. “Oliver?” she called as she passed Thea’s room. “Are you up here? I was going to check on the kids and kiss them goodnight if you wanted to join me.”

Oliver was sitting on Thea’s bed, his hands fisted on his thighs. “She is not fond of me right now,” Oliver said.

“Who? Cause I can think of any number of females in this house who probably are mildly to moderately upset with you right this instant for various reasons.”

“Thea.”

“Yes, well, if I can gather what happened from the context clues, you have just broken up what might have been a tender and intimate moment between her and her boyfriend. She’s seventeen and raring to go, Oliver. Of course she’s pissed at you.”

Oliver raised his eyebrows. “Wow. Not pulling any punches today, are you?”

“I’m starting to develop this headache between my eyes that will not go away,” Felicity said. rubbing her forehead. Because your family is absolutely insane, she thought. “So no, I am not pulling any punches. I am, however, going to take a sanity break and kiss our children goodnight before everyone notices that we’ve both left the party and the story in the paper tomorrow is how we’re getting back together.”
Oliver chuckled. “Yeah -- that might be… that would definitely be good.” He pushed himself off the bed and took her hand as he passed by, squeezing it. “Thanks, Felicity.”

“You’re welcome,” Felicity said, shaking her head. He probably wouldn’t be thanking her if he knew what she had running around in her head.

Then again, what did she know, really, Felicity asked herself. There just wasn’t enough information for her to tell Oliver anything. And she didn’t have any proof. All she had was a book of names and some problems Walter had asked her to look at. That was it.

They walked down the hallway to the twins’ room, pushing the door open. Maddie was asleep. Matthew was staring at the ceiling, singing to himself. Felicity chuckled a little as she crossed the room, sitting down on the side of his bed.

“Having trouble sleeping?” she asked.

“It’s loud,” Matthew said.

“Yeah, buddy, I’m sorry about that,” Oliver said. “I’ll close the door and it will get quiet again up here, okay?”

“Okay,” Matthew said, closing his eyes.

“We just came up here to say goodnight.” Felicity bent and kissed Matthew’s cheek three times. Something she’d been doing since he was a baby. He snuggled down deep into his bed and sighed at her.

“Goodnight, Mama.”

Oliver brushed his hand over Matthew’s head. “Night, Matthew,” he said softly.

“Night, Daddy.”
They repeated the ritual with Maddie, and by the time they were done, Felicity noticed that both twins were fast asleep.

“Do you think he was waiting for us?” Oliver asked.

“Matthew likes his routine,” Felicity answered simply. “It’s likely.”

Oliver shut the bedroom door behind them as they left, but he didn’t move to go downstairs. He leaned up against a hallway wall and sighed.

“You know, this party was supposed to bring everybody together but -- I think we all scattered to different parts of the house as soon as we possibly could,” he said.

“I get the feeling that there’s a --” lot of crazy shit going down right now, Felicity wanted to say, but she settled for, “ -- a lot going on right now, Oliver. You can’t just force a Norman Rockwell painting on people.”

“Norman Rockwell? Is he recent?”

“No. Not by a long shot. God. How are you so…. you all of the time.” Felicity snapped.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Oliver took a step closer to her. “You’ve just been -- kind of…”

“Up and down and all around tonight?” Felicity crossed her arms over her chest. “Maybe that’s because I… I don’t know, Oliver. There’s a lot going on right now.”

“I know. And listen, Felicity. After the holidays, we’re going to work something out. I’ve been having Digg run surveillance on your apartment and I just don’t think going back there is going to be an option, but we’ll figure something out. I know this living with me thing hasn’t been easy but…”

“Oliver. You are not the issue. Most of the time. The kids love it here. They love having their daddy right down the hallway. But it’s hard being a houseguest for so long and, you know what?” Felicity
took a deep breath. “This is not the place to talk about it. You have got a hundred guests downstairs that want to talk to you and I spent a lot of money on this dress -- too much money to stand upstairs in a hallway hiding from people.”

“Oliver.” Diggle stood at the end of the hallway. “I’m afraid we’ve got a situation.”

Felicity smiled. “I’ll let you take care of that, then,” she said. “And I’ll meet you downstairs?”

“Yes,” Oliver said, and he turned to give Digg his complete attention. Felicity walked to the end of the hallway, and ducked into a bathroom, leaving the door cracked. She could faintly hear what was being said on the other end of a hallway.

“The dark archer -- he’s got hostages, Oliver. He says if the vigilante doesn’t show up to rescue them, he’s going to start killing them off one by one.”

“Then I don’t have much choice, do I? Make my apologies to Felicity, Diggle.”

“The police are there. They can handle this, Oliver.”

“He wants me, he’s going to get me.”

“Oliver, this guy is dangerous.”

“Not even half as dangerous as some of the things on the island,” Oliver snapped, “and I survived there for five years.”

Well, Felicity thought, as she let the door snick close all the way and heard Oliver walk past her. That was… more information to process.

**

Oliver laid his hand flat on the door of his children’s bedroom for just a second, closing his eyes. He didn’t pray anymore -- he never had to begin with, except when he’d been dying and the notion of
deity had been briefly comforting, but he took a minute to center himself, the way Shado had taught him, to dig down deep and find his strength.

And then he was rushing through the city on his motorcycle to the address that had scrolled across the screen. Getting to the hostages was easy enough. Getting them to the roof in one piece was far easier than he anticipated.

That was the last thing that was easy about that particular night.

**

Felicity sank to the floor and held her head in her hands. Oliver was the vigilante.

Oliver. Who was, among other things, the father of her children, was also the masked vigilante that went around killing people from a list. She drew in a deep breath and let it out. Not five minutes ago they’d been kissing their children good night, and now this.

“This house is going to drive me crazy,” she said to herself. “These people are going to drive me crazy.”

She stood up, brushing her hands on her dress. The moment of self-pity was over. Getting information and drawing conclusions had never been hard for her -- there were very few mysteries she couldn’t solve with some time and patience and effort, and she’d found a pretty big piece of the Oliver Queen puzzle with this vigilante thing.

Felicity stared herself in the mirror, not really seeing what was in front of her. The vigilante, she thought, targeted people on the list. The list that Walter gave her. The list of people with no solid connections to each other.

Which meant -- what, exactly? Oliver had been gone for five years and the vigilante activity started pretty much right after he got back and oh that little shit.

She gritted her teeth. It was obvious now that he’d very likely arranged to be exonerated, which meant someone else had to be wearing the Hood while he was at that party the night the charges had been cleared. Who would Oliver trust with something like that?
Tommy Merlyn was a close friend, obviously, but she didn’t think he was the type to lurk in the shadows or have the muscle to be able to defend himself if it came to that, which left…. the only other person who was consistently in Oliver’s company, who was much more than a driver, who sometimes acted as an assistant.

“John Diggle,” she said, straightening her spine out. “He’s in on it.”

And he might just be willing to provide her with some answers, she thought. It was a long shot but it was one she was going to have to take.

She left the bathroom, a woman on a mission, only to find John waiting for her.

“Hi, Felicity.”

“John.” Felicity lifted her hand to her heart. “You scared me to death.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Nervous for some reason, Felicity?”

“I am perfectly fine. I have no reason to be nervous at all,” Felicity said.

“Is that how you want to play this?” Diggle asked. “I saw that the door was cracked, Felicity.”

“Okay, listen. In my defense, Oliver has been acting really strangely, since, well, you know… ever. And I can’t be around someone acting that weird and not try to figure it out, you know? I’m not wired that way. And Oliver should know that.”

“I think he does, on some level. See, normally, he would have caught something like that. But he’s been a little distracted by someone else trying to frame him for murders he didn’t commit.”

Felicity swallowed. “I’m sure that’s very distracting.”
Diggle crossed his arms over his chest. “So I guess I’ve got to ask you what you plan to do, now that you know.”

“I don’t have enough information to make an informed decision,” Felicity said. “I mean -- I don’t know why he’s doing the things he’s doing, if he’s got a good reason at all. Or if he’s just completely insane.”

John lifted both corners of his mouth, an expression he used when he thought he was supposed to smile. “He’s not insane, Felicity, and he’s got reasons for doing the things he does. But they aren’t my place to give you.”

Felicity sighed. “We’re just -- stuck. Half of my instincts are screaming at me to take my children and run, to take them the furthest point away from this family that I possibly can. I look around me and it all seems to be crumbling. But I can’t go back now.”

“Hey, everyone’s family is a little crazy,” Diggle said. “The Queens just do everything…. on a larger scale.”

Felicity chuckled. “You’re telling me.”

Diggle’s phone rang. “I’ve got to take this. It’s Oliver.”

“Wait. He calls you while he’s….”


Felicity’s heart started to race. “He’s in bad shape? What does that mean?”

“It means he’s no longer conscious, Felicity. Just track the phone!” Diggle started to run down the hallway. “Give me a call when you find him!”

**
Oliver hadn’t gotten his ass kicked like that in a long time. He didn’t actually want to think back to the last time he’d had to be stitched together like a pincushion, because that time, he’d done it without sedation at all.

He kept floating in and out of consciousness. And his only thoughts were of pain and remembering to breathe as carefully as he could, and how much his head hurt. He reached for the phone to call Felicity, and then remembered that that would be a terrible idea.

It didn’t seem like it was too long before Diggle appeared and lifted him from the ground into his arms and it was then, in a terrible wrenching swell of pain, that Oliver lost consciousness for good.

**

When he came to again, John Diggle was staring at him. But there was someone else in the room all together.

“Felicity?” He asked, his voice a hoarse whisper. “Digg, what is she…”

“She figured it out, Oliver. Now listen, we don’t have much time.” Diggle ran through his list of injuries and their cover story. “I’m going to go get the rest of the crew,” he said. “I’ll give you two a moment alone.”

“Felicity, I…”

“Save it,” Felicity said, but she wasn’t being cold or harsh. It was more like she was resigned. “You’ve got to get better so I can absolutely kill you dead, Oliver Queen.”

“You don’t… sound that angry. So… we’re okay?”

Felicity shook her head. “No. We are the farthest thing from okay I can possibly contemplate. I’m just so mad at you I can’t bring myself to even deal with you right now.”

“Oh.”
“Here comes your family.” Felicity didn’t look over her shoulder at him as she left the room. But Oliver felt as though she’d punched him in the stomach.


Raiza held on to both of the Queen children’s hands in her own while the elevator worked its way slowly up several floors to the private wing of the hospital. Ms. Felicity had sounded so tired on the phone, and Mr. Oliver was surely exhausted and in a lot of pain…So. She had done what she thought was best, bundling the children up in pajamas and coats and boots, putting them in the back of her reliable sedan, and bringing them here.

To their family.

“Are we going to see Mama?” Matthew asked. It wasn’t the first time.

“Yes, I believe so,” Raiza said. “She will be up here with your father, trying to make sure he is resting. We’re just going to say hello and give them hugs.”

“It’s a long way to go to give a hug,” Maddie said, rubbing her eyes with her free hand.

“Sometimes, my dear, we go as far as we need to go for the ones we love. Especially Mommies and Daddies who need to see their little ones, hm?” Raiza said, squeezing her hand.
The doors of the elevator chimed and slid open. Raiza immediately spotted Thea, sitting on a bench outside of the room Oliver was in.

“Aunt Thea!” Matthew shouted.

She lifted her head and wiped tears from her eyes. “Hey, you guys, what are you up to?”

“We’re just here to give everyone goodnight hugs and kisses,” Raiza said. “Especially people who need them.”

“Do you need a goodnight hug and kiss, Aunt Thea?” Maddie asked seriously.

“Baby, I would love that more than anything in the world. Yes.”

Maddie and Matthew launched themselves at Thea, who caught them and brought them close, kissing their cheeks.

Raiza waited until they were done and then gently wrapped her arms around Thea as well. “You will be all right, dumpling. You will find the strength somewhere.”

Thea laughed and sobbed at the same time. “I think… I’m going to go try and find Mom, let her know that you guys are here. Felicity’s in with Oliver. They’re very busy not talking to each other so it should be all right for you to go in.”

Raiza nodded, and knocked briskly on Oliver’s door before she opened it. “Ms. Felicity? Mr. Oliver? You have visitors here to see you.”

She stepped aside and let Maddie and Matthew run in the room. Felicity’s eyes, Raiza could see, immediately filled with tears and she kissed both of their cheeks repeatedly.

“Raiza… how can I… I mean… Thank you so much,” Felicity said. “I didn’t even realize how badly I wanted them with me until just now.”
“A mother always wants her children in the toughest times,” Raiza said softly, and she walked over to Oliver’s bed and laid a hand on his cheek. “Are you feeling well, Mr. Oliver?”

“No,” he said honestly. “But… I am very glad to see you. And the kids.”

“No more of that awful bike, Mr. Oliver,” Raiza said firmly.

“I think we can all agree on that, at least,” Felicity said, lifting Matthew up onto the bed. “You can hug him, but gently. Daddy’s ribs are broken.”

Raiza took a step back and watched the child of her heart love on his own babies. Felicity sat down on the other side, and lifted Maddie into her lap. What a pretty picture of a family they made, Raiza thought -- and perhaps someday they truly would be. They were certainly moving in that direction now.

Raiza quietly turned to go.

“Wait!” Oliver called in Russian. “Raiza… thank you for coming. For bringing my children to me. You always know what my heart needs.”

“It is a good heart, Mr. Oliver,” Raiza said in the same language. “You should listen to it more often.”

Oliver chuckled and kissed Matthew’s forehead. Raiza turned and this time really did leave. Perhaps there was something she could do to help Moira…
part vii: "hiatus (part i/iii)"

Chapter Summary

Walter is abducted and Oliver feels like the world is falling apart all around him.

Chapter Notes

As previously discussed, chapters from here on out will be a touch shorter than they were in the beginning. That is because I prefer to do consistent and more frequent updates for you guys instead of getting huge chapters once a month while I'm in school.

I'm sorry about that! If I were writing this in the summer you would be getting massive chapters on a consistent basis but that's not sustainable for me right now. (It would still be the same story, for the record. I'm not cutting anything out. I'm just dividing the story up differently.)

Also -- there will be a drop in the angst level in the next chapter, you guys!

Felicity left Oliver's hospital room and found a seat in the hallway, her hands fisted on top of her thighs as she focused on breathing in and out. Since nearly the beginning of the evening, she had been running on adrenaline and now, with that all behind her, she was left feeling shaky and weak.

She reached for her cell phone, about to call her mother and tell her she would be showing up on her front door, when Walter appeared in her field of vision. Did all of the Queen family members move like cats? Was that a requirement of joining the family.

"Hello, Felicity," Walter said. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

She shook head -- she could think of no reason that wouldn't sound petulant to say otherwise.

"You know," Walter said, after a long pause, "when Oliver first told Moira and I about you and the children... I thought to myself... this can come to no good. I... knew Oliver when he was a boy, and I knew, in shaky detail from what the doctors could tell us, what he had been through on the island had been... horrific. And I thought what a rotten deal this must be for everyone -- every child deserves a parent who can be present and loving and I doubted very seriously that Oliver was that. And then... I watched him change. He has certainly come farther than I ever would have anticipated."
Felicity sighed. "He's still..." dressing up like vigilante and murdering people in cold blood, she thought, but went with, "he's still just so... selfish. He got on that bike tonight and he didn't think about what the cost would be to all of us if he wasn't here tomorrow."

"It's not fair of me to ask this and I know that if Moira or Thea heard me say it, then they would be very cross with me indeed, but I must ask you to consider remaining at the Queen mansion for a time. The holidays are always hard for them and I can't imagine it will be much better for Oliver. He will have to... adjust to celebrating without his father as well. Whatever the tensions between you and Oliver, I have no doubts that you two will work them out and come to some amenable resolution and I believe your presence, and the presence of Madelyn and Matthew, would ease some of the sadness they find so inherent in the season."

Felicity looked up at him, words on the tip of her tongue, questions she wanted to ask him, but she wasn't supposed to have overheard what she had overheard. So she couldn't ask him why he cared so much about the woman he was married to when he suspected, apparently, that she had played a role in the conspiracy that had resulted in the death of Robert Queen. She couldn't ask him if life now was always going to be so... tumultuous or if this was something abnormal for the Queens.

All she could do was think about what he was saying. "It's too late to pull back from Oliver now. I don't want to confuse Maddie or Matthew. Oliver is their father and they deserve to have a relationship with him. I can't force him to make choices I agree with. I won't go back on the deal we had agreed to before -- I will stay at the mansion until Christmas, then the kids and I are going to Coast City, as planned. When we get back, we can talk about what happens moving forward."

"Of course." Walter laid a hand on her shoulder. "You've carried a great weight for most of your adult life and learning to trust someone else to help you carry it is quite a task. You are doing admirably, Felicity."

Felicity nodded and whispered a thank you. Walter got up and smiled at her. "I am just going to go downstairs to grab a quick cup of coffee."

"Of course," Felicity said, not knowing that that was the last time she would see Walter in quite some time. She dialed the Queen family mansion and waited patiently for Raiza to pick up so she could check on the kids.

“Hey,” she said, “it’s Felicity. Just calling to check on Maddie and Matthew.”
“Oh good!” Raiza said. “They were about to go to sleep. I told them I would put you on the phone when you called. How is Mr. Oliver?”

“It appears that he will live.”

“I think we should burn that motorcycle, Ms. Felicity.”

Felicity laughed and laid her head back against the wall. “I think so too.”

“You tell him that it is a toy for men without children.”

“I don’t think he’s going to listen to me on that particular issue,” Felicity said. “But I will do my best.”

“Mr. Oliver is a very bright boy but he can be very stubborn sometimes. All right, all right. Ms. Maddie and Mr. Matthew would like to talk to you.”

“Okay.” Felicity felt her eyes, embarrassingly, welling up with tears as soon as she heard Matthew’s piping voice.

“Hi, Mama!”

“Hi baby,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“We made playdough!” he shouted. “And I got it all over and Ms. Raiza made me cleaned it up.”

“Well, that’s good,” Felicity said. “If you make a mess you should clean it up, right?”

“Yes. When are you coming home?”

“I’m just going to stay a little bit longer and talk to Daddy one more time and then I’ll be home,
okay? I’ll kiss you goodnight when I get home.”

“When is Daddy coming home?”

“He has to stay here all night so the doctors can watch him. He will be okay, but he’s got a lot of owies.”

“Okay,” Matthew said. “Maddie wants to talk to you!”

Felicity chatted with Maddie for a few minutes, mostly repeating what she told Matthew and then, when she hung up the phone, she stood up and wiped her eyes.

Moira stepped out of Oliver’s room and zeroed in on Felicity.

“I was just looking for Walter. Are you okay, dear?”

“It’s just been a really long day,” Felicity said. “And I miss my babies. You know how it is.”

Moira’s face softened and she opened her arms up. “Oh, honey. I know exactly how that goes.”

Felicity didn’t know how she felt, exactly, about Moira, and what she might or might not have done, exactly, but she couldn’t deny Moira Queen gave truly excellent hugs.

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Oliver took the peppermint candy cane Thea offered him with a smile. “Hey, wanna race?”

“Absolutely.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “No cheating.”
“I don’t cheat,” Thea said. “Ready… set… go!”

Oliver watched her like a hawk, and sure enough, a minute and thirty seconds in, Thea started to chew. “Hey!”

“What? I’m bored of this now,” Thea said, sitting on the edge of his bed. “I want to talk about something that matters.”

“I’m on so many pain-killers right now, Thea…” Oliver shifted uncomfortably on the bed, “and now is when you want to talk about something that matters?”

“Yes. Because you might be honest with me now.”

Oliver winced. “Thea…”

“Don’t ‘Thea’ me, Oliver. When is this going to stop?”

Oliver narrowed his eyes at her. “What do you mean?”

“I just mean -- I figured when the kids show up you would really come back to us, you know? Like you’d snap out of this… world you’ve been living in and come and really just… be part of our family, you know? But you walked out on the Christmas party you insisted you wanted to have for them. And you hop on your bike and what? Almost die.”

“Thea, I swear, I wasn’t trying to -- “ Oliver sighed. “I don’t know.”

“I want you to be around, Oliver. You just got back. You’ve got kids now that need you. I need you. Life was hard without my big brother around to piss me off and tell me I’m doing everything wrong.”

“I don’t… do that,” Oliver protested weakly.
“Please just promise me that you’re going to be more careful from here on out. I need you to stick around.”

Oliver reached up and brushed a tear off of Thea’s face. “Thea, I promise. I’ll be more careful, okay?”

There was a rap on the door, and Felicity opened it, stepping inside. “Hi.”

Oliver smiled up at Thea. “Listen, do you mind giving us some space?”

Thea nodded. “I’ll just go check on Mom and Walter.”

Felicity smiled weakly at her and waited until the door shut behind her before she raised her eyes to look at Oliver.

“So.” Oliver cleared his throat. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Felicity stayed on the other side of the room. “I just keep thinking -- you’re not insane, and you’re not stupid. So you’ve got to have a good reason for… all of this.”

"I think you know me well enough by now to know that I wouldn't do this if I thought I had a choice."

Felicity shook her head. "That's the thing, Oliver... I mean, if I think about it, I don't know you that well at all. But even... knowing this, somehow, I feel like I can trust you. Like I should trust you."

"Is there something you want to tell me?" Oliver asked, struggling to sit up.

"Oh, for God's sake lay still," Felicity snapped. "You're going to pull a stitch or something."

Oliver's lips twitched. He wanted to smile. He wanted to say something light and funny about how stitches were a luxury and pulling one out wouldn't be the worst thing that ever happened to him, but he knew that she wouldn't react well to that from him right now so he took a deep breath and then
winced at the pull his ribs.

"Okay," he said under his breath, "that hurt."

"Of course it did, you lunatic," Felicity said, tiredly. "You broke how many ribs?"

"Three. Give or take," Oliver said. "I would relax if I didn't have to strain to look at you."

Felicity sighed and crossed the room, pulling up a chair next to his bedside. She folded her hands in her lap. "Listen, I think we should table the discussion about how maybe you should have mentioned this to me before and what you were thinking chasing down a lunatic all by yourself and what it means for this... family that we're trying to paste together, all right? Because I don't want to have that conversation with you while you're high on painkillers."

"Felicity, I didn't have a choice. He was going to hurt people."

"I know. I know that much. That's why I'm still here. You'll notice I didn't slap you across the face and march out of here to collect our children and leave you behind forever, right?"

Oliver did chuckle then, cursing when even that hurt. "Yeah," he said, closing his eyes, "I noticed that much."

"But we probably don't have a lot of time alone together, so I think you should tell me where you go the list."

Oliver's eyes snapped open. "Excuse me, what?"

"Don't play dumb with me, Oliver Queen. I know better than that. The list of people you're using to figure out who to target."

"How do you know there's a list?" Oliver asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Because just a few nights ago, your stepfather gave me a book filled with names. It took me a while
to figure out why they were all so familiar to me. And then it came to me -- they had all been targets of the vigilante."

Oliver felt like his chest was collapsing. He couldn't draw a breath. "Walter. Gave you a book filled with names.";

"Yes. I feel like that part of the story was quite clear."

"Did he say where he got it?"

Felicity shook her head. "Not specifically. He mentioned that it was Moira's -- he had me look into something else for him, too."

Oliver's head was spinning. What was his mother doing with a copy of the list? He had thought for sure that his father had authored it. That there had only been one. That it had been meant for his eyes specifically.

"What else?" Oliver asked.

"Oliver, you really don't look so good."

"I'll be fine," Oliver said, clenching his teeth.

"You don't look fine. Do you want me to get your morphine pump?"

"Maybe after you tell me what else Walter had you look into."

Felicity sighed and seemed to study her hands. "You aren't going to like it. I wasn't particularly fond of it, either. But then I don't like getting in the middle of... things. Deep-seated issues having to do with my mom's first marriage and... anyway. You didn't want a sidebar. You wanted the truth."

"That would be my preference," Oliver hissed. Between the shocking revelations and the pain that was eating away at the edge of every thought in his head, his patience was wearing thin.
"There was... an accounting discrepancy. An unaccounted for amount of money that your mom claimed was to help a friend start a business. Walter... I don't think he believed her. He had me look into it for him."

"And?"

"I guess he was right to be suspicious because Moira's story didn't check out -- the money was used to set up a shell corporation that purchased a warehouse in Starling City, and that's it."

"What was in it, did you ever find out?" Felicity shook her head. "But I overheard something else... An argument tonight. Whatever was in that warehouse, it had something to do with the Queen’s Gambit. And your mom... she sounded scared."

It was at that moment that Diggle stepped in the room. "Sorry to interrupt, guys, but we've got a little bit of a situation. It appears Mr. Steele has been abducted from the hospital."

"What?" Felicity stood up. "What is going on?"

"My guys are on it," Diggle said. "A security guard saw the struggle, called for back up and tried to intervene. He's being rushed to the trauma center as we speak. Oliver, we've got to treat this as a hostile situation. At least for the next little bit, no one who isn't family or medical staff will be allowed on his floor."

"I trust you," Oliver said evenly. "Do what you need to do to keep us safe."

Felicity reached for Oliver's hand, and Oliver took it, squeezing it, taking what little comfort he could find in the gesture. He barely heard Diggle leave the room. Once he did, Oliver reached for the remote to the morphine pump and threw it across the room as hard as he could.

"Fuck!" The word exploded from his lips and tasted good on his tongue. "Fuck this... whole stupid fucking life."

Felicity watched him, unmoving, while he let all of the vile words inside of his head spew out. He was so... frustrated. He couldn't get up and go help -- he couldn't track down his stepfather, not like
this. He couldn't even move. And now he knew that Walter had been investigating his mother, that his mother probably had something to hide...

"My father said," Oliver began through gritted teeth, "that he had failed this city. That we had made our money on the backs of the poor and the broken, that we weren't alone. He told me there were a host of others like him that were conspiring to bring about the ruin of Starling City."

"So he gave you the list," Felicity whispered.

"He gave me the fucking list," Oliver said. "He told me that I had to live so that I could be a better man than he was. And then he shot himself in the fucking head so that I would have a shot to live because there wasn't enough food and there wasn't enough water for all of us on the raft to last long."

Felicity went white. "Oliver..."

"And now... THIS? I try to do the right thing -- I try to, somehow, atone for my family's sins. I try to keep everyone safe. I've been holding on with white knuckles, Felicity, and all along... my mother's hiding secrets, Walter's hiding things... I just don't know what to believe anymore. I don't know who to trust."

Felicity pushed her glasses up her nose. "You know --when I found out I was pregnant... there wasn't a single person in the world who thought it was a good idea for me to keep my babies. Especially once we found out there were two."

Oliver's eyes snapped over to her. She was fingering the blanket that covered Oliver's legs.

"Well-intentioned doctors and nurses... my mom, my dad -- he's really my step dad but I just call him Dad cause that's what you call the person who stepped up when he didn't have to and just generally rocked the parental thing --they all said I should consider the a's. Adoption. Abortion." Felicity shook her head. "I couldn't do it. I know it's not the same for everyone, but I was already crazy, stupid in love with our children, Oliver. I dug down deep and I stood my ground, and honestly, that's the thing in my life I am the most proud of. I didn't let anyone else push me around. I found the strength of will to make it through somehow."

"So what's the point here? I need to find strength of will?"
"No. I think you have that in spades." Felicity shrugged. "I'm saying maybe you don't need to white
knuckle so much. I'm saying when you feel like you're failing and you don't deserve what your
father did for you -- I just think about Maddie and Matthew. And how they needed their father. And
they did, Oliver -- they're so much better for having you around. I think about all those people who
are going home to their families. I think about a man who could be a hero. I think we could make a
really good team, Oliver. I think we make a great one already. Why don't you let me put my brain to
work on the Walter thing?"

"Felicity..."

"He was abducted. Diggle was very specific about that language. Abductions are usually purposeful
crimes -- there's an end goal. The kidnappers want something. We need to figure out what that is."

Oliver raised his eyebrows at her.

"We are ignoring the fact that most abductions end violently," Felicity said firmly.

"Oh we are, huh?"

"Yes." Felicity drew out her phone and immediately started to tap on it.

"I don't want you to get hurt. We have to consider the very real possibility that whatever he was
looking into about my mom got him abducted. Felicity... are you listening?"

"Mm, yes."

"Felicity."

“I promise. We’ll let Diggle do his job.” Felicity lifted her head. “But in the meantime, I’ll start doing
some things that I know might be able to help him. Discreetly, of course.”

Oliver laid his head back on the pillow and let silence fall over the pair of them until the door opened
and Raisa stepped in.
His heart lurched in his chest. There they were. His children. Safe, and secure, and here. And instead of being worried that he was about to let it all fall apart, like perhaps he should have been... he felt like he could do anything. When Matthew climbed up on the bed beside him and laid one of his little hands on his face, Oliver nearly cried.

The whole world was falling apart around him and nothing was right in it at all.

Except Maddie and Matthew.

And Felicity.

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Moira stood outside the room and watched Oliver with his children, her arms wrapped around her stomach. She hadn’t been able to stop crying. Not since the reports had come in. All of her worst nightmares were slowly coming true. She hadn’t been able to get Walter to back off, as hard as she had tried, and he’d been snatched away from her when things between them were still... tenuous at best.

It was Malcolm Merlyn at his worst. He knew exactly where her heart lie -- the world could crumple at her feet. She just wanted her children safe.

She knew the instant he appeared behind her.

“I heard on the news, Moira, I’m so sorry.”

“About which part? My son nearly dying, or you absconding with my husband?”

She turned just in time to see the sympathetic smile slowly fade away from Malcolm’s too-handsome face. He was too much everything, she often thought. Too much passion. Too much rage. Too much jealousy.
But she wouldn’t bend for him. She refused to let him see how scared she was. She straightened her spine and put on her best face.

“You were warned, Moira. You couldn’t control Walter, and there was a consequence. You can have him back as soon as we’re done.”

“And how many people have to die so that you can have your vengeance?”

Malcolm shot her a look. “I am going to assume that you have learned your lesson, Moira. There won’t be any cold feet from you, will there?”

Moira swallowed. “No. I know my part.”

“Good.” Malcolm took a step forward and peeked through the window. “Beautiful grandchildren you have there, Moira.”

“I’m well aware,” Moira said.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing, Moira, and they’ll stay that way.” Malcolm turned away from her and walked down the hallway -- more slowly and more measured than he would normally.

Moira let out a shaky breath and closed her eyes.

“Mom? What was Malcolm Merlyn doing here?” Thea asked, coming out of the ladies’ room from down the hallway.

“He was in the neighborhood and heard we were having a rough night of it,” Moira said, her voice dull and hollow even in her own ears. “He stopped by to offer his support.”

“Huh.” Thea clearly wasn’t buying it and muttered something under her breath.
“What was that?” Moira asked, irritation spiking.

“What was that?” Thea said. “Anything from Mr. Diggle or the security team?”

Moira didn’t look at her phone. She knew what the answer would be. Malcolm’s men were too good to leave anything behind.

“No, baby, I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Thea said. “Hey Mom?”

“Yes?”

“He’s going to be okay.”

Moira nodded, her stomach turning over and over. “Thank you, Thea.”

“Why don’t you let the security team take you home?” Thea asked. “There’s nothing you can do here.”

“What about you?”

Thea shrugged. “I don’t know. I want to be here for Oliver.”

Moira nodded. “Me too.”

“Okay then,” Thea said, and she took a seat on the bench again. “Why don’t you come sit with me?”

So Moira sat on the uncomfortable bench, a thought running through her head of donating some
more comfortable furniture to the hospital, laid her head on Thea’s shoulder, and closed her eyes.

“Someday it’ll be some other family’s turn to have a crappy day,” Thea said, running her hand through Moira’s hair.

Moira smiled weakly. She knew that day was coming way too fast.
Part VII: "Hiatus" (Part II/III)

Chapter Summary

Christmas Eve arrives at the Queen household, but nobody is feeling very festive. Oliver and Felicity must make decisions about how they want to proceed in the future, and Thea is slowly breaking down.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the kind comments and kudos you left on the previous chapter! I just can’t believe how awesome and supportive this community is!

Come say hi to me on my Tumblr! storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com

Oliver came home from the hospital on Christmas Eve. With Walter still missing, the decorations and bright lights that covered nearly every inch of the mansion seemed falsely cheerful. He tried not to let his misery show as Felicity helped him out of the backseat of the limo. But it was apparently obvious.

“You’ve got a grumpy face,” Felicity said under her breath as they made their way slowly up the walk to the front door.

“I do?”

“Yes. It’s not that bad, Oliver. We’re going to find Walter. We’re going to stop this… person, whoever he is, from hurting anybody else, and we’re going to do it in a safe and sane manner once you have fully recovered,” Felicity said firmly. “But first we’re going to have Christmas with our children. Who are very excited to see you, by the way, so why don’t you try to smile?”

Oliver let out a short laugh. He would have never guessed that she had this side to her until the last few weeks. She seemed to take every punch thrown at her like a champion. “Okay. I guess I can. For the kids.”

“That’s all I ask.” Felicity opened the door and Oliver would swear two streaks of pure energy flew
at him. “Matthew! Maddie! Careful!”

It was too late. They hit him like a freight train. Oliver tried to hide his grimace as his sore core muscles and ribs protested, but he still bent to wrap them in a hug.

“You made it in time for Santa Claus!” Madelyn said, her eyes wide. “He knows where to find us, right Mama?”

“Yes, he does,” Felicity said. “We sent him several e-mails, just to be sure. Don’t you remember?”

Madelyn turned to look at Matthew, who nodded reassuringly.

“So there you go,” Felicity said. “Santa will know how to find you.”

“Good. Raisa says we can make cookies with her if we want – she says Daddy used to leave cookies out for Santa Claus.”

“Oh yeah.” Oliver rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I did.”

“You want to help?” Matthew asked. “Raisa’s got lots of frosting.”

“Maybe when I get done upstairs, buddy,” Oliver said, looking at the impressive staircase with trepidation. Still. He wanted an uninterrupted shower and sweatpants. And another pain pill.

Moira came down the stairs, dressed in a pair of silk pajamas. Felicity patted his arm and took the kids’ hands to let them lead her off to the kitchen.

“Felicity got you home all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, we managed just fine,” Oliver said, smiling at her. “How are you feeling today?”
Moira shook her head. “I’m fine, Oliver. I’m not the one with broken ribs.”

“Mmhmm,” Oliver said. Thea’s door opened and she came down the stairs as well. She shook her head at Oliver, and he decided he would wait and see what Thea had to say before he asked any more questions. “I was just going to go up the stairs and take a shower.”

“Do you really think that’s the best…” At Oliver’s look, Moira trailed off. “Yes, of course,” she said, “you know your own limits better than anyone else, I suppose.”

Oliver wanted to tell her that he learned the value of a complete recovery on the island – he’d learned the hard way that not allowing himself time to heal was dangerous, but he didn’t want to revisit that particular episode on the island, and he didn’t want to see her face when he told her that story. So he shut the door firmly in his mind and nodded. “I’ll be fine, Mom. I’ll holler if I need help.”

“What are Maddie and Matthew up to?” Thea asked. “I thought I heard them down here.”

“They’re in the kitchen with Raisa and Felicity making Christmas cookies,” Oliver said.

“We will miss them while they’re gone,” Thea said softly.

“Oh yeah,” Oliver said. “I guess I just… forgot that they were going to Coast City after Christmas.”

“I think it will be good for them,” Thea said. “They’re good kids, and Felicity’s a good mom, but when you’re not used to living in this goldfish bowl it can be kind of…”

“Limiting?” Oliver asked.

“Yeah, exactly. Honestly I hope your kids just – escape all of this completely, you know? I think maybe it’s a good thing they’ve got Felicity to make sure they stay grounded.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes. “Are you okay, Thea?”

“I’m just as fine as you are,” Thea said, brushing past him.
“I’ve got three broken ribs!” Oliver called after her, as he slowly made his way up the stairs.

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Felicity watched Raisa slowly add dye to a batch of frosting, turning it a bright shade of red. “Is Mr. Oliver going to help?” she asked.

“I think he wanted to catch a shower first,” Felicity said. “He’ll be down afterwards, if he doesn’t fall asleep.”

Matthew wrinkled his nose. “’S not naptime, Mama.”

“No, it’s not, but Daddy’s still hurt, so his body needs lots of sleep so it can repair itself,” Felicity said. “So if he needs to rest, we’ll let him rest.”

Raisa smiled. “I am just so thankful he is alive. It seems that we are not to be granted peace of mind when it comes to Mr. Oliver. I told Mrs. Queen many times, he seems to enjoy troubling our minds.”

Felicity smiled. “I am beginning to think you might be right.”

The door to the kitchen opened and Thea stepped in. “Ooooh, I smell cookies!” she said enthusiastically. But Felicity noticed that her eyes were dull and her skin was pale.

“Hi Aunt Thea!” Maddie nearly shouted from her barstool. Maddie was basically in love with Thea, who shared her love of all things fashion. Matthew waved at her. He was too busy watching the icing take its color to pay too much attention.

“Are you going to help us decorate some cookies for Santa Claus?” Felicity asked.

“I was supposed to go out with some friends, actually,” Thea said.
“Oh, is that why you look so cute?” Felicity asked, smiling at her.

“You really think so?” Thea asked, doing a quick twirl.

“I do. It’s cute. Going to a holiday party?”

“Shane’s dad’s company is having a thing. He invited me to come along as his date.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “Shane, the guy from the Queen family Christmas party?”

“That’s the one. I know Oliver doesn’t like him, but that’s half the fun.”

Felicity might have taken her seriously, if she hadn’t been so tired. Thea clearly was putting on a show, just like the other members of this family, only Felicity hadn’t taken the time to figure out what her deal was. “Call me crazy, but I think Oliver just wants you to be with someone more – hm.” Felicity struggled to find the word. “Articulate?”

“I’m just dating him, I’m absolutely not going to marry him,” Thea said, waving a hand. “Besides, Oliver’s got no room to talk.”

“No argument there,” Felicity said.

“You be careful with this boy,” Raisa said, lifting her spoon. “And the weather is supposed to get bad tonight so be careful on the road, as well.”

“Of course, Raisa,” Thea said, kissing the cook’s cheek and giving her a fond squeeze. “If Mom asks where I’m at, just tell her I have my cell phone on.”

“Wait, Thea, before you go. Call me crazy, but are the pajamas I saw Moira wearing the same ones she was wearing yesterday?” Felicity asked.

Thea sighed and pulled her keys from her bag. “Yeah. I can’t get her to leave her bedroom for most things, and I can’t get her to wear real clothes. I can’t get her to come downstairs and spend some
“Hey.” Felicity took a step forward. “I know, you’re doing the best that you can. Moira will cope… however it is that Moira copes with things. You don’t have to be her parent, you know?”

Raisa nodded, but didn’t say anything when Thea’s eyes filled up with tears.

“I just need her to be my Mom. Just for a second. But I know that’s tough for her. She did this exact same thing when Ollie disappeared the first time. She didn’t go out, she didn’t eat, she slept all the time.”

Felicity pulled Thea into a hug. “You know what? You totally deserve to get out of this house and think about something different.”

“Thanks, Felicity,” Thea said, hugging her back and then wiping her eyes. “You know, I was telling Ollie, I’m really going to miss you guys when you go away.”

“It’ll be just for a couple of weeks, and then we’ll be right down the road in Starling City. You know you can call me anytime you want to,” Felicity offered.

“You know, sometime, I’m going to sit you down and grill you about what happened with my brother all of those years ago.”

Felicity smiled. “It is a very short story.”

Thea shook her head. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

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Oliver forced himself to shower, being careful not to pull on his ribs or get water on his stitches. Everything still ached, but the world looked a little better once he was through. He wrapped a towel around his waist and took a look in the mirror. Running a hand over his chin, he determined that he was looking a little too wild, and began to trim his facial hair.
There was a sharp knock on his door, and Oliver walked over to it without changing – opening the door wider once he saw it was Diggle.

“Hey man, come on in.”

“It probably could have waited until you had pants on.”

“I thought you Army types lost all of your sense of modesty during basic training,” Oliver teased.

“Nah, man, they don’t send us to a deserted island to train with wolves,” Diggle shot back. “I’ve got an update on a couple of things.”

“All right,” Oliver said, heading back to his bathroom to continue shaving.

“The first is the situation with the children and security.”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve located an apartment which we think will be secure enough that Ms. Smoak and the children could live there without fear of harassment by the media. It is, however, probably much more than Ms. Smoak could afford on her current salary.”

Oliver sighed. “She’s just going to have to give up her pride and let me help. She doesn’t want to stay here forever, but having the kids in the constant gaze of the media is something I know for sure she doesn’t want, either.”

“Felicity is logical. Just point out to her that you really should be paying child support anyway.”

“I know,” Oliver said. “She wants to get this whole living situation thing addressed by the time she gets back from Coast City. It’s just going to be hard…”
“To say good-bye? I would think it would be pretty nice to have the kids around all of the time,” Diggle said.

“Yeah.” Oliver rinsed his blade underneath of the water. He wasn’t going to say anymore about the seed of something like panic settling in his gut at the thought of having Matthew and Maddie anywhere other than down the hall from him, where he could keep an eye on them, where he could make sure they were still breathing after his rough days, his touchstone for doing the things he did. Keeping them at the Queen mansion didn’t insure their safety – he knew that. But it did make it easier for him to keep an eye on them.

“I’m sorry, man,” Diggle said, sticking his hands in his pockets. “It’s a rough situation, I know.”

“What was the other thing that you wanted to tell me?”

“No leads, as of yet, when it comes to Walter. But you know the head of security that died a while back?”

“Yeah, we looked into that but we could never find anything solid to indicate it hadn’t been anything other than an accident, right?”

“Right. My contact at Queen Consolidated says Walter had just asked him to look into something… to look into a warehouse. Owned by Tempest.”

“The shell corporation my mother used that Felicity can’t find anything about,” Oliver said.

“That would be the one.” Diggle rocked back on his heels. “I think you should let me go down there, see what I can see.”

Oliver shook his head. “Diggle, it’s too dangerous. It’s like anybody who breathes too hard around this thing ends up accidentally wrecking their car or falling to their deaths.”

“Well, you can’t do it. You’re no Superman. You’re beat to hell and you look it. Why don’t you let me pick up some of the slack?”
“Because it’s Christmas. And I don’t want to have to call Carly or your nephew on Christmas Eve and tell them I’m the reason that you’re not coming home to spend the holiday with them, all right?” Oliver snapped.

“So what. You want to table this over the holidays?”

“Would that be so bad? I want just to take… a minute, Diggle.”

Digg studied Oliver’s face for a few weighty seconds, and then nodded. “All right, Oliver. You can take all the time you need. But you got me involved in this thing, and I’m not giving up. We’re going to figure this out.”

Oliver chuckled. “Felicity said almost the same thing.”

“Speaking of that,” Diggle said, “what’s the plan there?”

“What do you mean, what’s the plan’?”

“You are being deliberately obtuse.”

“Hey man, I failed out of college.”

Diggle sighed. “That doesn’t make you an idiot, any more than those pain pills you aren’t taking don’t make you loopy. Felicity. You’re bringing her in.”

“To be clear, I think she’s bringing herself in more than anything.”

“Oliver. How in the world are we going to keep this girl safe?”

“We have to.” Oliver’s face lost all hint of joviality. “We’ve got to keep her safe, and I’ve got to keep the kids safe, but I don’t think I could do this without her anymore. She’s smarter than the both of us put together and she’s tenacious. I couldn’t say no to her – if I did, she’d just go off and try and figure this all out on her own.”
“Well, I like her,” Diggle said. “And I’m all for having another person around who keeps you honest. But I just wanted to make sure you were thinking with more than just your little brain.”

“Drop it, all right? I just want this whole subject of whether or not I want to sleep with Felicity dropped.” Oliver stood up straight. “I have children with her. I admire her. I respect her.”

“You could sleep with her and respect her,” Diggle suggested.

“Not what I was trying to say,” Oliver said, sighing.

“All right. You want her around, we’ll have her around. You think we can keep her safe? We’ll try our best. But after Christmas we’ve got to hit the ground running, Oliver. Whoever this guy is that beat the crap out of you? He’s willing to stop at nothing to get whatever he wants.”

“Which… we don’t know what that is.”

“Exactly,” Diggle said firmly. “Which is the part that scares the shit out of me.”

Oliver nodded. “I think on that point, we’re agreed.”

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Maddie and Matthew had been persuaded to go to sleep early, and Felicity and Oliver had waited until they were asleep to bring down the mountains of gifts from Santa, which joined the other gifts from Aunt Thea and Walter and Moira.

“I know they feel like they’ve got years to make up for,” Felicity said quietly to Oliver, “but this is ridiculous. We’re going to have to say something next year. I don’t think my apartment can handle all this stuff.”

Oliver nodded. “Hey, about that?”
“Yes?” Felicity asked, finding a seat on a sofa in front of the roaring fire.

Oliver cleared his throat. “Actually, on second thought – do you want a glass of wine?”

“I always want a glass of wine. And given that it’s Christmas Eve, I will take you up on your very kind offer,” Felicity said, a smile on her face.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I am.” Felicity shrugged. “I am worried about Walter, of course – but tomorrow is Christmas, and my babies are safe and happy. I’m about to have a glass of wine on a very comfortable couch which honestly looks like it was in the Beauty and the Beast movie and… yeah. Life, in this moment, is more good than bad.”

Oliver nodded. He walked over to the sidebar and selected a bottle of red. Its cherry-berry aroma hit his nose as he uncorked it and poured it generously into two glasses.

He watched Felicity’s face as she sniffed at it, and closed her eyes. “Hm. I think I almost like the anticipation of a good glass of wine more than the actual drinking of it sometimes… but then I think… no. Nothing compares to that first sip.”

“I didn’t realize you loved wine this much.”

“I developed something of a taste for it in college – a few of my professors would have me over every once in a while – I didn’t have a lot in common with the kids my age. I didn’t before I had kids and I certainly didn’t after. They could go party and get drunk – skip classes, that kind of thing. I had too much on my plate to really enjoy my early twenties in that way.”

Oliver knitted his brow together. “I guess… I hadn’t thought…”

“Oliver, you understand that it’s all right, right?” Felicity looked at him over the top of her glasses. “What is with you Queens and trying to absorb guilt for things which are not your fault? All of it was my choice. And I knew going into it what it was going to do to my peer relationships. I knew what it would do to my relationships with my parents and my professors.”
“And you did it anyway?”

“As previously mentioned – I couldn’t not love them. From the moment I heard their heartbeats. I just knew.”

Oliver sighed as he sat down and tried to hide a groan.

“Did you overdo it today?”

Oliver lifted one side of his mouth in a smile. “You know, you’ve really got that mothering thing down pat.”

“Sorry. I’ll try not to smother you. But you should really be careful. You don’t want to like, puncture a lung.”

“No, I’m aware,” Oliver said, closing his eyes. “I’m very aware.”

“See, you say it like that and I think there’s a story there.”

“There’s always a story,” Oliver said, and left it at that.

“Well, all right then. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Diggle and the security team don’t think going back to your current apartment is a good idea. There are too many vantage points from across the street from which the paparazzi could get pictures, and the security just isn’t that good. Now that it’s known that Maddie and Matthew are Queens, there will always be an underlying worry about the thought of kidnap-for-ransom… there would be no good way to prevent a snatching in your building.”

Felicity blinked. “I am going to need more wine.”

“I’m sorry, Felicity – you know if I could go back and somehow manage to keep their identity a secret, I would…”
“No, I know,” Felicity said. “This is part of it, though. This is part of your life, isn’t it?”

Oliver shrugged. “I think I took my first training on what to do if I ever got grabbed at seven or so?”

“Okay,” Felicity said, her eyes widening. “That’s… frightening.”

“Tommy and I actually took the class together. I think we drove the instructor to retire,” Oliver said with a fond grin.

“I’d believe it.”

“They found a place that they think would be ideal. The security is excellent – gated neighborhood, doorman at each building to check IDs…”

“Whoa. What you’re describing sounds like prison.”

Oliver closed his eyes. “I know it’s… not what you’re used to.”

“I don’t want to live that way,” Felicity said, and he could hear the edge of panic on her voice. “There’s got to be another choice.”

“Stay here,” Oliver said.

“Whoa. Nuh –huh. That is not happening.” Felicity got up, glass of wine still in hand, to walk to the other side of the room. “I can’t just stay here for the next thirteen years, Oliver!”

“If you want to move out, then you have to move somewhere safe. I’m afraid I’ll have to insist on that.”

Felicity’s eyes sparked. “You’ll have to insist on that?”
“Yes! Because I don’t think I could handle it if I didn’t know, in the back of mind, every single second, that the three of you are safe!” Oliver nearly shouted. “Is it too much to ask for you to just—live somewhere safe?”

“Safe is one thing. Prison is another!”

“It wouldn’t be prison. It would be… just a good place for you to be. Digg and I could get there in three minutes if we needed to from the Foundry. If someone did get in, there are cameras everywhere, we could have them identified in minutes…”

Felicity poured another healthy serving of wine into her glass. “Okay, I can see that you’re really scared.”

“It’s not just you that I’m worried about,” Oliver said. “I mean— it’s bad enough that you want to help me with my… side job. Diggle asked me today how I planned to keep you safe – he asked me if I had thought about that at all.”

“Well, that wasn’t very fair of him. Of course you’d thought of that,” Felicity said calmly.

“What?”

“Well, we’re friends, aren’t we? And in a messed up, convoluted way, we’re family now. We’re always going to be connected to each other. And if there’s one thing I’ve noticed about you, Oliver, it’s that you do anything to keep your family safe. So. What’s really going on here.”

Oliver set his glass down on a side table and decided to go for broke. She had already seen him at his most vulnerable – there was nothing he could say now that should shock her.

“I… don’t like the idea of not having the kids here. Or not having you here. The illusion of safety that the mansion provides might be just that: an illusion, but it’s one that’s… firmly embedded in my mind.” Oliver cleared his throat. “Also, Raisa is here – and I trust her with Maddie and Matthew more than I trust anybody else.”

“I can’t stay here, Oliver. The kids can’t stay here. I don’t want them to think this is what life is like—
you know? I appreciate that you have a lot going on, Oliver, but nobody in this family is honest with each other. There’s love here, but it’s also kind of stifling. I need to leave for my own piece of mind.” Felicity sighed. “But I can appreciate with your… extracurricular activities, how’d you would be more than usually worried about our safety.”

“Good. I’m glad that part makes sense, at least.” Oliver sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you, Felicity – it just … it feels like it’s always been this way.”

“Let’s put our heads together and think about it,” Felicity said. “We’ll come up with something.”

“You two should move in together,” Thea said, from the doorway of the living room. “It doesn’t have to be a romantic thing. Why don’t you just – if you’re that worried, Oliver, move in with her?”

“Thea! I didn’t see you there!” Felicity said, her face going red.

“It’s okay. I tried not to listen, I promise, but neither one of you was exactly keeping your voice lowered, so…”

“Well, because that would be…”

“What? The perfect solution? Listen – you’ve probably got some sort of PTSD thing from the island, right? I mean… I can only assume, given the way you act, that life was pretty shitty out there. And life in here can be pretty shitty, too.”

“Oh, my God, Thea… no. That’s not what I meant!” Felicity said.

“If that’s not what you meant, that’s what I heard, and I have to agree, emphatically. I’ll be getting out of here the moment I can, too.” Thea stumbled her way to an armchair. “Everybody does lie. Lie, after lie, after lie. And no one thinks anyone else is smart enough to catch on, which is just straight-up dumb, by the way.”

“What’s going on, Thea?” Oliver asked, sitting on the edge of the sofa. “You’ve been acting weird all day.”
“It’s nothing, Oliver. If I wanted you to know, I would tell you. In the meantime, I think you and Felicity should talk it over. It might be kind of awkward, you know – but you can just agree to have sex other places, or something. But seriously? I would get the fuck out of this horrible, poisonous place while you still can, Felicity.”

“Okay, I think you need to go to bed,” Oliver said, trying to push himself up.

“No, don’t worry about me. I can get up the stairs by myself,” Thea said, and then she half-ran over to Felicity and wrapped her tight in a hug. “Please don’t you ever become one of us. You’re too good to be a Queen, Felicity Smoak.”

Felicity must have caught a whiff of something, because she wrinkled her nose and sighed. “On second thought, Thea… why don’t you let me take you up the stairs? It could be kind of like an older sister type of thing.”

“Okay.” Thea wrapped her arm around Felicity shoulders.

“I’ll be right back down, Oliver,” Felicity said.

“Oh… okay.” Oliver looked at her in genuine confusion, but she shook her head and mouthed that she would be right back down.

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Felicity helped the younger woman up the stairs and into her bedroom, closing the door behind her. “Okay, Thea. I just – I just want to ask you a question. I’m not judging you, I just want to know.”

“I’m drunk,” Thea said, unsteadily pulling off one of her shoes and throwing it across the room, away from Felicity. “And I’m also stoned.”

“Ah. Okay.” Felicity nodded. “But… you stayed safe?”

“Had a friend drive me home. Turns out Shane is an asshole. Big fucking surprise. Everyone’s an asshole today.”
“Thea – I really wish you would tell someone what was bothering you.”

Thea whirled, her eyes wild. “Why? What good would that do anyone? Everyone lies to me all the time – you know they tried to let me believe Oliver was alive for the longest time, almost right up until they had the funerals. Oh, let’s not tell Thea everything. She probably can’t handle it.”

“They’re trying to keep you safe,” Felicity hedged.

“Well, maybe they shouldn’t do crumby, stupid-ass, hoe-bag things then!”

Felicity’s eyes widened. “Who is this about?”

“My mother,” Thea said the words through clenched teeth, “is having an affair. With Malcolm Merlyn.”
part vii: "hiatus" (part iii/iii)

Chapter Summary

Lois Lane arrives at the Queen mansion to interview Oliver and Felicity about how they met...

Chapter Notes

So sorry that this is such a short one, guys! But the aftermath of this chapter will play a big part when we pick up the next chapter, four weeks after this happens....

Thank you so much for all of your comments and all of your kudos and all of your Tumblr love! This is such an awesome fandom. Really and truly!

The road out of Starling City to the Queen mansion was a winding one, and Lois Lane loved driving. She’d selected a sporty roadster – a little out of the price range the Daily Planet was used to paying for, but she’d make up the difference on her own – precisely for the purpose of navigating it, shifting the gears herself, and listening to the sound of the engine roar and purr as she guided it around curves and barreling down straightaways.

She was risking a ticket, but she didn’t care. There was something about the wind through her hair, the smell of something different drifting through the air. It was Christmas, and she was far away from home. She was bound and determined to make it worth her while.

Her phone rang – Clark, the caller ID informed her, and she sighed as she hit ‘ignore’. He wouldn’t be calling her about work today. No, today, he would want to talk about something personal, and Lois wanted nothing more than space and time to think.

All her life, she’d been looking for a guy like Clark Kent. Sweet, nice – willing and able to show his interest in her. Charming and polite. But he was missing something – he was holding back from her, somehow.

Not to mention the caped superhero who kept showing up, and sweeping her off of her feet. She’d thought her days of having a divided, angst-ridden heart were over when she left high school behind. Apparently, she hadn’t gotten that one right.
She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and coaxed the radio to play just a few decibels louder, so that the sounds of AC/DC soared over the sound of wheels against the pavement. It was almost loud enough to drown out her thoughts about Clark and allow her to focus on what she had come all this way for. Five years ago, she had met Moira Queen in the aftermath of losing her son and her husband on the same day. She’d been impressed with the woman’s resolve, and her strength of character. And she’d said so.

Some of her colleagues thought she was only writing kind things about the woman in order to curry her favor, but Lois was a believer in only writing what she believed to be the truth, which was why she’d published, seven months later, an article exposing a tainted deal between Luthor Corp and Queen Consolidated. She’d believed then that she might have burned any bridges she had with Moira Queen, but that hadn’t been the case.

“You have a job to do, and so do I,” Moira had said. “There’s no reason for either of us to become frustrated with the other when at the end of the day, getting the job done is the only thing that matters.”

Lois hadn’t known what to think of that, so she’d let it slide.

She wasn’t expecting the phone call that had come only days ago, in the wake of the news of Oliver’s children appearing in every rag and dime-store tabloid from coast to coast. He’d been a B-list celebrity before, more famous for his bad behavior than any redeeming characteristics, but she’d done some research on him during the writing of that first article. She’d found a mixed bag of opinions about the heir to the Queen fortune: women seemed to think he was charming, sexy… but careless and often cruel. And men were fond of him, it seemed, but distantly. The only evidence she’d found of close friends had been Tommy Merlyn.

In her interview with him, he’d been studiously flip. He’d downplayed his obvious grief, cracked jokes, and made it clear that he was out to remember the good parts about his friend. That he still had hope that somewhere Oliver was still alive.

She wondered how he was coping now with his returned friend. She wondered how any of them were coping, really. People didn’t disappear at sea and then get to come back – that kind of thing only happened in movies and storybooks. It seemed unreal.

And now, on top of everything else going on: Walter Steele had been kidnapped from the hospital where Oliver had been recovering from a near-fatal motorcycle crash. It seemed that the Queens could not escape tragedy.
Her attention turned to what little she knew of Felicity Smoak. As hard as it had been to find people, five years ago, who would comment on Oliver Queen, it was even harder to find anyone who would speak about Felicity Smoak. And it wasn’t because they didn’t have anything nice to say. On the contrary, Ms. Smoak seemed to evoke protective urges from almost everyone she came in touch with. Her and her children were effectively blacked out of the media by her family’s reluctance to say anything. The closest she had come to getting a comment from anyone had been from the lady who dyed Felicity’s hair who said that sometimes she let her roots get a little long before she returned to the salon.

But still, it was a matter of public record that Felicity Smoak had received help from Queen Consolidated before it was known that her children were Oliver’s: she was the recipient, three years in a row, of a scholarship Moira had put into place for mothers who were attempting to finish degrees while they had young children. And then the first people to offer her a job out of college had been the Queens.

Lois couldn’t let those connections just sit in her head. If she had to guess – and she had made a living on researching her hunches – she would guess that Moira Queen had known more than she let on. Not much got past the woman who had married Robert Queen at twenty-one years old.

What a cruel life that must have been, Lois thought. To watch the man you loved – and by all accounts, Moira had married him for love – be so blasé about marriage vows. Still, it was known at Queen Consolidated: Robert’s infidelity, Moira tolerated. A threat to her children, she did not.

It was an intriguing little story, she thought, and she was eager to fix another part of the puzzle into place in her mind. What would the next generation of Queens be like, she wondered. She’d been impressed by Moira, charmed by Thea – slightly off-put by Oliver and Robert. But then she’d never had a chance to meet the Queen men.

She squealed to a stop in front of the Queen mansion and reached for her briefcase. A giant wreath with a big red bow crowned an impressive oak door, and Lois took note of that and the other classic, but substantial Christmas decorations throughout the property. She knocked briskly on the door and waited until a woman wearing a grey dress uniform opened it.

“Hi. I’m Lois Lane,” she said, extending her hand. “Moira and Oliver were expecting me?”

A series of shouts and squeals could be heard, and the housekeeper, Lois assumed that’s what she was anyway, allowed her mouth to twitch. “Ah yes, the reporter from Metropolis Mrs. Queen likes so much.”
“That’s me,” Lois said, slightly embarrassed.

“I read the article you wrote about Mr. Oliver after he disappeared. You are a good girl. Not many people looked very hard to find the good in him.”

“I just like to hear all sides of the story,” Lois said.

“That’s what we’re counting on,” Moira said, coming down the stairs in as casual an outfit as Lois had ever seen her in: a pair of black slacks and a loose sweater. “Thank you, Raiza. If you would let Oliver and Felicity know that Lois is here, and watch the children for a few hours?”

“Of course, Mrs. Queen.”

Raiza made her way up the stairs and Lois found herself studying, not for the first time, the grand foyer of the Queen mansion. Designed to impress more than to feel like a home, it certainly did its job well. Coming in here, you were well aware that you were in the presence of American royalty: a legacy built by Robert Queen’s driving ambition and Moira Dearden Queen’s family money.

Lois was too small-town to impressed by such a display. In fact, it kind of made her itchy, the way the way the Luthors made her itchy. Too much wealth mean too much power: such people escaped the nooses of consequence too easily.

But they were still people, she reminded herself. People who deserved to have their stories told as fairly as possible.

She nearly managed to hide her gasp as Oliver Queen came in to view. He was wearing sweat pants and a hooded sweatshirt, but it was clear he’d been beat to hell in the wreck, recently. She winced in sympathy as he slowly made his way down the stairs, the woman who must be Felicity Smoak right behind him.

Lois watched with eagle eyes as Felicity let a hand hover near Oliver’s arm, as though she would help him if he needed it every once in a while, the way Felicity’s eyes tracked Oliver’s every movement. The way Oliver occasionally checked behind him to make sure she was still there.
Hm. She thought. Interesting.

Of course – these people had children together – had perhaps had some kind of connection before the boat went down – had definitely had sex with each other. Maybe it was just those kinds of bonds she was witnessing pass between them. But then, maybe it was more.

She found herself wondering what she looked like around Clark – if she had the same kind of care and concern in her eyes that Felicity did in hers. Or if she was just as confusing to read as she was confused.

She shook her head and made herself refocus.

“Are you Lois Lane?” Oliver asked, as he reached the bottom step, and extended his hand to shake hers firmly.

“I am.”

“My mother has nothing but good things to say. I’m Oliver Queen,” he said. “And Merry Christmas. Thanks for flying out today.”

“Not a problem,” Lois said evenly. “Any one of my colleagues would have jumped at the chance to get this story. I’m honored you chose me.”

“This is Felicity Smoak,” Oliver said, gesturing to the blonde slender woman standing beside him.

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” Felicity said. “I don’t uh – I don’t talk to reporters. So.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t go out of my way to be evil,” Lois said, with a soothing smile. “We’re just going to have a chat. I’ll ask you some questions, you answer honestly, and I’ll write a story that’s as… fair and truthful as it can be.”

“All right then.” Felicity squared her shoulders. “Oliver seems to think this might help the interest… go away.”
“Feed the savage beast, hm?” Lois asked, wishing desperately that she had her recorder out and ready. She wanted to find the words to capture the look of Felicity Smoak, uncertain, but faking it. Not bowing under the pressure that was obviously getting to her. “Has the attention been intrusive?”

Felicity shrugged. “No more than I expected it to be, but I don’t think you can really prepare yourself to have the whole weight of the media focus its gaze on you. Naively, perhaps, I hoped it would go away if we ignored it long enough. But that doesn’t seem to be working, so… here we are.”

“Here we are indeed,” Lois said. “Well, is there somewhere we can chat that’s a little bit more comfortable?”

“Of course. There are like four thousand rooms in this place,” Felicity said, and Oliver shot her a look full of amusement as she blushed. “Well, not literally, of course. But there are, uh… a lot of rooms. Given that it’s a mansion.”

“I think we’ll go into the lounge,” Oliver said, gesturing for Felicity to lead the way. “We can have something brought in if you’d like something to drink, Ms. Lane?”

“Lois is fine, and I would love some water. I rented one of the new Mustang convertibles to drive down here and I got a little bit carried away,” Lois said honestly. “But honestly the drive out here is just beautiful.”

“It’s one of life’s little pleasures that you take for granted until it’s not there,” Oliver said lightly – and from anyone else it might have sounded trite, but it was tinged by the experience of having such little pleasures ripped from him.

Felicity gestured inside of a room. “I think this is the one Oliver meant. Right?”

“Right,” Oliver said. “Please, Ms. Lane. Ladies first.”

Lois stepped inside the grand room with a marble fireplace and several white sofas. She nearly sighed. Of course. White. Why must it always be white for the rich? She would be nervous to breathe in the room now.
Which, come to think of it, was probably why Oliver had chosen the room.

Hm. Perhaps he wasn’t as much of a dumb playboy as his reputation made him out to be. Lois found herself preparing mentally for a sparring match.

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Felicity seated herself on one of the love seats and Oliver sat down next to her, stretching his arm behind her over the back of the furniture, taking up as much room as possible. She crossed one leg over the other and wished had taken more time with her make-up today. But Madelyn and Matthew had been up at the crack of dawn, shouting about Santa Claus, and they’d opened presents and had a good couple of hours of playing before they had all gone back to bed, hoping to catch up on some of the sleep they had lost.

In truth, Lois Lane’s arrival mid-day had been just after they had awoken from their naps. Felicity had been putting her hair back in a ponytail and getting dressed when Raiza came to tell them that Lois was here. She’d fretted for a minute, but Oliver assured her that Lois wouldn’t be taking pictures today – she would just be interviewing them. She could use one of the photos from the Christmas party.

And she wouldn’t, of course, be meeting the children.

Oliver and Felicity had agreed on that without any discussion at all.

Still, Felicity felt more than slightly nervous. She had nothing to hide, really – she wasn’t ashamed of the way her children had come into the world, or the life they had lived. She had worked her ass off to make sure they had food and clothing and never wanted for anything. So the only thing she was nervous about, really, was the idea that somehow, she would Oliver’s secret slip. She didn’t necessarily have the best mind-to-mouth filter, especially in situations where she was nervous.

“Let’s start with you, Felicity,” Lois said, and she flipped open her note book and set her recorder out where it was easily seen. “Where did you grow up?”

“Coast City,” Felicity said. “And then I went to college in Massachusetts.”

“At MIT?”
“Yes.”

“But not before you took a pit stop in Starling City, right?”

“Ah. You want to know about how I met Oliver.”

“Just trying to put the pieces together.”

“I see. I met Oliver at a party at Starling City University,” Felicity said. “At a frat party, to be exact.”

“Did you come down for the party?”

“It was between my freshman and sophomore years of college. I’d just broken up with my boyfriend. A good friend of mine from high school was going to school down here and since I didn’t have to be back in Massachusetts yet, she encouraged me to come down. To be honest with you, I wasn’t having that much of a good time. Frat parties just … aren’t my thing. Not that there’s anything wrong with them, if that’s what you like! But… I was not enjoying myself.” Felicity paused to consider what to say next. “All of these boys just – it was all about the games, and trying to be smooth, you know? And I was coming down the rough side of a break-up. Nothing felt real to me and I just wanted something that felt… real. So, anyway. Oliver came over and he tried one of his tried-and-true lines and by this point in the night I was just done. So I…”

“She told me it was bullshit,” Oliver said, smiling at Felicity. Her breath nearly caught – she remembered that smile. She didn’t see much of it these days, but apparently the memory was a good one. “She asked me if that actually worked with girls.”

Lois chuckled as she made a note on her pad of paper. “And that’s the only time the two of you, uh… met?”

“Yes.” Felicity lifted her eyes. “We met just the one time and – that was when it happened.”

Lois nodded. “Let’s go back to those early years, Felicity…”
At the end of the long session, Oliver’s ribs ached. He felt like he’d been run the washer and hung to dry. It had been difficult, listening to Felicity answer questions honestly about what the early days of having Maddie and Matthew had been like. The way she phrased things – it didn’t sound tragic. But he knew that it had been difficult for her. She’d continued on at MIT, raising her kids far away from their grandparents or anyone else, really.

In a way, he’d realized, that had been her island, her crucible. She’d had to sink or swim, and judging by the kids she had – she’d managed to swim. Felicity had spoken honestly of working long hours, missing whole nights of sleep, taking help where she could get it – from the government, from friends, from charities… sacrificing everything so she could give her children a good life.

And that was why, she said, she hadn’t hesitated to tell Oliver the truth: it had always been her intention to let her children have the fullest lives they could possibly have, and that meant knowing their father, now that the possibility had emerged.

Lois had asked if she regretted introducing Oliver to the kids, given that it had changed their lives so dramatically. Her answer had floored him.

He could close his eyes and practically hear her voice. “No,” she had said firmly. “Letting Oliver into our lives has been the biggest blessing. Now Maddie and Matthew can know both sides of their history – Smoak, and Queen. And honestly it’s been great to have a partner, someone I can count on, without guilt, to be there for my kids. To know, if something were to happen to me, there’s someone else in the world who eats, sleeps, and breathes being a parent the way I do? That’s… that’s been amazingly reassuring.”

Her eyes had met his, a hint of sparkle in them, like she might cry at any minute, and despite their agreement to be as clear as possible that they weren’t in a relationship, he’d reached for her hand and squeezed it.

“I … my dad left.” Felicity said from the doorway, her arms crossed. “When I was a little girl. I’ve told you before, I guess – but my stepdad stepped up. He was great. I call him Dad, you know, because that’s what he was to me. But there’s still a part of me that wonders why my biological father left. What was so wrong with me that he couldn’t stay. That’s… another reason why I wanted Maddie and Matthew to know you. I didn’t want them to wonder about you the way I wonder about my dad. But I didn’t want to tell Lois that.”

Oliver got to his feet and crossed the room. “Hey, you know, if anything ever happened to you, you
don’t have anything to worry about, right? I mean – we’ve never said it before. And I’ve always assumed it would be me that something would happen to…”

“I would trust you to do the right thing,” Felicity said. “I would trust you. I do trust you to do the right thing for our kids, Oliver. You’re a good dad – and you’re getting better by the minute.”

He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her that she made him want to be the best possible parent he could be because she expected so much of him… but he stopped himself.

There was a long pause, and then Felicity cleared her throat. “Listen – we’re going to get packed to go to Coast City tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah. I… I didn’t forget about that,” Oliver said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“And I think you should come.”

“What?”

“I think you should come with us. Meet my mom and dad. They’ve been wanting to meet you for uh – quite some time. But more here recently than before, since you’re alive and all.”

Oliver chuckled. “Are you… are you sure about this?”

“Yeah. It’s just for a few days. I can promise pancakes and a break from the relentless drama of being in this house,” Felicity said teasingly. “What do you say?”

Oliver closed his eyes and felt like he could draw a full breath for the first time in a long time. “I say that a break sounds like the best idea in the world.”

She smiled at him and turned to go.

“Hey, Felicity?”
“Yeah?”

“Thanks. For everything. If I’m a good dad, it’s because you’re a good mom and I don’t want to let you down. I don’t want to let those kids down.”

Felicity turned back around and crossed the room, pulling his head down and laying a deliberate kiss on his cheek, imprinting an impression of her mouth on the skin there. “You won’t, Oliver. Even if you sometimes mess up, the fact that you love them – that means the absolute world to me. Be ready to go at seven tomorrow?”

Oliver swallowed. “Uh… you can count on it.”
Chapter Summary

While at Coast City, Oliver and Felicity take a step closer to each other.

Chapter Notes

A long(ish) DVD Extra! I wasn't planning on writing anything in Coast City and just jumping back into the season but then you guys were so interested in Oliver meeting the in-laws and then this fic hit 800 kudos and I was like -- wellllll... why not? I hope to have a regular chapter update for you by mid-week, but please enjoy this in the meantime. This is a DVD Extra you'll want to read, I have a feeling!

DVD Extra – Oliver meets Felicity’s parents

The long drive out to Coast City made every bone in his body ache, and Maddie and Matthew had done pretty good for the first hour and a half, entertained adequately by the Finding Nemo DVD that his mother had bought them (one of several things she’d bought them, actually), for Christmas, but then something had switched on in their brains, and the fighting had become nearly unbearable. Within half an hour, Felicity had declared that the whole car was taking a “talking break” unless someone had to pee. Oliver’s head began to pound in rhythm with the aching in his ribs. Felicity apparently noticed that he wasn’t doing so well, and she asked often if they needed to stop for breaks, which only served to annoy him, because he thought he was doing a nice job of hiding his pain from the world.

Finally, though, Felicity pulled off in a residential area of Coast City and stopped in front of a nondescript, beige, split-level home. Oliver thought it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“You’re really pale, are you sure you’re okay?” Felicity asked under her breath while Maddie and Matthew unbuckled themselves from their booster seats.

“I’m fine,” he said, gritting his teeth as he slowly got out of the car. “Just a little sore.”

“Okay, good, because you look like you’re about to fall over,” Felicity said dryly, but she dropped it after that, gathering bags from the back of the car and biting her lip when Oliver took several, although it was clear he was in a lot of pain.
The front door of the house burst open and a woman ran out, her dyed blonde hair framed around her round face. “Where are my babies?”

“Grandma!” shouted Maddie and Matthew, and they ran forward, caught up in the larger woman’s arms.

“Hi, Mom,” Felicity said, as she was drawn into a hug as well. “Where’s Dad?”

“We’re having sump pump issues,” the woman said, and apparently this was a common thing, because Felicity rolled her eyes and sighed. “Who’s your friend, Felicity?”

“Mom, you know perfectly well who…” Felicity sighed and gestured to Oliver. “Mom, this is Oliver Queen. Oliver, this is my mother, Ruth.”

“Hi, nice to meet you,” Oliver said, extending his hand.

“Nice to meet you as well,” Ruth said, but her tone wasn’t quite… warm. Oliver couldn’t blame her, really. He wasn’t sure he’d be trusting of the situation on her side, either. “Are those… photographer people going to show up at my house and harass me, Mr. Queen?”

“Felicity and I have taken every precaution to ensure that they won’t,” Oliver said. “We’re doing everything we can to make sure Maddie and Matthew stay safe, and that your privacy is protected.”

“I suppose we can’t ask for more than that. Why don’t you come inside before you fall over, Mr. Queen,” Ruth said dryly. “Felicity tells me you had yet another brush with death just a couple of weeks ago.”

“Thanks,” Oliver said, narrowing his eyes at Felicity, who shrugged her shoulders as if to say ‘who me?’.

**
Matthew and Maddie didn’t seem to notice the tension between Oliver and Ruth, for which Felicity was extremely grateful. It was hardly Oliver’s fault that her mother had several preconceived notions about him and his level of… responsibility. Still, when her stepfather, Leo, arrived, he shook Oliver’s hand warmly and gave Felicity a tight squeeze, making sure that she was okay with a whispered question in her ear.

Felicity sent Oliver upstairs to the guest room to lay down – the fact that he didn’t object overly to the bit of mothering had her worried, and then sent Maddie and Matthew outside to play on the swing set in the back yard.

“Everything going okay in Starling City?” Leo asked, as he poured a large glass of iced tea and sat down next to Felicity at the table. It might be December, but the sea air kept the temperature moderate year-round, and Leo and Ruth Smoak drank iced tea like it was going out of style.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Just – a little, you know. Stressful.” Felicity accepted her glass with a smile. “Big changes and all of that.”

Ruth pursed her lips. “Hm. And you don’t think you rushed into it, moving in with Oliver?”

“There was nowhere else safe to go,” Felicity said. “Once the news leaked, my low-income apartment was not going to be safe enough for the kids. And we’re… working out a compromise as far as the living situation goes. I can’t stay at Oliver’s mother’s house, and he knows that. But… things keep happening. For right now it works. And Maddie and Matthew get a chance to get to know Oliver so that when we start splitting custody it won’t be such an adjustment.”

“Oh, you’re going to start splitting custody now?” Ruth sighed and rolled her eyes. “He just gets to show up and be a parent now, huh?”

“I don’t understand why you’re upset, Mom,” Felicity said evenly. “There’s nothing to be upset about. Oliver was dead. And now he’s not, and he wants to be a part of the kids’ lives. He deserves to be a part of their lives.”

Ruth scoffed. “He wasn’t good for much before he disappeared to that island, was he? You read all the stories about the reporters he attacked and the women that he slept with. He got his girlfriend’s sister killed, didn’t he?”

“He came back a different person,” Felicity said firmly. “I’m not interested in who he was before.
I’m only interested in the fact that he’s been a good father to Maddie and Matthew so far. He’s gone to great lengths to keep all of us safe in circumstances that are way beyond his control.”

“I just don’t want you to get too attached and get your heart broken when he turns out to be just exactly what I think he is,” Ruth said, and got up from the table.

“He’s not Dad, Mom,” Felicity said, finally saying what she had wanted to say for a while. “You can’t go around treating him like you would Dad, okay? Oliver didn’t choose to leave. He chose to come back. So stop, please. I want this to be a nice visit.”

“Felicity, honey…”

“I’m going to go check on Oliver,” Felicity said, and she got up from the table and went up the stairs to the guest bedroom, where Oliver was lying awake, his hands behind his head.

“Everything okay with your folks?” Oliver asked.

“Yeah. Mom and I just had to… set things straight, that’s all,” Felicity said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “She gets angry and it’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault, really…”

“I mean, I could tell her if I’d known about you guys, I probably would have tried to swim back,” Oliver said. “Or I could tell her that I really regret who I was before the island, the way that I treated people, the things that I took for granted. I mean, literally everything. Except one thing.” He sat up and reached for the end of Felicity’s ponytail, threading his fingers through her hair. “I don’t regret, not for one single solitary minute, any of the time that I spent with you. I mean, I was a miserable son of a bitch. I hated myself and I hated my life and I didn’t have the strength to change any of it. And it wasn’t like, you know, you saved me. But you were a bright light – this… very real experience. I’m glad that you’re Maddie and Matthew’s mother.”

“When you say stuff like that, it really makes me want to kiss you.” Felicity sighed. “Too bad that’s a terrible idea, right?”

“It’s a terrible idea,” Oliver agreed, but his eyes and his mouth were smiling and Felicity started to laugh.

“Only not really because, as I recall, we are very good at kissing,” Felicity said. “I mean, ten on the
“Richter scale good.”

“Perfect martini good,” Oliver said, catching on to her game.

“Chocolate and peanut butter good.”

“Oh, now I have to kiss you,” Oliver said, and he leaned in close and –

“MOM!” Maddie shouted from downstairs. “Mom! Where are you? Matthew fell out of the swingset!”

Felicity rushed down the stairs, Oliver close behind her. “Is he okay?” she asked.

“His arm looks all funny and he won’t stop crying…”

Oliver and Felicity rushed out the backdoor and found Matthew cradling his arm. Felicity could see in a moment it was a compound fracture and she nearly vomited.

“All right, Felicity, why don’t you get the car started,” Oliver said. “Matthew, buddy, we’re going to have to stabilize that arm for the ride to the hospital, okay?”

“No!” Matthew sobbed. “I don’t wanna go to the hospital!”

“It’s okay,” Oliver said, his voice even. “But that’s where we have to go, buddy. They’re going to need to fix you there. They can give you some medicine to make you feel better.” Oliver quickly whipped his shirt off of his body and made a sling. He’d forgotten that she hadn’t seen the scars – hadn’t seen him even partially undressed since he came back from the island. “Later, Felicity.”

“Of course,” Felicity said, running to go get her keys.

The drive to the hospital was short, Oliver sitting in the back with Matthew while Felicity navigated them through the streets of Coast City. Oliver called his doctor in Starling City, who called Coast
City General, and they were whisked up to a private floor under a false name as soon as they arrived.

Some painful hours later, Matthew was drugged, his arm was set, and Felicity and Oliver were about ready to collapse from exhaustion.

“It seems like it never stops,” Felicity said, laying her head on Oliver’s shoulder. Cautiously, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Like we can’t ever get a breath in, you know?”

“Yeah, I do. Hopefully this is the big event of our vacation, though, and we can just… relax, from here on out,” Oliver said.

“Let’s hope so,” Felicity said, and she closed her eyes as Oliver drove them back to her parents’ home.

**

Oliver lifted Matthew out of the back seat of the car, letting Felicity sleep while he carried him inside and took him to the bedroom where he would be staying. Ruth’s door opened and she stepped outside and watched him tuck the boy in.

“Where’s Felicity?”

“Fell asleep on the ride home,” Oliver said, arranging the covers just so and making sure the boy had a glass of water within reach. “I thought I’d give her a few minutes. It’s been a long day. Week. Few months.”

“I can see that. Listen, Oliver,” Ruth said, stepping forward. “I’m really not trying to be the evil mother-in-law.”

“I understand that,” Oliver said.

“I just worry that someday you’re going to realize this is all… so much work.”
Oliver lifted one corner of his mouth. “And what do you suppose surviving on an island by yourself is like?”

Ruth crossed her arms over her chest. “Fair point. It’s just – you know, you weren’t here. Which, I can’t hardly blame you for, but…”

“I blame me for it,” Oliver said honestly.

“You can’t go around with the weight of the things you can’t control around your shoulders,” Ruth said. “Not and be really present here, and in the moment, Oliver. Do me a favor and don’t do what I did. I got so – so pissed at Felicity’s dad I couldn’t ever really let it go. It colored everything for a long time, until I met Leo. And then every now and again it still sneaks up on me. I wish I hadn’t been so mad while Felicity was growing up. I wished I’d been more present, in the moment, and not being mad at a past I couldn’t change.”

“Daddy?” Maddie started to sit up.

Oliver came over and sat on the edge of her bed, aware that Ruth was still watching him. “Yes, baby, I’m here.”

“Is Matthew okay?”

“He’s got a pretty bad break in his arm,” Oliver said honestly. “He’s going to hurt for a while. But he’s going to be okay. He’ll get better.”

Maddie reached out and laid her hand flat on Oliver’s chest. “Like you got better?”

His heart twisted. “Yeah, baby. Like I got better. But maybe without so many scars, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Maddie said, and laid back down to close her eyes.

“Everything okay in here?” Felicity asked, her voice hoarse with sleep.
“Sorry, I was going to come get you in a second,” Oliver said, walking across the room to wrap Felicity in a hug. “Everyone’s fine.”

“I think I’m going to sleep on the floor in here, just to make sure everyone’s okay,” Felicity said.

“I can…”

“Sleep in the bed because your ribs are still healing. You can take the night shift the next time one of them gets the stomach flu, all right?”

“All right.” Oliver kissed the top of her head and walked past Ruth to his own bedroom. He left the door cracked a little and heard Ruth.

“You told me there was nothing going on with that boy. You said you weren’t going to get involved.”

“I’m not and I won’t. Not unless that’s what’s best for everyone involved.”

“It seems like it’s a little late now to be saying those kinds of things. It’s obvious you’re half in love with him.”

To Oliver’s surprise… Felicity didn’t say anything. She certainly didn’t deny it.
Oliver and Felicity return to Starling City and must get back to their real lives.

I sincerely hope you enjoy the development in this chapter.

If you've been asking about Oliver's scars, I must plead for your patience for two more parts.

Once everyone else in the house was sleeping comfortably, Oliver and Felicity found themselves sitting on the couch in the living room of her parent's house, both too alert and worn out to think about going to bed just yet. After a long pause Felicity said, “Do you want some wine? I want some wine.”

Oliver looked up. “Ah, I thought I might take a pain pill.”

“Really?”

Oliver shrugged. “Lifting Matthew, sitting in the ER…”

“No, I don’t doubt you need it, I just… you haven’t taken very much of your medicine. Not that that’s a judgement either way, just… okay, do you want me to go grab it? I mean, you’ve pretty much been a superhero today and…”

“Felicity.” Oliver’s voice dropped, low and soft. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Felicity said, shaking her head. It was clear she wasn’t. “I just… I do this sometimes. I can handle a crisis just fine. It’s when I have time to think about it later…”
“Hey, he’s okay.” Oliver said.

“I know,” Felicity said, wiping her eyes. “I just got really scared there for a second.”

Oliver got up off of the couch and wrapped Felicity in his arms, and she wrapped her arms around him and breathed in. He closed his eyes and laid his head on top of hers. “I was scared, too.”

“I’m glad you were there. I could have handled it on my own. But it was nice to have somebody there with me,” Felicity said. “Someone just as scared as I was.”

“I was glad I was there,” Oliver said simply, and left it at that. He’d spent more than enough time mourning the hours he’d missed with his children and all of the milestones he wasn’t there for.

“You’re a good dad, Oliver Queen.”

He laughed. “Who would have thought?”

“Me,” Felicity said, pushing her glasses up her nose and looking at him. “Even five years ago, I would have thought that you would be a good dad.”

“I wouldn’t have, really – I was much too selfish. Too much like a kid.”

Felicity shook her head. “I was too, when I got pregnant. I changed. You would have too.”

Oliver lifted one corner of his mouth in a smile. “Thanks, Felicity.”

“Hey, I mean it.” Felicity laid her hand on Oliver’s cheek, and he leaned into the touch. “You weren’t all bad before the island.”

“I was pretty bad.”
“I remember you made me laugh,” Felicity said. “I was nervous, a little bit, because I hadn’t been with anyone but my boyfriend, and you kept making all these jokes, you know? And I remember that you were nice to me when I couldn’t quite stop talking when I wanted to – you made some bad choices, Oliver. You weren’t a bad person. Maybe you weren’t quite the good person you want to be now – but I don’t think you were anybody’s villain.”

“That might be because your name isn’t Laurel Lance.”

Felicity shrugged. “That’s true. And I’m a little bit biased, to tell you the truth.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Felicity said, her eyes honest and open. “It’s hard to be neutral about the guy who just carried our son into the emergency room and kissed his cast and tucked his sister into bed.”

Oliver reached for her hand and squeezed it. “I am going to kiss you now.”

“Okay,” Felicity said, on a whisper. “If you absolutely must.”

Oliver laughed. “Oh, I must.”

It was a sweet kiss, a good kiss, a steady kiss. It didn’t knock either one of them off of their feet. If anything, it rooted them in place, it knotted them together. Oliver’s hand found Felicity’s hair, and he buried his hands in the silken threads and took his time reacquainting himself with her mouth. He couldn’t remember if she had tasted this sweet five years ago, and he wanted to kick himself for forgetting something so important, so pivotal.

He paid attention to the quick way she drew in breaths, how she liked to be held. Remembered, suddenly and with startling clarity, some of the sounds she had made when they moved together, how her body had been then.

It wouldn’t be the same now. Neither one of them would be the same.

Five years. An island. Twins. A lifetime misery and loneliness for him and solitude and struggle and
joy for her.

No, it definitely wouldn’t be the same.

Felicity broke off the kiss eventually, her eyes still closed, her glasses a little fogged. She held up a finger. “Okay,” she said. “So – that was an excellent point you just made there. Truly excellent.”

He chuckled. “Thank you.”

“We have a lot of stuff to figure out,” Felicity said, taking another step back. “We can’t just – and I don’t think you want to, either – rush into this, you know, or maybe you do because that was extremely sexy and I think as you’ll recall that you know that I like sex as well and… okay. Three… two… one.”

“So you’re saying you want to stop there for tonight,” Oliver said. “That’s all right, Felicity. You’re driving the bus. We go as fast as you want to go.”

“No no no.” Felicity shook her head. “We go as fast as we want to go, Oliver. I’m not driving anything, and neither are you. If this is going to work, then – we need to be a team, right? If we’re going to balance – everything, then I think we should be a team.”

Oliver blinked, slowly. “Okay. So… teammate, where do we start?”

“I think you should kiss me one more time. Just… for science’s sake,” Felicity said. “And then I think we should go to bed. And then in the morning – we can work some stuff out. Like where we’re moving. And who all will be living with whom. I can ask my Mom and Dad, I’m sure they’d take Maddie and Matthew to lunch or out for ice cream so we can have a few hours to hash some stuff out. Sound good?”

“You have the best ideas,” Oliver said, and then he kissed her again.

Nope, definitely not the same. But he could certainly get used to it.

**
Two Weeks Later

Felicity set down the last of the boxes in the kitchen of their new apartment and sighed. The moving company Oliver had hired had done most of the work, but there were a few precious things she wouldn’t trust to anybody but herself. Some art projects the kids had made, a few photos – things she couldn’t afford to lose. Still, her long, exhausting day was over. Mostly.

Oliver came into the kitchen, dusting his hands off on his pants. “Looks like we have everything?”

“Yep,” Felicity said. “Looks like we have everything.”

“And now what? You…”

“Unpack,” Felicity said, raising her eyebrows. “And not just me, buster. I would not be moving if it were not for you, so crack open a box and start stuffing things in drawers. I’m assuming all of your clothes and stuff are coming tomorrow?”

“Yes. Aren’t you one of those people who have like – organizational systems and…”

“I do. But I can fix it. I just can’t stand living in cities of cardboard,” Felicity said. “Why don’t you take the kids’ rooms?”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “Hey, Felicity?”

“Yeah?”

“I know I haven’t said it, you know, recently, but I really appreciate this,” Oliver said. “I know – this wasn’t exactly the ideal situation…”

“Are you kidding me? Three beds, two and a half baths, marble countertops? A decent school system,” Felicity said, a note of teasing in her voice which slowly faded away. “I wouldn’t have been able to afford a place like this on my own, Oliver. And the kids are going to be much better off, so… I’m going to say thank you. Even though I really wanted to do this on my own.”
“Hey. You were doing a great job on your own,” Oliver said. “I don’t want you to think that I…”

“No, I know,” Felicity said, flushing. “We should really… unpack. Especially since I’m about to start babbling any second and…”

“Okay.” Oliver smiled at her and turned on his heel to go to the bedroom, but not before his cell phone rang shrilly.

“That’s not your normal ringtone,” Felicity said.

“It’s not my normal phone.” Oliver stared at it for a long time.

“You haven’t put on the hood since we’ve been back, have you?” Felicity asked, the phone still ringing.

“No.”

“Does that phone ever ring with good news?” Felicity asked, stepping closer to him.

“No.”

“Then someone probably needs your help,” Felicity said softly. “You should answer it.”

“Felicity, I don’t…”

She swiped her finger across the screen and handed it to him, ignoring his expression, rocking back on her heels and listening as Oliver talked with the woman on the other end of the phone. The conversation didn’t last long. Oliver hung up the phone and glared at her.

“Was I wrong?”
“No. Laurel’s friend… her brother died in a fire. She doesn’t think it was an accident.”

Felicity nodded. “Well, Laurel’s a pretty smart girl. If she doesn’t think it was an accident, it probably wasn’t an accident, right?”

“I don’t know. Grief does funny things to people.”

“If you need to go, you should go,” Felicity said.

“I’m just – not….” Oliver stopped and nearly growled in frustration.

“What?”

“Sure. I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“What’s not a good idea? Meeting Laurel?” Felicity pushed her glasses up on her nose. “If someone murdered a fireman, don’t you think that’s something that should be examined more closely?”

“I don’t –“ Oliver sighed.

“Are you in pain?” Felicity laid a hand on his abdomen, and felt for any tell-tale quivering or heat which would indicate he would have a physical reason to want to stay home.

“No.” Oliver shook his head. “It’s not physical. I’m fine. I’m more than fine.”

“I’ll say,” Felicity said, grinning up at him.

He chuckled like that had taken him by surprise. Felicity decided her ensuing mortification would be worth it if it made him smile like that every time. “No, Felicity. I’m fine. I’ll go see if there’s something the man in the hood can do to help Laurel.”
“Hey, Oliver?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t want to make assumptions here because, well. That never goes well for me. But on the off-chance that I’m right, I want you to know that I’m not worried about you and Laurel. She’s with Tommy and you wouldn’t hurt your best friend. And... I trust you to do everything you can every time you put on the hood to come back to us safe and whole and healthy,” Felicity said. “So don’t worry about letting us down. Just be safe.”

Oliver’s hand cupped her cheek for a moment and she leaned into the touch. He only hesitated for a moment before he leaned in to kiss her – a privilege he was still getting used to. She kissed him back and grinned at him when he pulled away.

He picked up his keys from the counter and turned to leave.

“Come back when you’re ready to unpack more Legos!” Felicity shouted, chuckling to herself once the door had closed and she was on her own.

**

Thea knocked tentatively on the door of Felicity and Oliver’s new apartment. She wasn’t sure she would be welcome there – but she was tired of the oppressive guilt of being at the mansion, the way her mother seemed to take Oliver moving out so personally and God, he was twenty-eight years old and had children, what was she expecting?

Felicity opened the door wide. “Thea!” She beamed. “How are you doing?”

“Um, I’m okay. Is Ollie here?”

“No, I’m sorry, you just missed him. He had a meeting about the club. He should be back soon, though. You want to come in and hang out for a little bit?” Felicity gestured around the apartment. “I’m just unpacking. Raisa’s going to drop Maddie and Matthew off in a few minutes and I’m sure they love to see you, too. Although, it’s totally fine if you’d rather not, I mean, I know you’d probably rather spend time with Oliver or your friends or...”
“No, it’s okay.” Thea came in and dropped her school bag to the side. “I just didn’t want to go home today. And… everybody at school keeps asking me about Oliver and Walter…”

“Need a break from sympathy?” Felicity asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Okay, then. Help me unpack this kitchen, Thea Queen,” she said, grinning.

“You know, you’re pretty cool. Laurel was about the only other one of my brother’s girlfriends I could ever stand,” Thea said. “But that was because she didn’t treat me like a kid sister, you know? I guess maybe now she was trying to get on Oliver’s good side, but it was really cool to have her over at the house and she’d braid my hair and stuff. Then Oliver died and she stopped coming over – which I totally get, by the way.”

Felicity nodded. “Well, I am not good at braiding hair.”

Thea laughed. “It’s not a comparison thing, Felicity. I just like you.”

“Good,” Felicity said, ripping open a box. “Listen, are you doing okay with… everything?”

“Yeah. I’m spending more and more time away from the house. It helps my sanity. Mom’s not listening to me. She barely gets out of bed.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “And Malcolm Merlyn?”

“I haven’t seen him but that doesn’t mean they aren’t sneaking around while I’m at school or something,” Thea said. “Did you say anything to Ollie?”

Felicity shook her head. “I didn’t want to – I thought perhaps that might be your secret to tell Oliver, if you think he needs to know.”
“He won’t believe me.”

“I don’t know about that,” Felicity said softly. “I think if you say things the right way to him, he
might take you very seriously.”

They worked together after that, putting away dishes and setting up silverware drawers. Thea found
she liked it, this somewhat-odd task of setting up a home. Her mother had redecorated rooms before,
of course, but now Thea found herself wondering if maybe that’s what she would like to do, as she
and Felicity migrated from the kitchen to setting up shelves of knickknacks in the living room.

The next time the door opened, it was her niece and nephew, who squealed with delight at seeing
her, even though they’d just had a good-bye dinner the night before.

“Aunt Thea! Are you coming to live with us?” Maddie asked, looking up into Thea’s eyes adoringly.
Thea’s heart clenched in her chest.

“Nope, baby girl. I was just over here helping your mom out,” Thea said, squeezing her into a hug.
“I get to go back to Grandma Moira’s house at the end of the day.”

Maddie wrinkled her nose in the exact same way Felicity had earlier, and it made Thea chuckle, so
she gave her another hug.

The twins were full of rambunctious energy, so Felicity decreed they were done unpacking for the
moment and they could go for a walk down to the neighborhood park. Thea wrapped herself up in
her coat and helped Matthew zip his up.

“I can show you where to go,” he offered, his arm still in a cast. “I can’t go on the swings and stuff
but I can play if I’m careful.”

“I’ll play carefully with you,” Thea promised, and they left the apartment behind them, walking the
short distance to the park.

She was racing Maddie down a slide when she noticed Oliver get out of his driver’s car and cross the
park, only to wrap Felicity in a hug and kiss her hello. Felicity froze and pointed over to Thea. Oliver
only grinned and waved.

“What?” Oliver asked, innocently.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we haven’t told anyone,” Felicity said softly. “We’re just going… we’re just going to see if this works.”

“What is ‘this’, exactly?”

Oliver shrugged. “You know.”

“No. I don’t know.” Thea crossed her arms over her chest. “Be very specific with me, Oliver.”

Felicity cleared her throat. “We’re dating. Or…. The equivalent of dating. The equivalent of dating when you already live together and have children.”

“Right,” Thea said, and then she let her mouth twitch upwards. “This is awesome! At least someone in this family gets to be happy for once.”

“Thea…” Oliver said, and she could tell she’d somehow said something disappointing and tried to tamp down on the rush of shame.

“Listen,” she said. “I don’t want to like… intrude or anything. Thanks for letting me crash your house unpacking party, Felicity. I’ll just… get going.”

“No, you won’t.” Felicity stepped forward. “Listen,” she said softly, “I want you to stay if you want to stay. Why don’t you have dinner with us? Oliver’s just being a jerk because he’s a big brother and he’s got no other mode.”
“You don’t have to be nice to me,” Thea said softly.

“No. I don’t,” Felicity said. “I want to be. Come on, Thea. I can’t beat out Raisa in the kitchen but I’ll bet it’s better company than sitting at home, right?”

Oliver nodded at her.

“Right, I guess,” Thea said, and she wrapped her arms around herself and followed Felicity, Oliver and the kids back to the apartment.

Still – Oliver and Felicity together. Maybe she understood a little bit more of what her mother was feeling. It was clear they were their own separate family unit now. She was infringing on their space. She hadn’t really got a chance to have her brother all that long…

But this was okay. This was good. Mature people, Thea told herself, recognized that sometimes older brothers grew up way too fast for their younger sisters.

It still hurt, a little. But Thea Queen held her head high and refused to pout. She’d handled her mother by herself before, and she could do it again.

**

“What did Laurel have to say?” Felicity asked, as they were cleaning up the dishes from dinner and Thea had gone home.

“I’m going to have to go out tonight,” Oliver said. “Do some reconnaissance. See what I can dig up.”

“That’s it? Just recon?”

Oliver shrugged. “It’s a murder investigation. That’s usually handled by the police.”

“I thought you put on the hood because the police weren’t doing their job,” Felicity said slowly.
“I put on the hood because my father asked me to save the city he’d failed so miserably,” Oliver said.

“Don’t you think you’d be failing it, too, if you didn’t do your best to figure out whatever is going on here?” Felicity asked.

“You know – normal people, when dating a superhero, they try to hold them back,” Oliver said. “You know, stay home, stay safe.”

“Which comic books are you reading?” Felicity asked, shaking her head. “I want you safe. I want you to come back. But I want you to do your best to help everyone you can, too.”

Oliver kissed her then. “I…. Felicity Smoak, you’re remarkable.”

She pushed her glasses up and smiled. “Thank you for remarking on it.”

**

Tommy Merlyn knocked on the door of the apartment with a large bouquet of flowers and smiled when Felicity opened the door. “Hey there.”

“Hi, Tommy,” Felicity said.

Two blurs ran through the living room, followed closely by Oliver. They were all using cars to race on the wood floor. “I win! I win!” Matthew shouted.

“No fair, he cheated!”

“One more lap!” Oliver declared, spreading his arms wide. “We need a championship lap.”

“Ah, how the mighty have fallen,” Tommy said, grinning at Felicity. “Do you think he even sees I’m here?”
Felicity shrugged her shoulders and smiled. “He got used to spending a lot of time with the kids while he was recovering – we took a vacation together to Coast City – and I think they missed him today. I know he missed them.”

“I can wait, then. These are for you.”

“Oh, thanks!” Felicity took them. “Wow, Tommy, these are gorgeous.”

“You’re welcome. You should really say thank you to Laurel, though. She’s the one who insisted on something bright and cheerful and unostentatious. I tend to go big and bold.”

“Well, these are perfect. Thanks.”

“Tommy!” Oliver pushed himself upright and crossed the floor, wrapping Tommy in a hug. Tommy marveled at the strength in his friend’s body – no wonder it seemed he bounced off the pavement, the man was pure muscle. It was a little intimidating, really. “What brings you here?”

“A business proposition. I was hoping to catch you at the club, but you snuck off before I got a chance.”

“Ah, yes, I’m sorry about that,” Oliver said, gesturing down at Maddie and Matthew. “You guys remember Tommy, right? Say hi.”

“Hi,” they chorused.

“Why don’t you guys go to your room for a little bit?” Felicity asked. “I’ll come check on you in a second. Start cleaning up your mess. We’re going to do bedtime in a few minutes.”

“Aw, Mom!”

“Not a choice,” Felicity said firmly. “Listen, Tommy, I … I uh, don’t do the society wife thing very well but do you want some water or… something?”
“No, I’m fine, thanks, Felicity.”

Oliver took a seat on the couch and gestured for Tommy to sit opposite him. Felicity sat down right next to Oliver, and Tommy raised his eyebrows. Well. He should have seen that coming from a mile away.

“I think we should throw a benefit,” Tommy said, spreading his hands wide. “For the Firefighters of Starling City.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Oliver said.

“We can throw it at the club, keep the overhead low so we have more to give the Foundation,” Tommy said.

“Do you know -- this is a guy who once rented out a baseball stadium so he could play strip kickball with a bunch of cheerleaders?” Oliver asked Felicity, nudging her with his shoulder.

“How far the mighty have fallen,” Felicity said with a smile. “I think that’s a great idea, Tommy. I hear chaos coming from the twins’ room. I’d better go deal with that.”

“How’s Laurel doing?” Oliver asked Tommy while he watched Felicity walk away.

“She’s… dealing,” Tommy said. “I’m just doing my best to help her through.”

Oliver looked at him as the door to the twins’ room shut. “Everything else going okay?”

“We’re having a small debate over drawers,” Tommy said, smiling ruefully. “I think I deserve one, she thinks not.”

Oliver leaned forward and put his arms on his elbows in that intense way he’d had since they were kids. “Preservance, my man. You’re going to need it. I… I, uh think I really did a number on Laurel. And I wish I could take it back, you know…”
“Yeah, you were an asshole kid,” Tommy said. “But we were all asshole kids.”

“This is what I try to tell Felicity! But she insists I wasn’t as much of an asshole as I think I was.”

“Proof positive that she didn’t know you very well back then,” Tommy said, smiling. “Nah, man, she’s probably right, you know? You were an ass about a lot of stuff. But you were also a messed up kid. Both of us were. We’re better people now, right?”

“I like to think so,” Oliver said, staring down at his hands.

“So. You and Felicity, huh? Going to try and make that work?”

A smile crept over Oliver’s face. “We’re… taking it slow.”

“How slow?”

“Slow.”

“Ouch.”

“Hey, I’ve learned the value of patience. Good things come to those who wait.” Oliver shifted. “Besides, there’s still a lot we have to work out.”

“Like what?”

“Like – money.” Oliver shrugged. “Whether or not we can actually function as a couple…. You know. Little things.”

Tommy smiled. “But you’re happy? You’re excited?”
“I’m very happy,” Oliver said. “I’m very excited.”

“Good.” Tommy got up. “I don’t uh – I don’t have anything else and I think I hear your kids calling your name….”

“Weird, right?”

“Very weird. But good. Oliver, I’m just happy you’re happy.”

“Thanks.” Oliver took his hand, shook it hard and then wrapped him in a one-armed hug. “Thanks for picking up the slack at the club for me while I figured some of this out.”

“Hey. What are best friends for?”

**

“So – you’re leaving, then?” Felicity asked, as soon as the door closed.

“An hour or so,” Oliver said, taking off his jacket. “I want to make sure it’s full dark.” He looked around, noticing there were far fewer boxes than when he had left. “You were busy today.”

“Yes.” Felicity crossed the room. “I’m back to work tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “And… we’re dropping the kids off at daycare together?”

“I think that’s best, if you want,” Felicity said.

“Okay.”

Oliver stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels.
“Are you okay?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah. I’m just… thinking.”

“Dangerous,” Felicity said, crossing the room.

“The kids are asleep?”

“They’re waiting on you,” Felicity said. “They want kisses goodnight.”

Oliver closed his eyes. “Okay. We’re really doing this, then.”

“I don’t know any other way to do it than to really do it,” Felicity said. “Are you going to freak out on me?”

“No.” Oliver shook his head. “I just can’t believe it.”

“You deserve good stuff, Oliver,” Felicity said. “Believe it. It’s all going to be okay.” She patted his arm and headed to the kitchen to get glasses for the kids' bedtime water.

Oliver couldn’t help but wonder how long he would be able to have this life. Surely, somehow, someway, it would all come crashing down around his shoulders.

”Dad! Are you home?” Maddie called, and it snapped him out of his reverie, and he headed down the hallway to dispense kisses and cherish his children, for however long he would be allowed to enjoy them.
part viii: "burned" (ii/iii)

Chapter Summary

With his confidence still shaken, Oliver has to venture back out in the world of the vigilante and balance his new responsibilities as a live-in-father. Felicity, meanwhile, must cope with changes in her status among her coworkers, and the kids are adjusting to being Queens.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you, for the overwhelming response to the LAST chapter. I am so glad that you enjoyed it so! I promise, as usual, I will answer EVERY review. Unfortunately, it might be after midterms this week.

In the meantime, please enjoy this chapter!

Felicity fired up the laptop in the front room, crossing one leg over the other. She’d had a long day – and tomorrow, she was sure, would be longer, as she returned to work. She’d told herself, when she made the choice that she wanted to try and make something work with Oliver, that she wouldn’t stay up late at night, worried about him. She wouldn’t get obsessive. She wouldn’t… do exactly what she was doing.

Which was playing the worried wife, she thought. Sitting up on the couch, waiting for the lock to turn in the door and him to walk through. Whether that would be an hour from now or two hours from now.

Still, she decided, she could use the time to do some looking for Walter – they knew he’d been taken, but the FBI didn’t know anything, the police didn’t know anything. Felicity firmly believed that there was a trace of him somewhere, if he was still alive.

She set about strengthening their personal firewall. She couldn’t make it too obvious, of course, so as not to arouse suspicion, but she did want to have some shields in place so she could do the bare minimum amount of poking in dark corners at home.

While she was encrypting some files, her phone buzzed, and she checked her e-mail.
To: Felicity Smoak (fmsmoak@employee.qc.com)
From: Lois Lane (theloislane@thedailyplanet.com)
Subject: Tomorrow’s Paper
Attached: (oqueenandfam.docx)

Ms. Smoak,

You asked if you could get an advance copy of the article about you two before it goes live. I’m sorry but six hours is about all I could manage.

Regards,

Lois Lane

Felicity tapped her screen to bring the document up. With the first few words, she knew she was going to have to get a bigger glass of wine.

**

The heat was unbearable. Oliver hadn’t been injected with any super serum. The only thing he had going for him was five years where his every living breathing moment had been about survival. And lots of training, of course. But he didn’t have skin that was immune to the tongues of fire that crackled and sparked and burned all around him. He might have wasted a thought cursing Diggle and Felicity and their unrelenting spines when it came to making him into some sort of a hero.

The island had taught him that weren’t any heroes, after all. There were just survivors. And doing what you could to make things right. Like killing firemen who were killing other firemen.

Oliver crept around the corner and saw it happen – the attacker’s brutal strike, and the fall he was unable to stop of the other fireman into the sea of flames beneath the ladder.

Oliver knew enough to know there was nothing he could do, and he was just weak enough that the man’s attack put him out of commission.
He pulled himself barely upright and made his way out of the incinerated factory to sit by himself in an abandoned building nearby. He reached for his phone and closed his eyes. He couldn’t tell Laurel much – but perhaps he could tell her enough that she could do her thing.

“Hello?” she asked.

“I have some information for you,” he said.

By the time he was done, he had a clear choice: He could go home to Felicity, who was probably waiting up for him. Maybe waiting up for him. But perhaps she wasn’t. Which would be worse?

Or he could back to the Foundry and catch Diggle up on what had happened. Maybe take a shower, so he wouldn’t go home smelling like ash and burned human flesh.

Not that that smell was leaving his nostrils anytime soon. It was a smell, after all, he’d had some familiarity with. He knew its tendency to linger long past its welcome.

The shower at the club was small, but effective. He washed away the grime and the face paint and tried not to feel guilty that he hadn’t hit the gas on his car to run back home. His first night in the apartment with the kids and Felicity and he was out… what? Playing vigilante?

He got dressed quickly and grabbed his jacket, making his way through the Foundry. Diggle appeared, his hands in his pockets.

“So, what? Laurel’s on her own against a maniac who lights people on fire?” Diggle asked.

“I can’t… I can’t right every wrong in this city,” Oliver said. “And how am I supposed to do this, anyway?”

“No, I get that. What is it, exactly, that you don’t know how to do?”

“I know how to make things right. I know how to put the fear of God into people and I know how to kill people. I know how to lie. I know how to hide who I am from everybody. Here’s what I don’t know how to do. I don’t know how to do all that and then come home and look my children in the
“I don’t know, man, I think if something happens to Laurel because you stepped away from this one, it’s going to be pretty hard to look your kids in the eye anyway, don’t you?” Diggle shook his head. “Oliver, you had a choice, and you made it, right? You wanted to have those kids in your life in a big way. And then you wanted to date that girl and that’s fine. But you can’t go out there and do what you do if you’re going to have all this running through your head every time. You’ve got to do what all of us do. Put it in a box.”

“Put it in a box, huh.”

“Yes. Put it in a box. Oliver Queen and the Hood? They’re two different guys. And Laurel is going to need the Hood before this thing is over, you mark my words. Because here’s the thing about firebugs: they don’t stop unless you stop them. Laurel’s a capable girl. But do you really want her going toe to toe with this guy without backup?”

“I want my children to have a father.”

Diggle moved suddenly, just as Oliver’s instincts kicked in. He had Oliver pinned on the desk in just a few seconds. Then Oliver was able to shift his weight and get out of it.

“What did that prove, exactly?” Oliver asked.

“That you’ve still got it, somewhere. Oliver. This isn’t about this lunatic. This is about that other archer getting the best of you, isn’t it? He shook something inside you.”

“I didn’t used to care if I died. Now I do. It… changes things.”

“Good.” Diggle said. “You’ll be a better soldier for it. Maybe you won’t be as reckless, but you’ll be more intentful. Maybe you won’t jump off of buildings the way you used to – or maybe you will when you really need to. Change isn’t a bad thing. Being so scared of change that you find yourself paralyzed? That’s the bad thing.”

Oliver’s phone dinged, and he picked it up. “Text from Felicity,” he said. “I’ve got to run home.”
“Sure,” Diggle said. “Hey, Oliver?”

“Yeah.”

“You think about this real hard. Let me know if this is still what you want to do. Or if you want to give it all up.” Diggle stood up. “Because I don’t care either way. I think you owe it to Laurel to be there for her. I won’t lie about that. But if you’re giving up your mission, I’m going to need to find another job.”

Oliver nodded, and walked out of the Foundry, his hands in his pockets.

**

The front door opened and Felicity nearly jumped as Oliver walked in. “Oliver! You’re here!”

He widened his eyes. “Yes… I live here.”

“No, I know that,” Felicity said impatiently. “I’ve just been waiting for you to get here. Well, not waiting waiting, because that would be desperate, but just waiting of the normal variety. Because I had something to tell you. Wait. Breathing. 3… 2… 1. Let’s start with you. How did it go?”

“Ah,” Oliver said. “Well, I found myself in a burning building.”

“I’m going to need more wine,” Felicity said, and she stood up, a little unsteadily.

“Are you sure? I mean, you look a little…”

“You’ll understand why in a minute. Back to you. So you found yourself in a burning building.”

“Yeah. Diggle got wind of this fire that this guy probably set, and he couldn’t get ahold of anybody at the actual fire department who might believe him, so I went out there to try and save somebody’s life.”
“Tried?” Felicity asked, pushing her glasses up and getting out another wine glass.

“Yeah,” Oliver said. “I was too late.”

“I’m sorry,” Felicity said.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

Felicity looked at him and rolled her eyes. “I hate when people do that. I’m expressing sympathy for you, Oliver Queen. Just say thank you.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Do you know who…”

“No,” Oliver said. “I’ll find out on the news tomorrow.”

“We can send flowers,” Felicity said. “Something, certainly, right?”

“Of course,” Oliver said.

“You’re not, like… guilt ridden about this, are you?”

Oliver shrugged.

“I mean, it sucks, don’t get me wrong, but… could you have tried any harder?”

“I don’t know, Felicity.”
She narrowed her eyes and, taking the now-full wine glass, gave it to him. Then she pulled him down to her level by his neck and she kissed him, slowly and deliberately.

“What was that about?”

“I think you tried your hardest and now the only thing to do is to catch this guy, right?”

“Felicity…”

“What? For all we know this guy that died tonight might have family. Kids that will miss him. A wife that might miss him. Or maybe a mom, you know? We owe it to him to figure out who’s doing this and stop it, right?”

“We do?”

“Yes. We do. I keep telling you. You’re not alone anymore. We’re in this together.”

Oliver put his wine glass down. “Felicity, I don’t know what to say to that. I don’t know how to do this. Live with you. Be Oliver Queen the business man. Be the hood at night. Be who our kids need us to be.”

“So stop thinking about it so much and just do it,” Felicity said. “That’s how I get through the day.”

“You stop thinking?” Oliver asked, a note of teasing disbelief in his voice.

“Well, no. But it seemed like advice that might help you,” Felicity said, laughing.

Oliver pulled her close and kissed her again, his hands sliding down her arms, and then up again. He played with the hem of her t-shirt when he abandoned her arms, his thumb brushing the skin of her stomach.
“Oliver,” she whispered. “What are you doing?”

“I’m not thinking,” Oliver said.

“That’s a nice… thought,” Felicity managed, “but I’m not….”

“Just make out with me a little,” Oliver said, and then he chuckled. “I haven’t said that since middle school.”

“All right then,” Felicity said, “we’ll make out. But first and second base only, all right?”

“Wait. How are we defining bases?” Oliver asked. “Because I have to tell you…”

“Go until I say stop,” Felicity said, laughing, and she pushed him on the couch, straddling him boldly and laying another kiss on his lips.

“Go until you say stop,” Oliver said, musingly. “Hm…”

Felicity couldn’t help but laugh, until he had her shirt off in one smooth move, and her bra undone. “Slick,” she said.

“Are you?” Oliver asked, smiling.

“Oh, shut up,” she said, and then she rocked her hips against his. He groaned, and their mouths met, hands moving eagerly, bodies moving together on the couch until…

“Mama?”

Felicity closed her eyes. Thank God the voice was coming from inside Matthew’s room. “What’s going on, baby?”
“I don’t feel good.”

Felicity immediately reached for her t-shirt and pulled it back over her head. “Go to the bathroom if you don’t feel good. I’ll be there in a second.”

“Is Daddy home?”

“Yes,” Felicity said.

“Okay. Can I have a glass of water?”

“Do you not feel good?”

“I feel better,” Matthew said.

Felicity smiled and rolled her eyes. “I’ll get you a glass of water. Go back to bed, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Aren’t you going to get him a glass of water?”

Felicity shook her head. “No. He does this. He’s not really awake and he won’t remember what’s going on,” she said.

“Oh.”

“I had a feeling it would happen tonight. New place, new circumstances. Lots of big changes.” Felicity got off of his lap and pulled her t-shirt back on.
“What did you want to tell me?” Oliver asked, shifting his weight and hoping his condition wasn’t too obvious to her.

“Hm?”

“You said there was a reason you were tipsy?”

“OH.” Felicity sighed and reached for her laptop. “Lois Lane sent me over a copy of the article about us.”

“Did she now? That interview was like a month ago.”

“Apparently she went to various other sources. There’s a lot of information in there,” Felicity said. “Like about being accused of being the vigilante. And details about the sinking of the Gambit. And how I was the recipient of the Queen scholarship… She weaves a pretty good tale.”

“A pretty good tale?”

“She makes it sound like there was no way your mom didn’t know that you had kids,” Felicity said. “She makes it sound like this was one big… grand conspiracy. And that you and I have been in love all this time. Despite what we told her. Although she of course mentions that we deny it.”

Oliver sighed. “I guess… Do we want to fight this? I mean, is there something to fight?”

“No,” Felicity said. “It’s just now – now at work it’s going to be even more complicated. Or maybe not. Maybe they’ll leave me alone because they’re scared of you,” she said, teasingly.

“Are you really anxious about it that much?”

Felicity shrugged. “I don’t know if you have noticed this, but I’m not the easiest to get along with. I run my mouth all the time, I’m kind of a know-it-all, I like things to go my way…”

“Hey. Felicity.” Oliver reached for her hand. “No. You’re… the easiest person in the world to get
along with. I know exactly what you’re thinking all the time, because you tell me. If you’re a know-it-all, it’s because you know a lot and I would never want you to pretend to be anything less than what you are with me. And you raised twins all by yourself for four years without me. So if you like things your way, it’s probably because you’ve been doing it that way and it’s worked out so far, right?"

Felicity sighed. “Right.”

“So… maybe if people don’t like you at QC, we should just start hiring smarter people.”

“You know what, Oliver Queen, you are just … pretty sweet when you want to be.”

**

Oliver woke up just as dawn broke. He’d only gone to bed a few hours before, but he’d learned on the island that sunlight meant danger. Suddenly he could see, and everyone else could see, too. If you wanted to live, you woke when the sun woke.

So he rolled out of bed, passed Felicity’s door down the hallway, and started making breakfast. Sure enough, just as soon as the smell of bacon made its way down the hallway, he was greeted by two munchkins, who screeched in delight when they saw him.

“Hi Daddy!” Maddie nearly shouted.

“Shhh, don’t wake your Mom,” Oliver said. “She’s got a few more minutes before she absolutely has to be up.”

“I don’t like mornings,” Matthew grumbled, pushing himself up onto a barstool.

“Neither do I,” Oliver admitted. “But here we are, anyway. The start of another day.”

“Can we go to Raisa’s house and not to daycare?” Maddie asked.
“Why?” Oliver asked. “Don’t you like your teacher?”

“I like Raisa better.”

“Well, I do too,” Oliver said, “but you need to go to school so you can learn things and fill your head with good stuff.”

“Raisa’s teaching us how to speak Russian!” Matthew said. “That’s learning stuff. Can’t we go over there?”

“No,” Oliver said, but something tingled in the back of his mind. “Don’t you guys like it at QC Day School? Is something wrong?”

Maddie shrugged her shoulders. “It’s different than it used to be.”

Oliver raised his eyebrows. “It is?”

“Yeah,” Maddie said. “Everyone looks at us different. Ms. Tamara says it’s cause you own the building.”

“Oh.” Oliver fought the urge to slam things. “Well – people are probably just curious. Because uh, they don’t know me very well. And they didn’t know that you were my kids. So it will probably go away. Soon. Just keep going to school and having fun with your friends. And if it doesn’t, then… just let me know. We’ll figure something out, okay?”

Maddie and Matthew looked skeptically at each other. “Okay,” Maddie said.

**

Oliver and Felicity dropped the kids off at daycare, and Felicity went back to work, and Oliver headed to the fire station to make sure it was correct, one of the few details Tommy was trusting him with, something he would have been amused by, if he weren’t so grateful for it.

His phone rang as he got out of his car. “Hey.”
“Just making sure that you’re on your way.”

“Yes, Tommy. I’m actually right here… and so is Laurel,” Oliver said. “Listen, I’ll call you back when I have the list confirmed?”

“Sounds good,” Tommy said.

“Hey!” Oliver said, waving a hand. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m cleaning out Andrew’s locker,” Laurel said. “What are you doing here?”

Oliver waved his phone. “Making sure the guest list is accurate for Tommy.”

“Ah. He’s been working really hard on that,” Laurel said.

“Yeah, I think this club thing might actually be a success with Tommy on board,” Oliver said, smiling. “So… uh. I’ll see you around?”

“I saw the article.”

Oliver turned. “Which article?”

“Lois Lane’s.”

“Ah.” Oliver set his face. “Listen, you and I both know that… there was some truth there. But there wa…”

“I’m not worried about you being in love with me when the Gambit went down,” Laurel said, interrupting him.
“Ah, okay.”

“I mean, you were with Sara when the boat went down. I don’t think you loved either one of us like she wrote,” Laurel said.

“Laure, you gotta know…”

“It’s okay, Oliver.” Laurel took a breath. “I just thought maybe there was some truth to Moira knowing all along.”

“What?”

“Your mother was never as oblivious as you and Tommy liked to pretend she was,” Laurel said. “I had a feeling she always knew everything that went on between us.”

Oliver shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Mom…”

“I know it would be hard to absorb, but it is an awful lot of coincidence that Felicity got that scholarship so many years in a row without Moira knowing,” Laurel said.

“I… Okay.” Oliver closed his eyes and found himself counting backwards like Felicity. “I don’t think my Mom knew.”

“All right,” Laurel said.

“Well, I should go… confirm the guest list,” Oliver said.

“I should go, as well,” Laurel said. “Oliver?”

“Yeah?”

“You know – I’m not trying to be mean, right?”
“No, I know, Laurel. You’re a lot of things. Mean isn’t one of them.”

**

Felicity had a long, aggravating morning. Coworkers stopped by to see how she was doing, and they were all smiles, but it was easy to overhear the snide remarks about getting long vacations when you were sleeping with the boss’s son. But she held her head high and answered the slew of e-mails awaiting her.

She found herself fixing the harddrive of a vice president and resetting sixteen passwords before lunch, which wasn’t that unusual. What was unusual was the flood of texts she started getting from Oliver.

Oliver: hey
Felicity: hey
Oliver: are you working right now?
Felicity: wiping a harddrive atm. Virius ate it. What’s up?
Oliver: Ran into Laurel. Think we figured out the problem.
Felicity: Oh. Okay. Good.
Oliver: So. Here’s a thought.
Felicity: Yeah? Thoughts are good.
Oliver: I think maybe we should go on a date.
Felicity: …we should?
Oliver: Yes. Like maybe tonight. I know this friend that’s throwing a gala. Want to get dressed up and drink some booze for a good cause with me?
Felicity: … Yes.

It put a smile on her face, and she couldn’t let go of the goofy expression all day.

“Hey, Felicity, what’s with the big grin?” Jennifer, one of her coworkers asked.
“Oh, just… got a nice text, that’s all,” Felicity said, turning the phone off.

“So I read that article in the paper this morning,” Jennifer said. “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh. No. I’m completely okay.”

“Good,” Jennifer said. “Don’t let what people are saying get you down.”

“I.. actually hadn’t heard anything,” Felicity said, gritting her teeth. “Which is kind of how I’d like to keep it.”

“Yes, of course, dear,” Jennifer said. “It’s better not to expose yourself to that kind of poison, you know what I mean? Those of us that know you well know what kind of person you are.”

“Well… thank you,” Felicity said.

Her phone rang insistently. “I’ll have to get this.”

“Yes, of course. It might, after all, be Mr. Queen,” Jennifer said, and she left before Felicity could throw something at her.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Smoak? This is Mrs. O’Hara, at the QC Day School?”

“Hello,” Felicity said. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m afraid that Matthew took another fall on that bad arm. He’s been pretty distraught,” the director said.

Felicity glanced at her clock and sighed. At this rate, she wouldn’t be able to pay her own cell phone
bill. Then she remembered.

“Let me call his father really quickly. I’m at work and can’t step away right now,” Felicity said, “unless it’s serious.”

“No. We thought you might want to go and have it looked at, just in case,” Mrs. O’Hara said. “But we aren’t seriously concerned.”

“Okay, good,” Felicity said, and she was already texting Oliver.

Felicity: Take a break from being a hero to pick up our son? He fell at daycare on his cast-arm.

Oliver: On my way.

Felicity sighed and closed her eyes. Surely the day would get better, right? Surely it would.

Then another terrifying thought came to her. A gala? She was going to have to find another dress.
part viii: "burned" (iii/iii)

Chapter Summary

The saga of Garfield Lynz comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry. I will respond to reviews of the last chapter ASAP. I just got so far behind and I have an anxiety disorder so when I get behind I tend to feel guilty and when I feel guilty it's hard to motivate myself.... anyway! I will get to it. But I love and appreciate every single review. I can't say that enough. So... thank you. From the bottom of my heart. I sincerely hope you enjoy this chapter and this ending.

Oliver hung up the phone with Tommy, the last of the details sorted out between them just as the doors opened to the Queen Consolidated dayschool. He keyed in his security code and entered the facility, slipping his phone into his back pocket. He could hear the sound of sniffling coming from the main office, so he poked his head inside and saw Matthew, sitting on one of the rolling office chairs, holding his cast arm.

“Hey buddy,” Oliver said, pointedly ignoring the director, who was wringing her hands. “How’s it going?”

“My arm,” Matthew said.

“Yeah, we gotta be careful, don’t we?” Oliver said. “Mom wants us to go get it looked at. What do you say?”

“Is Maddie going to come?”

Oliver thought about it for a minute. “How about it being a just-us-guys trip?” Oliver asked.

Matthew brightened up. “Okay,” he said. “Can we get ice cream?”
“I think at this point it’s a certainty,” Oliver said, and then laughed when he saw Matthew’s confused expression. “Yes, little man. We can get ice cream.”

“Awesome!”

Oliver straightened himself up. “Is there someone who can help Matthew get his things while I talk to you?” he asked the director.

“Yes, of course, absolutely. Would you like to step inside my office?”

“Of course. This won’t take long,” Oliver said, stepping inside.

“Mr. Queen, I just want to assure you that everything was being done to supervise your children and…”

Oliver waved his hand. “I once bruised several ribs jumping from a roof into a pool. Matthew comes by it honestly.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I wanted to express my concern that—“ Oliver stopped and tried to find the right words, “I don’t want the children treated differently. I was willing to continue to give this facility a chance, even after such an egregious security leak, which has put the safety of my children and Felicity in danger, because I felt like the kids felt safe here, they felt secure. It’s important to me that they’re comfortable. But this morning, the twins both expressed to me that they aren’t. They’re being treated differently.”

“Mr. Queen, I assure you, it’s not intentional.”

Oliver nodded. “I don’t – I don’t want to remove the children from a facility like this. I think it’s important that they grow up with a sense of… hm, reality and perspective that I was not given as a child.”

“I understand completely, Mr. Queen.”
“In other words,” Oliver said, “please relax. I won’t get you fired. Unless there’s gross misconduct, of course. But we talked about that before.”

The director swallowed and smiled. “Yes, of course, Mr. Queen.”

“Okay then,” Oliver said, feeling as though perhaps he’d done more damage than he had good, considering the woman’s smile was oddly frozen on her face. He nearly sighed but managed to hide it as he left the office to greet Matthew. “Ready to go, Matthew?”

“Yes!” Matthew’s tears were fading fast, and Oliver had a feeling that he was going to be just fine. Oliver held his hand on the way down the elevator, listening to the boy tell the story of how’d jumped SO HIGH and landed on his arm. Oliver winced. The break was still healing and he knew how much any jostling could hurt, never mind a full-on-impact.

Just as soon as they got down the elevator, though, Oliver realized they were going to run into trouble. The whole front of the building was swarming with reporters. Oliver led Matthew out the back to the parking garage. They made it nearly to the car before he heard the shout.

“Mr. Queen! Just a few questions, Mr. Queen!”

Oliver tossed Matthew’s Spiderman backpack into the back seat, and then helped the boy in as well before he firmly shut the door.

“Mr. Queen, I appreciate you taking the time to…”

“No,” Oliver said. “Get out.”

“Mr. Queen…”

“I mean it. This is private property. I have already alerted security.”

“Mr. Queen –“
“Not with my kid, do you understand me?” Oliver fairly growled, taking a few steps forward. “You don’t come onto my private property and harass me with my kid right there. You want to stalk me, that’s fine. You leave my kids alone.”

The reporter was busily scribbling in a notebook, so Oliver wrenched it from him and hurled it as far away as he could and smirked at the reporter’s incredulous look. “Fetch,” he said, through gritted teeth, and he got in the back seat, indicating that the driver should leave.

“Daddy?” Matthew asked.

“Yeah?”

“it’s not nice to take other people’s things.”

“No, it’s not,” Oliver said, closing his eyes. “I lost my temper.”

“Mama would make you apologize.”

Oliver chuckled. “I’m not sure she would in this case. I’m sorry, Matthew. I will do better in the future, okay?”

“Okay,” Matthew said, seemingly satisfied. “Is the doctor going to poke me today?”

“He might have to, to check out that break,” Oliver said. He caught the lip mid-quiver, though and tried to side step his son’s concerns. “Hey, are you looking out the window right now? Isn’t that a cool dump truck?”

Crisis averted. Momentarily.

**
Felicity watched her phone until it rang, late in the day. “Yes, Oliver? How’d it go?”

“No damage,” Oliver said, “just some more bruising and swelling. Doctor says he should take it easy and prescribed an anti-inflammatory.”

“Oh, okay,” Felicity said, closing her eyes. “So not the end of the world then.”

“No. Listen, I didn’t grab Maddie. I thought it might be easier to do one of them at the doctor.”

“That makes sense,” Felicity said, looking at the clock. “I can wrap up here and take Maddie, then.”

“Be careful on your way home,” Oliver said, “Matthew and I were nearly cornered in the parking garage by a reporter.”

Felicity sighed. “Okay.”

“Hey, we knew this going to happen, right? A short burst of intensity and then, when we’re not interesting anymore, they’ll go away.”

Felicity chuckled. “Well, it’s a good thing we never do anything interesting then, is it?”

Oliver laughed, too. “Okay. I’ll see you at home tonight?”

“Yes. Oh. Oliver?” Felicity closed her eyes and told the dancing butterflies in her stomach to stop. “About the gala tonight. I don’t know if I can.”

“Why?”

Felicity swallowed. “I don’t have anything to wear. Besides the Christmas dress, of course, but I was photographed in that already and isn’t that some major faux-pas?”
“Don’t worry about it,” Oliver said.

“What do you mean don’t worry about it?”

“Thea’s on it,” Oliver said. “I got in touch with her earlier, explained the situation. She’s meeting you at the townhouse with some options.”

“Oliver!”

“What?” She could hear the laughter in his voice. “I’m just trying to do a nice thing here, Felicity.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Felicity said. “Well, I guess it’s all right.”

“Of course it is. See you soon.”

**

Thea walked into her mother’s room and saw Moira half-laying on her bed, flipping through old photos. It was a coping mechanism Thea was familiar with. After Oliver and her father had been declared dead, Moira had spent weeks agonizing over scrapbooks, pouring over old Polaroids and candids, obsessing about memories that seemed too far away to touch for Thea. She nearly sighed as she stood in the doorway, and gave herself points for not rolling her eyes.

“So many of these old photos,” Moira said. “I really should have them scanned in…”

“I’m going over to Felicity and Oliver’s place,” Thea said, crossing her arms. “I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Moira rolled over and looked at her. “Why are you going over there?”

“Oliver and Tommy are throwing some sort of benefit at the club and Felicity needs help with a dress, or so Oliver says.” Thea shrugged. “Hopefully I’m not overstepping my bounds. But I have a few cute things I haven’t worn yet.”
“I see,” Moira said flatly. “All right then.”

“Unless there’s something else you’d rather do,” Thea said, taking a step closer.

“Like what?”

“Dinner, a movie? Anything where you’d be spending some time outside of this house with me? You could come see Oliver and Felicity’s new place. It’s really nice.”

“I’m sure it is,” Moira said, with something that might be called sarcasm. “No, I’m much too tired to go out and about.”

“That is just amazing, Mom, because you’ve been in bed all day.”

“Don’t presume to know what I’m going through.”

Thea’s temper flared. “Don’t you presume to know what I’m going through! I lost my Dad and my step dad and now Oliver’s moved out and my mother spends all day staring at photographs instead of spending time with the one family member she’s got that still breathes the same oxygen she does so excuse me if I’m running a little low on patience right now.”

“Thea Queen!”

“You don’t get to play the indignant parent when you refuse to actually parent, Mom,” Thea said. “I’ll be back when I get back.”

“Thea!”

The door slammed behind her, and Thea took several deep breaths in and out. There was nothing to be done for it – Moira would do what she would do. The servants would tip-toe around her, and Thea Queen would be left to raise herself. Like she had been doing since was twelve and she lost her brother and her father.
And her mother.

She walked to her room, feeling a little defeated, but she swiftly went through her things, pulling out glittery numbers, things with straps, things that were daring and flashy. If Felicity was going as Oliver’s date, then they were going to make a media splash – no way the press let that go, so she would want something that would photograph well… Thea lost her mind to the fashion task at hand and tried to ignore the hurtful words she’d shouted at her mother just minutes before.

**

Oliver opened the door of the townhouse, looking a little sheepish. “Thanks for meeting me here. I would hate to take Matthew back to daycare for forty-five minutes.”

“Not a problem, man,” Diggle said, bending down to give Matthew a high-five. “How you doin’, little dude?”

Matthew grinned a chocolate-ice-cream grin. “I’m so good!’

“They gave him some medicine to make the pain go away,” Oliver explained. “And then we had ice cream.”

“Ah, he’s in four-year-old heaven right now, huh?”

“Something like that. Hey, Matthew, Daddy and Mr. Diggle have to discuss business really quickly. Will you run to your room for a few minutes and then I’ll come get you and we can play for a while?”

Matthew wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want to.”

“I’m not really asking,” Oliver said, his voice hardening.

“I don’t want to!”
Oliver took a deep breath in. This was the first real time either of the twins had tested him on, well… anything. But he’d seen Felicity deal with this kind of stuff plenty. “Right now,” he said.

“No!”

Oliver took Matthew’s hand firmly. “Say good-bye to Mr. Diggle.”

“No! Don’t want to! Noooooooo!”

Oliver figured it was a combination of the pain, the ice cream, and the long day that was making his four-year-old behave like a two-year-old, but it still made him grit his teeth as he walked the boy back to his room.

“It’s important,” Oliver said, “that I can trust you to listen to me when I tell you to do something. Play in here for a few minutes and I will be right back.”

He shut the door, ignoring the screaming on the other side of it.

“It’s been kind of a long day in the world of Oliver Queen, hm?” Diggle asked.

Oliver lifted one corner of his mouth in a smile. “You could say that.”

“I’m sorry if I came down on you a little harsh earlier.”

Oliver shrugged. “It’s nothing. I got a phone call from Laurel. The first of the fireflies to die was Garfield Lynz.”

“Yeah well, being dead kind of rules him out as a murder suspect, right?”

“All of the fireflies had that same tattoo that the man I fought did,” Oliver said. “In the Nodel tower fire, many of the bodies were so badly burned they couldn’t be identified. What if Garfield Lynz
didn’t die?”

Diggle cocked his head to the side. “That presents some intriguing possibilities.”

“That’s what I thought.”

The door opened and Felicity walked in with Madelyn. “Oh, hi, Dig!” she said brightly. “How’s it going?”

He shrugged. “Good as ever.”

“Awesome. Listen, are you sawing our son’s limbs off in there?” she asked.

Oliver shrugged. “He’s overtired and he didn’t want to listen.”

“Ah,” she said, nodding. “Makes sense. Well, hopefully this means he goes down easy for Raiza tonight.”

“Let’s hope. Hey Princess, how’s it going?” he asked Maddie.

“Good!” she said brightly. “Is Matthew going to be okay?”

“Yep,” Oliver said, nodding at Felicity as she walked down the hallway to check on Matthew. “How was school?”

“It was okay. Is Raiza coming to see us tonight?”

Oliver nodded. “Just for a little bit. Your Mom and I are going to leave right before bedtime and we’ll be back late.”

“Okay,” Maddie said, and she took off running.
“Cute kids you’ve got there, Oliver. I’m going to take off and make sure everything is in place for security at the gala,” Diggle said.

“Thanks,” Oliver said, shaking Diggle’s hand. “I appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it.”

**

Between Matthew’s meltdowns, which were regular until they finally convinced him to go to sleep, and Maddie’s non-stop chatter and wearing shoes which were higher than she normally liked and teasing her hair into submission and taking eyeliner tips from an eighteen-year-old, by the time they were ready to leave for the gala, Felicity’s nerves were already frazzled. Then Thea took one look at her and pronounced her camera-ready and Felicity tensed.

“Oh my God,” she moaned. “I didn’t even think about it.”

“Oliver’s smart, he knows what he’s about,” Thea said. “This is a smaller event, and the press won’t be expecting you two to attend together, so they’ll be caught-off guard. Just keep moving, try to look away from the flashes and hold on to Ollie. He’ll get you through the door safely. Don’t answer any questions if you don’t feel like it.”

“What am I doing?” Felicity asked, shaking her head.

“You’re supporting my brother trying to make a better man out of himself,” Thea said. “Which, by the way, means a lot to me. I’m sorry that some of the downsides are rather, you know, epic and sucktastic.”

“No, it’s… I’m not, I mean…” Felicity sighed and counted backwards in her head. “We just don’t even know where we’re going.”

“So… don’t comment about it. You’re there as the mother of Oliver’s children and as a member of the Queen family. Keep your chin up and don’t take any shit.”
Felicity chuckled. “Do you want to come and be the coach in my ear?”

“I would really, really like that,” Thea admitted, “but I think I should probably go back home and make sure Mom doesn’t… I don’t know, overdose on Polaroid fumes or something.”

“Everything going okay at home?”

Thea shrugged. “Mom hasn’t left her room in a few days and she’s barely talking to me. I lost my temper and I yelled at her today.”

Felicity’s eyebrows furrowed and she drew the younger woman into a hug. “I’m sorry. I know. Relationships with our mothers can be… complicated animals.”

“I would just appreciate it if she acted like she gave a shit about me, you know? Oliver and Dad’s boat went down and she shut down. And I tried for days to get her to show up for me. I begged and pleaded. I needed my mom. But she wouldn’t, not for me. Then Walter showed up, and all of a sudden she’s leaving the house? I mean, I’m glad she got better but it still kind of made me sick that she didn’t do that for me. She did that for some guy. And now she’s doing it again. Watch Malcolm Merlyn prance back into our lives and turn her into Ms. Perky again.”

“Thea…” Felicity pulled back. “Oh, hon.”

“I just… I really need a mom, you know? I don’t have any of this shit figured out, and she’s supposed to be around to help me, isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Felicity admitted.

“Anyway. I get to be her nursemaid and her cheerleader and her mother until she snaps out of it, I guess.”

“Do you want me to go talk to her?” Felicity asked.
“No, I think that might make things worse,” Thea said on a laugh, wiping her eyes. “God, I’m sorry. I just cried all over you.”

“It’s fine. That’s what friends are supposed to be for, right?”

Thea smiled. “Right.”

They left Felicity’s room, turning off the light, and went down the hallway to say goodnight to Maddie. Matthew had passed out long before. Raisa sat in the living room, reading a book.

“Oh, Ms. Felicity, you look absolutely lovely,” she said. “Ms. Thea has excellent taste, I’ve always said.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said. She didn’t normally wear this shade of grey but it sparkled all over and caught the light and she hadn’t been able to resist the frock hanging on the counter. She was taller than Thea so it rode up a little more than she might have wanted if she had bought the dress in a store, but it was by no means indecent.

Oliver came through the front door holding a bouquet of roses.

“Awww, isn’t that sweet,” Thea cooed. “You’re going for the big damn romantic gesture!”

“Shush, Thea,” Oliver said. “One of these is for you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Thea said. “It’s honestly a lot more fun than anything else I would be up to tonight.”

Oliver handed the rest of the roses to Felicity, who couldn’t resist the stereotypically female gesture of raising them to her nose and inhaling their fragrance. “They’re lovely, Oliver.”

“I will put them in some water, Ms. Felicity,” Raisa said, getting off of the couch.

“Oh, you don’t have to…”
“I can make it look pretty. You trust me?”

“Of course,” Felicity said.

“Good. I very much like arranging flowers,” Raisa said, smiling. “You take Mr. Oliver and have a good time, yes?”

“You know where Matthew’s medicine is if he needs it,” Oliver said. “And we’ll both have our cell phones on.”

“Yes, yes, of course, Mr. Oliver. Shoo!” Raisa pushed them and Thea out the front door and shut the door behind them.

“Well.” Felicity said, turning to Oliver. “I guess we’re on our way?”

“I guess we are.”

**

Tommy had really outdone himself this time, Oliver thought. Trying to impress Laurel had turned out to be a powerful motivator for his friend. The music was good, the decorations were fine and…

“Felicity?”

“Hm?”

“Are you okay?”

She was blinking rapidly. “I’m fine. Just a little blind.”
“Yeah,” Oliver said, shrugging. “You don’t ever get used to that. I’m sorry, by the way. I didn’t think it would be quite that bad.”

“No one called me a whore,” Felicity said. “So that’s a victory. Oh look, someone’s coming around with wine.”

Oliver felt the smile nearly split his face as he flagged the waiter over and got a flute of the stuff for Felicity. “Thank you,” he said under his breath.

“Oh, is that Tommy and Laurel?” Felicity asked.

“I think so.”

“Her dress looks amazing on her. Can I just say, I totally get the whole long-term relationship thing you had going with her because she is gorgeous. And oh wow. My mouth is just… running away tonight, isn’t it?”

Oliver chuckled. “I like it.”

“You would.”

“Oliver!” Tommy said, pulling away from what looked like an intense kiss. “I didn’t realize you were bringing Felicity! You look beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Well, you really should thank Thea. She saved me. Laurel, that is a beautiful dress.”

“Thank you.”

Oliver spotted the fire chief and nodded his direction at Felicity. “Tommy, do you mind if I borrow Laurel for just a second? There’s someone we need to talk with.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows, faking surprise well enough. “Sure, abandon Tommy and I. We’ll just
drink without you.”

Oliver chuckled and led Laurel over to the fire chief, which is how he ended up on the opposite side of the building from Felicity when Garfield Lynch came out of the crowd to murder the fire chief.

He couldn’t look for her – he had to trust that Tommy would get her out. As soon as he got the opportunity, he sent Laurel out of the building and ran down to the basement, changing as quickly as he’d ever changed.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thought to himself. He should have realized that a benefit would be an open target for someone like Garfield Lynz, and he’d put hundreds of people in danger.

He felt the now-familiar lick of flames against his skin as he navigated the burning building. He saved the fire chief’s life and did his best to talk Lynz out of suicide but… there was nothing for it.

IN Oliver’s long experience, when someone wanted to be dead, there was very little you could do to persuade them otherwise.

Still. As the firefighters worked to put out the flames and he changed back into his Oliver Queen suit, he could only think of one thing:

Felicity. And Laurel and Tommy – making sure everyone had made it out okay.

He found them huddled in a group outside of the club.

“Oliver! Where were you?” Laurel demanded.

“I went to see if I could get the sprinkler system to kick in,” Oliver said. “I thought it might buy us some time.”

“Well, we’ll definitely need a new one of those. It was a complete failure,” Tommy said, his tie loosened and a frown on his face while they watched their hard work go up in flames.
“Everyone made it out alive,” Felicity said. “It could have been far worse.”

“Now we’ve got an opportunity to build it from the ground up,” Oliver said. “I think I’ll choose to be excited about that.”

“You’re demented,” Tommy said, shaking his head. “A real looney tune, Oliver Queen.”

“Naw, just resilient,” Felicity said, nudging Oliver with her hip.

“Hey, anybody else feel like Big Belly Burger?” Oliver asked.

“I think I’d like to drown my sorrows in a very large milkshake,” Tommy agreed.

“Lead the way!” Laurel said, and Oliver reached for Felicity, drawing him into her side.

“Is everything really okay?” Felicity asked in a whisper.

“Every innocent person made it out alive. You made it out alive and unharmed.” Oliver said.

“Not even singed!” Felicity boasted.

“That’s… that makes me more than okay. That’s everything.”
dvd extra: not every nightmare ends in tears

Chapter Summary

Oliver struggles in the aftermath of the fire at Verdant, but he and Felicity take another step together in building the intimacy of their relationship.

(Totally consensual, fun and silly sexy times alluded to, but not graphically described herein)

Chapter Notes

UGH. Okay, so this DVD Extra took forever. And I wanted you to have this before we dived into "Trust But Verify" and all of the awesome Thea stuff that will happen in that chapter and the things that will do to our heroes' relationship. I'm so sorry to have taken so long, but as previously discussed, my mental health is tenuous at best from time to time, so I wanted to make sure this chapter was the absolute best I could do because I feel like you all deserve it.

THANK you for the comments and the kudos and the love and support. Seriously every comment on the last chapter made me bawl. Thanks for being the loveliest fandom to me so far.

This chapter would not be here without Grace, and Effie, and Abbie. So you should thank them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’d had this dream before. That didn’t mean it didn’t shake him down to the very core, undermine his feelings of safety and contentment.

It always started the same: the dance floor at Verdant, the night of the firemen gala. The decorations were lovely, the sound from the speakers shook the floor and the decorations sparkled in the very expensive lighting Tommy had paid for. It was all the same. Until Oliver spotted the chief of the fire station across the room and left – no matter how hard he fought to stay, his feet moved him across the room and then, just when he could no longer see Felicity, the room caught on fire.

Not in the way it had that night, but with an unholy fervor. The bar went up in flames, and the room grew so hot Oliver could feel sweat pouring from his body. He tried to push people out of his way. He tried to shout at Felicity to get out, but she didn’t listen. None of them listened.
And then they were consumed by flames: Felicity, Laurel and Tommy, right in front of his face. And the burn scars on his back and his abdomen ached in sympathy and in the dream he shouted himself hoarse.

But he woke up paralyzed. Terror gripped him for long seconds before he managed to suck in breaths and push himself out of bed. Like a robot, like the man in the dream unable to control his own feet, he moved down the hallway softly, the way Shado had taught him, rolling his feet, inhaling and exhaling as quietly as a ghost. He pushed open Felicity’s doorway, which groaned a little in protest, and looked in on her. Saw her blue comforter moving up and down slowly and rhythmically as she breathed in and out.

“You’re staring at me,” Felicity said under her breath. “I swear your eyes weigh like four hundred pounds.”

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said, pushing himself off the door jamb and turning to go.

“Listen, did you have a bad dream?” Felicity asked without moving.

“Yeah, I did. Do you think I’m one of the kids right now?”

“No, but I have more experience with their bad dreams than with yours,” Felicity said, sitting up slowly and reaching for her glasses. “What’s the deal, Oliver?”

“It’s nothing. I just was checking on you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m okay, Oliver. We all got out okay.”

“I know.” Oliver rubbed his hands over his face. “I know that. And I’m not… freaking out or anything.”

“Your words, not mine,” Felicity said, and she threw the comforter off of her body and patted the mattress next to her. “Why don’t you come check on me in here?”

Oliver lifted his eyebrows. “Really?”
“Really,” she said. “It’s four in the morning. If either of our children wake up in the next two hours, there will be murder in this house.”

Oliver chuckled and crossed the room, crawling in bed with her and wrapping himself around her, laying his head on her stomach. She buried her hands in his hair and felt the strands between her fingers, her nails lightly scratching his scalp.

It felt good. It felt more than good, really. He kissed her stomach and curved into the touch. It didn’t feel entirely innocent. But it wasn’t entirely sexual either. It was the kind of touch he craved. Sex, he could get. Love? That was hard to come by sometimes.

“I dream about it sometimes, too,” Felicity said. “I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared in my life.”

“Really? You seem to be handling it fine.”

“I have an iron mask,” Felicity said, with a smile that just barely reached the corners of her mouth, “but it didn’t escape me that Maddie and Matthew could have lost both of their parents that night.”

“I know,” Oliver said. “That’s – that’s what’s keeping me up at night. Honestly? I think I could use your help more. When I do – things seem to go – better. But I don’t want you close to me if being close to me is going to expose you to danger like the club being set on fire.”

“Hm,” Felicity said. “Well, there is an argument to be made that everyone has to die sometimes. That perhaps I could get hit by a bus tomorrow and it wouldn’t have anything to do with whether or not I was helping out the vigilante. But then, I don’t go sky diving for a reason.”

Oliver snorted.

“But,” Felicity continued, laying her head against the headboard, “there’s an element to this I’m not sure you have considered fully.”

“What’s that?”
“Matthew and Maddie just got their father back,” Felicity said. “And they deserve to have you around Oliver, they really, really do. So if you think having me around might help you be… I don’t know. Smarter. Safer… I think you should utilize me. You’re sleeping in my bed, so, keeping your distance other ways is kind of a moot point, don’t you think?”

“I guess.”

“And I should mention,” Felicity continued, “that I am really, really glad that you are back as well.”

“Are you now?” Oliver sat up, bringing his face close to hers, a hair’s breadth away from their lips touching.

“Oh yes.” Felicity said. “I’m… hm. You could say I’m happy to have you around.”

“Just happy?” Oliver closed the distance between their mouths and kissed her. It started playful. Little nips of the tongue, little touches, and then Felicity spread her legs and rocked her hips up against his and it was like a switch went off in his brain.

“For now,” Felicity muttered, and Oliver kissed his way down her neck.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Very definitely sure,” Felicity said. “More sure than I was the first time around.”

Oliver started laughing. “The first time around you had your panties off before we got to the hotel room.”

“See. I’m very, very sure.”

Felicity pulled her pajama top over her head and slipped her hand under the waist band of Oliver’s boxers.

“Felicity…” he hissed as her hand wrapped around him, and her thumb brushed across the head of
his cock.

“I think I’ve gotten better at this over the years,” Felicity said. “It will be interesting to see what you think.”

“I, ah… thought you were pretty good the first time around.”

Felicity just grinned up at him.

**

The first time it was quick, hurried – murmurs of shhh, neither one of them quite used to doing this with their children just down the hall. The first position they tried didn’t work quite the way they remembered, so they tried again, and again… and Oliver at least got Felicity off once before he came, but when it was all over they were both panting, sweating like they’d run a race.

The next time – they took it a little bit slower. They’d eased the immediate ache. Now they could indulge the hunger. Lips lingered over skin, hands found places that induced shivers. Felicity crawled on top of him and sank until she bottomed out and rode him to completion and when she put all of her weight on his knees and leaned back so he could play with her nipples – well, he might have been comfortable dying right then. It was about the happiest he’d ever been.

Sex hadn’t made him feel this good in – well… A long time. Not since the first few times with Laurel, really, he thought, when there was so much there. So much potential. So much hope that things might turn out for the better, that he might somehow rise above all of his – Oliverness and become a good man.

“Well, I’m going to come right out and say it,” Felicity said, rolling off him and giggling. “You are better at that than you were the first time.”

“I’m a little out of practice,” Oliver said, rolling over to cup a breast, just because it was there and it felt nice under his hands and he could now. “So I’ll only get better.”

“Will we survive?” Felicity asked, and Oliver just had to kiss her. He couldn’t stop himself, really, from touching, kissing, holding… she was here, and she was real, and she was choosing to stay, knowing everything about him – well, if not everything, knowing more about him than any other
woman who was still alive.

“Yes,” Oliver said. “We will survive.”

Felicity seemed to go still. She rolled over, into his side, and closed her eyes for a long minute. “I told you, the last time we got close like this, that I’d ask about the scars someday.”

Oliver felt the muscles slowly start to tense. “Felicity…”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.” Felicity raised up on her elbow. “I know a thing or two about some stories just needing to stay buried. Not everything has to be discussed to death.”

“Okay,” Oliver said, his voice trailing off, unsure of where this was going.

“But if you wanted to, sometime, I could listen.”

Oliver swallowed. “Most of them are bullet wounds. A few are from when I was stabbed. A few are from being tortured – whips, canes, that kind of thing.”

“Oliver.” Her hand laid flat on his chest. “I didn’t… where…”

“The island. And… other places.” Oliver tried to sit up, but Felicity’s gentle pressure kept him right where he was.

“I don’t want to freak you out or make you run,” Felicity said. “I’m just… I’m just sorry that you went through so much.”

Everybody has to go through a crucible,” Oliver said. “Mine’s just the lucky kind that leaves visible scars.”

Felicity nodded, slowly. He took her hand in his and threaded their fingers together.
They fell asleep like that.

**

“Matthew! I found them!” Maddie’s voice was piercing enough to cut through walls. Felicity was sure their next-door neighbors could hear her. “What are you two doing in the same bed?”

“Sleeping,” Felicity said, opening one eye. “How’d you two get in?”

“Turned the handle,” Matthew said smugly.

“Didn’t you lock the door?” Felicity asked Oliver.

“Nope, I had other things on my mind.”

Felicity smirked. “Okay. Everybody out. Daddy and I will get up and make pancakes.”

“We will?”

“Yes.” Felicity bent and kissed him. “For some reason, I am very, very hungry.”

Oliver grinned at her.

"Are you two gonna kiss again? I'm hungry," Matthew whined.

"Just once, buddy," Oliver said. And he made that good morning kiss an especially good one. Felicity was a little unsteady when she pulled away. There was something in his eyes that had been missing for a long time -- something like joy. It almost made her mist up, so she cleared her throat.

"I'm serious! Everyone out who wants food!"
"I'm hungry, but not for food," Oliver whispered to her after the kids left.

"Oh my God, you could not get more cheesy if you tried," Felicity said, laughing. "Besides, we don't have time for that. Not with those kids in pancake mode."

"Raincheck?" Oliver asked.

Felicity cupped his face, unable to resist, and kissed him one more time. "Any time you want."

Chapter End Notes

I blather on a lot about Arrow, and my real life, and post exclusive drabbles on my tumblr, so follow me there if you wish:

storiesbyladychi.tumblr.com
part ix: trust but verify (i/iii)

Chapter Summary

Felicity and Thea spend quality time together and Oliver and Diggle have a slight disagreement. ...Slight.

Chapter Notes

Mea culpa. I apologize profusely for this taking forever. There are lots of reasons. Most of them very good -- school, mental health -- but I am back. I cannot promise quick updates, but I can promise a sincere effort to finish this story before the end of summer.

Sunlight streamed in through the window, as the shades were thrown open. Someone was cheerfully humming in her room, and Thea Queen did not approve.

“Ugh, no thank you. Whatever it is,” she said, mostly into her pillow.

Her birthday was coming up in just a few days. She would be eighteen, and officially an adult, with increased access to her trust fund and the ability to move the hell out, if she wanted to – something she was considering since her mother seemed to oscillate between competency and despair these days. Her friends had decided that celebrations were in order, and so the night before, they had hit ever club they had an in at – which meant pretty much every club but Verdant, which Oliver only let her into if he was personally there to watch her.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, since I have a rare day away from the kids and I would very much like to take you shopping. You’ve got a dress to buy for a party, right?”

Thea opened one eye and saw Felicity Smoak, her brother’s current… whatever, standing at the end of her bed. It was a shame her head was pounding so, because she really did like Felicity and enjoyed spending time with her.

“Wasn’t Mom supposed to do that?”

“She was. Unfortunately, she got called away to a meeting at Merlyn Global. She called and asked if
I’d be willing to do it, since you’re so crunched for time with the party prep.”

“You don’t have to, you know,” Thea said, curling tighter into her pillow. “I can go by myself. You don’t have to step in and pretend to be my mom.”

“I assure you, I have zero intention of ever pretending to be your mother,” Felicity said. “For starters, I don’t think even on my best day, I could be that scary.”

Thea snorted.

“I just thought it might be nice,” Felicity said softly. “Raisa has the kids, Oliver’s got something going on with Diggle…”

“Yeah, of course,” Thea said, rubbing her eyes. “Just – giving me a minute to get myself together.”

“I’ve got a glass of my patented hangover cure downstairs in the kitchen whenever you’re ready.”

“Might be an hour or so to put myself together.”

Felicity shook her tablet. “I brought something to entertain me. I might even make it all the way through my e-mails without being asked for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

“You make motherhood sound so glamorous.”

“Oh, it’s non-stop glamour, all the time,” Felicity said, grinning from ear to ear. “I’ll see you when you’re ready.”

“Okay.”

Thea waited until the door shut behind Felicity before she swung her feet over the side of her bed and ran her hands through her hair. What, exactly, she wondered, had she taken? Her mouth was dry, her hands were shaky. Clearly someone had made sure she made it home okay, but she didn’t remember large portions of the night before. It made her unsteady.
She looked over herself, starting at her toes and going all the way up to her neck. There were a few bruises she didn’t recognize, but she hadn’t gotten a tattoo or done anything as permanent as that. She drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and reached for her phone.

A few texts from friends, making sure she made it home all right – thankfully she’d replied to them so no one had come looking for her, and one text mentioning how crazy she’d been. Her friend Kenzie had sent her one that read: “grl, I kno now 2 stay away from that crzy Vertigo shit”.

Thea’s eyes widened. Vertigo. So that’s what she’d taken. Her friends, she remembered vaguely, had promised that she would be able to forget whatever was on her mind and be able to relax and enjoy the night. She would have to remember the name.

But for now – she had to put herself together. Queens always partied hard, but never so hard they couldn’t hide it the next morning, Thea believed. So she stepped into the shower and started her routine for the day.

**

Oliver worked steadily through his workout routine. It varied, a little, from day to day, but there was a rhythm to it that he appreciated. He didn’t have to think about it too hard. He could allow himself, for instance, to think about other things while he put his body through its paces. Or, he could choose to think about nothing at all.

Like, for the moment, he was definitely not thinking about Felicity’s skin under his hands, or the noises she made when they moved together in the night. He was not thinking about how he was going to keep her safe. He was not worrying about his children, spending the day with Raisa because they were still having issues with returning to school.

“What did that dummy ever do to you?” John Diggle asked, as he came down the stairs into the Foundry.

Oliver laughed as he executed another forearm block. “Nothing. Just working through some things.”

“Things with Felicity not going well?” Diggle asked, removing his jacket so that he could start putting his own workout gear on.
“Things with Felicity are going…” He searched for the right word. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

The start of a smile creeped around the edges of his mouth. “More than fine. I’m feeling really good, Diggle.”

“Well, that’s nice to see.”

“I’m feeling good and I think it’s time we get back to what we set out to do,” Oliver said.

“The list?” Diggle asked.

“The list.”

**

Felicity waited patiently while Thea pulled herself back together. The girl was obviously hungover and tired. Felicity had been there herself, more than a few nights in college, before she’d had the twins. And Thea’s life was … well. It didn’t appear to be easy, even from the outside looking in.

She answered several e-mails and messed around on social media. It took nearly a full hour for Thea to come down the stairs, coiffed and perfect, but Felicity didn’t really mind. There was something soothing about the quiet of the Queen kitchen when no one was around. It was the only really homey room in the entire mansion – everything else felt too planned and designed for her tastes.

But the kitchen was Raisa’s domain. It often smelled of baking things, and while it was immaculately clean while not in use, while Raisa was cooking there were often pots and pans scattered everywhere. She was Russian by birth, but she’d come over to America in the eighties, and Raisa loved George Michael and Wham and Flock of Seagulls completely unironically, and often had that music playing lowly while she worked.
Felicity liked Raisa and understood her in ways that she didn’t think she would ever understand Moira. Which was sad, she thought, considering that she was sleeping with Oliver.

Sleeping with Oliver. On a consistent and regular and extremely fun basis, Felicity thought. Wasn’t that a headtrip and a half. She would never have pictured herself here, waiting in the Queen family kitchen for a girl who was quickly becoming the little sister she didn’t know she wanted. Or needed. Life was funny like that.

“Hey Felicity,” Thea said as she pushed open the door. “You know, I really meant what I said earlier. You don’t have to do this.”

“I think it’s going to be fun,” Felicity said brightly, shutting her tablet down. “I’ve never been shopping with the famous Thea Queen. And I hear it’s quite an experience.”

A slow, almost-bashful smile spread over Thea’s face. Felicity had always thought she was pretty, but she was really breathtaking when she looked happy. It seemed to sparkle out of her eyes.

Kind of like Oliver, the thought popped up in the back of her mind, and she pushed it down. She wasn’t about to get silly over Oliver Queen. She would keep her head on straight. No matter how much she liked him, he was still Oliver – and maybe he’d changed. Definitely he had changed. But – she wasn’t counting on whatever they had lasting for the rest of their lives. Definitely and absolutely not.

Felicity Smoak didn’t lie to herself. And she didn’t let herself dream too big. She wanted a comfortable life for herself and for her children and Oliver Queen falling into her lap after she thought he was dead for five years – this man that she’d spent a fun night with, a man who had given her children…. Imagining he would come back – that they would fall into this – whatever it was they were doing – that had been unthinkable.

Continued to be unthinkable, really.

“Felicity, are you okay?”

“What?”
Thea widened her eyes. “You kinda went to la-la-land there for a second.”

“Oh yes. I’m sorry. Just – my brain. I mean, I’m away from the kids and… okay. I’m focusing, I promise.”

“Hey, by the way, did my mom tell you what color convertible she bought me for my birthday?”

“What?” Felicity tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Oliver and Moira told me they decided not to go with the convertible.”

Thea gave her a small smile. “Well then, can I drive your car?”

“My car?”

“Yeah, it’s cute.”

Felicity imagined it, just for a moment. “Uh – maybe you can drive on the way back?”

“I’m a good driver!”

“I’m sure you are.” Felicity cleared her throat. “It’s just that… I lease that car, so. I have to be careful with it.”

Thea tilted her head to the side. Felicity sighed. “If something happens to it – I mean, I have full insurance, but… it’s not really my car. I don’t own it.”

“Oh.” Thea picked up her bag. “Well then – I’ve got shotgun!”

Felicity breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Because uh – there’s no room for you in the back. What with the booster seats and all.”
They were a little ways down the road when Thea cleared her throat. “So. Can I uh – ask you some stuff?”

Felicity turned the radio down, Pink’s screaming vocals dying to a more manageable level. “Sure. I mean – what about?”

“I’m just trying to understand, I guess. Why you did the things you did.”

“Oh.”

“I mean – I’ve been thinking. I know you’re not a bad person. I know you’re a great mom. Anybody who spends any time at all with Maddie and Matthew knows that. I just keep thinking – if Oliver hadn’t come back from the island, I would have never known about them.”

“I know,” Felicity said softly.

“I really like being an aunt,” Thea continued, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “I mean – it’s quite possibly the best thing ever, you know? And I’m just wondering…”

“I was ashamed,” Felicity said. “I know that doesn’t sound – liberated, or whatever. But I thought I was smarter than your average bear. And Oliver and I had been careful. Or we thought we were being careful. Anyway. I found out I was pregnant and I just –” she tried to look for words for what that moment in her life had been like, what she had felt – “I just couldn’t cope. It was so much. And you have to understand that I had fought so hard to get into college. And to stay on top of my class. And I thought about terminating the pregnancy.”

Thea nodded, no judgement in her eyes.

“But I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. So I went in to the doctor and they ran some tests and they said it was twins.” Felicity gripped the stirring wheel. “And in the OB-GYN’s office, there were all of these magazines. Oliver must have been on the cover of every single one of them. The Queen’s Gambit had gone down. And everyone thought…”

“That he was dead. I remember,” Thea said softly.
“And so I was thinking, you know – the very last thing I should do to you is to come out of the woodwork, telling you that I was going to have your dead brother’s kids. Oliver wasn’t around to verify our relationship. Or lack thereof. It would have been tests. And lawyers. And I was thinking that I was a poor college kid.” Felicity looked anywhere but Thea. “And the Queens – well, you know. You’re anything but poor. And I kept thinking about custody and… I just…”

“Felicity.” Thea reached for her hand and squeezed it. “I just wanted to know.”

“I am sorry.”

“I don’t know how well we would have taken it,” Thea said softly. “I think I might have been – I don’t know. I was just so angry. I am angry.”

“Hey, you’ve caught a tough break on some things, Thea,” Felicity said. “I’d be pretty pissed, too.”

“Turn left here,” Thea said suddenly, “there’s a little boutique that I think you’re going to love.”

“Me? Aren’t we shopping for you?”

Thea grinned at her. “We’re shopping, Felicity, for -- possibilities.”

“Thea.”

“It’s on me,” She said firmly.

“Thea…”

“I insist. You know how stubborn Oliver can be?”

“Yeah.”
“He taught me. And trust me. The student has exceeded the master.”

“Ah, okay I…” Felicity’s phone rang. She pulled into a parking space and put the car in park.

“It’s my brother,” Thea said, handing her the phone.

Felicity swiped the screen. “Hey, Oliver, what’s up?”

“First day back at the office has been a little rough.”

“Are you okay?” Felicity asked.

“I’m not in the hospital or anything. I could just use your brand of help.”

“Thea, why don’t you go inside the boutique? Oliver needs my help with a personal problem.”

“You’re with Thea?”

“Indeed I am.”

“Ah, okay.”

Thea left the car.

“Can you do some digging for me on an old Army buddy of Diggle’s?”

“What? Oliver…”
“He’s on the list,” Oliver said.

“How did Diggle take that?”

“Badly.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“Felicity. Everyone on the list is there for a reason.”

“Okay, but… Diggle’s a friend, right?”

“His friend is on the list. He’s a part of this.”

“How?”

“I think he’s been involved in stealing shipments of drugs from Starling General.”

Felicity let out a low whistle. “Wow. That would…”

“I’ve got security camera coverage of the teams doing the hits. It’s classic military tactics.”

“Which you would know about…”

“It was a fascinating island I was marooned on,” Oliver said dryly. Before she could ask more about that, Oliver took a deep breath. “Anyway. His name is Ted Gaynor. Can you do some digging into his finances for me?”

“Well – not right this second, but…”
“Whenever you get a chance.” Oliver said. “I uh – I also wanted to say that I’ll be home late tonight.”

“You’ll be home late,” Felicity said flatly.

“I want to hear what Mr. Gaynor has to say for himself in person.”

“Of course you do,” Felicity said, a small smile on her face. “You’re really getting back in the swing of things, then.”

“I said I was going to.”

“I know. It’s just nice to see.” Felicity opened the door to her car. “Your sister is threatening to use her black credit card to buy me something pretty.”

“It’s just cause you have pretty eyes,” Oliver said.

“Uh huh,” Felicity rolled her eyes. “Ted Gaynor?”

“Ted Gaynor. Please.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Talk to you later?”

“Absolutely.”

**

Oliver hung up the phone and swiveled in his chair. There wasn’t much he could here today. The club ran find under Tommy’s direction, and he felt like his presence sometimes hindered more than it helped. He wasn’t about to don the hood in broad daylight if he could avoid it.
So. What to do with his day?

He picked up his jacket and slung it across his shoulders. Out of long habit, he dialed a familiar number. “Hey, Raisa? I think I want to take the kids to the park. Want an hour or so off?”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Oliver.”

**

Oliver watched Maddie and Matthew from the safety of a park bench. He couldn’t turn off the part of his brain that spent every moment hyper-aware, that was constantly watching for something to go wrong, half-expecting it… more than half-expecting it.

This wasn’t the life he was expecting when he came back. He’d thought, for sure he’d be alone. In fact, he would have preferred that, really.

But now –

Maddie screamed in delight as she flew down the slide. And Matthew was absorbed in the inspection of a bug on the sidewalk. Clearly he’d never seen a rollie-poly before. Or at least he was acting that way.

Oliver saw the limousine pull up on the side of the playground and stood. Perhaps some other rich bastard was bringing their kids to play at this little park on a weekday afternoon, but… perhaps not.

Malcolm Merlyn stepped out of the limousine, all smiles. Oliver hadn’t really ever liked him – his friendship with Tommy had ensured that. When Tommy had needed a father, Malcolm hadn’t been there. Oliver had never quite been able to let that go, so he set his teeth and faked a smile.

“Hey, Mr. Merlyn, how’s it going?”

“It’s a beautiful day,” Malcolm said. “Taking the children out to get some sun, I see.”
“Enjoying the freedom that your son’s work ethic affords me,” Oliver said, extending his hand to shake Merlyn’s. He tried not to feel like he was shaking hands with a snake.

“I’ve heard. How is Tommy working out for you?”

“Truly excellent,” Oliver said. “No complaints.”

Malcolm stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Is that so? Fascinating.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I will be honest. I did not expect him to… rise to the challenge, so to speak. One of my long frustrations with Tommy was his unwillingness to meet his potential. But then you get back in town and…”

“Tommy and I always planned to go into business together,” Oliver said lightly. “That way we could keep each other honest.”

“I have not had the pleasure of meeting your children yet,” Malcolm said.

“Ah. Yes.” Oliver took a deep breath. “My daughter Madelyn is currently losing her mind on the swing, and over… that’s Matthew.”

“It’s interesting, what fatherhood does to us, don’t you think, Oliver?”

“Hm?”

“Well, of course, you haven’t been one long, but it can… compel you to do things that you might not otherwise do. In the name of protection. Motivation.”

Oliver thought of his panic as the club caught on fire around him. How instantly, his first thought was how grateful he was that his children weren’t there.
“I don’t think you have to be a parent long to understand that at all.”

“Well. Then maybe you can help me get back in Tommy’s good graces. I’m afraid he’s not speaking to me.”

Oliver bit his tongue and smiled. “Of course, Mr. Merlyn, I can say something to him if you’d like.”

“I’d appreciate it. Have a good afternoon, Oliver. And really – truly beautiful children you have.’

“Thanks,” Oliver said.

As soon as the limousine was out of site, he gathered Matthew and Maddie up, and took them for ice cream. Far away from the park.
Oliver and Felicity work together to figure out more information about Ted Gaynor. Thea's birthday party is coming up.

Chapter Notes

I'm doing my best with the plot of this episode but it's never been one of my favorites. As a result, SOOOO MUCH SCHMOOPINESS.

Sorry, if you don't like schmoop. There's a lot of it in this chapter.

You've been warned.

(Also, customary apologies for being an updating bum. I never forgot about you guys. I just had three jobs to work and classes to take. But my load's a little less for the next little bit, so... updating it is!)

Oliver’s next stop wasn’t one that he was particularly looking forward to. He hadn’t been the best brother or son since his return, and he was only a passable father. Still, he felt like he should step in and say something to his mother, especially since Thea only had one parent left, and Oliver could tell their relationship was straining towards a breaking point.

He dropped Maddie and Matthew off with Diggle and asked his friend to buy him a couple of minutes alone with his mother. He drew in a deep breath and pushed the door open to his mother’s glass-plated office.

“Missed another lunch date with Thea, huh?” Oliver asked, as soon as the door to Moira’s office was closed behind him.

“I had a meeting I had to get to,” Moira said, somewhat stiffly. “Aren’t you supposed to be with my grandchildren?”

“Mr. Diggle’s taking them on a walk around Queen Consolidated,” Oliver said. Everything about this meeting was awkward and uncomfortable. It was easy – perhaps too easy, really, to fall back into the habits he’d learned on the island, and away from it. He had to strive to keep his fingers still. The old Oliver, the one he still wanted her to see when she looked at him, would never have
questioned his parents about their behavior. “I’ve been talking to Thea and Felicity, and I’ve been watching Thea these last few days. Is there something going on you want to tell me about?”

“Whatsoever it is that you’re implying, you’re going to need to spit it out, Oliver.”

“It’s obvious that Thea thinks you’re having an affair with Malcolm Merlyn,” Oliver said, his eyes narrow as he watched his mother for any micro expressions. Sure enough, she tensed, and then relaxed. Something about that had hit home.

“That’s ludicrous,” Moira said. “Malcolm is a very old and very dear friend, you know that.”

Oliver weighed his options. “So you haven’t been spending extra time with him?”

Moira huffed, clearly resentful of being questioned like this. “Malcolm Merlyn has been the CEO of Merlyn Global for years. I have been running Queen Consolidated mere weeks. Yes. Occasionally I ask his advice.”

Oliver cocked his head to the side. “She seems convinced that it’s more than that. Are you sure there’s not something that you want to tell me?”

Moira seemed to fold in on herself. “No, Oliver. I am not having an affair with Malcolm Merlyn. I can promise you that. I would never – not to Walter. I have been on the receiving end of that particular sin. And I never… could.”

Oliver didn’t miss that her eyes didn’t meet his. “Dad?” He asked, his voice clear – something he was shocked about.

“Robert was unfaithful to me – repeatedly. It made our marriage difficult, to say the least.” Moira raised her eyes and finally met Oliver’s, if only for a brief second. “I didn’t want to tell you. I wanted you to remember him the way you thought of him when he – well.”

“I know Dad wasn’t perfect, Mom.” Oliver sighed. “I just wish you had, I don’t know – told me.”

“You can’t tell Thea.”
Oliver nodded. “There’s no reason to,” he said. Just then there was a knock on the door. Diggle had done his job. Ten minutes were up.

“Dad!” Matthew, unusually exuberant today (it must have been the ice cream), rushed into the room. “We saw Mom’s office, but she’s not there! And then we saw Grandpa Walter’s office, but he’s not there. Grandma Moira, you’re here!”

“Hi, sweetheart,” Moira said, dropping to her knees to hug Matthew first, and then Maddie. “It’s nice to see you two. What are you doing here?”

“Walking,” Maddie said brightly. “Mr. Diggle takes big huge steps. We had to keep up! It was so hard!”

“Are you wore out, then?” Oliver asked. “Maybe we should go find somewhere you could take a nap.”

“No!” They both shouted.

Oliver smiled. “We better get going. Say good-bye to your grandma, guys.”

Then there was a flurry of hugging and kissing. Moira drew Oliver in close and patted his bag in the kind of hug he remembered from childhood. “I promise, I’ll do my best to make it up to Thea.”

“Good,” Oliver said softly, and he took the hands of his children and led them out of Queen Consolidated.

***

Felicity went through the door of the townhouse, expecting the house to be in about the same shape she’d left it in. What she got was quite a different story. It appeared, from the moment she stepped inside, that the Lego box had exploded all over the living room and into the foyer. There were toy cars scattered throughout the room, on top of structures and underneath of furniture.
There was also remanants of a snack being made in the kitchen. Something red. Kool-Aid, maybe or… tomato paste? She’d investigate later. It was quiet, the kind of stillness that only came with everyone being absent from the house, or….

“Oliver?” Felicity called, but didn’t get any answer. She was careful to step around the various obstacles in her way, her feet protesting the high heels she didn’t dare take off until she got to a more Lego-free area. She moved what she could, folding this or tossing that as she moved towards the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

There was no one in Maddie and Matthew’s room, so Felicity continued down the hallway to the master suite. She pushed open the door and her breath caught in her throat.

He was only supposed to have spent an hour with the children, she thought, but clearly he hadn’t had the heart to leave them in the middle of the day with Raisa, who would have had the sense to prevent the mess that awaited her. But this sight was worth it. They were all curled up on the bed together, Maddie, and Matthew, and Oliver, heads and feet touching, arms and limbs all akimbo and every once in a while, one of them would snore.

“Oliver?” Felicity slipped out of her shoes.

“Hm. Come join us,” he said lazily. “I think your children killed me.”

“Nope, when they are holy terrors, they are yours. Have been since birth.”

Oliver opened one eye. “Something’s not fair about that….”

“I thought you were working late,” Felicity said, twisting her arm around to undo her dress.

“I am going to. Just taking a break between being a business man, and a nightclub owner, and…”

“The other thing.” Felicity said.

“Yes.” Oliver wiped his eyes. “Diggle’s going to talk to Ted Gaynor tonight, once it gets dark. I’ll follow him.”
Felicity’s eyebrows nearly made it to her hairline. “Does he know that’s your plan?”

“He’s not an idiot,” Oliver said briefly.

“Yes, well, maybe you should try using your words instead of having everything be supposition.”

Oliver decided to let that go. “Did you find anything for me about Gaynor’s financials?”

“I’m running the program,” Felicity said. “As soon as I have some results, I’ll be able to do some more things manually. But no – I haven’t gotten anything exciting, yet.”

“Then come lay down with us for a while,” Oliver suggested.

Felicity slipped into an old t-shirt, baggy and comfortable, and a pair of gym shorts and did just that, gently arranging Matthew so that he would allow her some room on the bed.

“You had a good shopping trip?”

“Mm,” Felicity said, agreeably, as she stroked Matthew’s hair. He was deeply out. At nearly five years old, he did not often like his hair played with, and she missed it. Her other hand, she extended to Oliver, who took it.

“I don’t think this is real, sometimes,” Oliver said.

“What?”

“I don’t think it’s real. I think – I think I don’t deserve this, you know? I was walking down this path, somehow, that leads me back home, to fix everything my father did to this city, put everything right… and then… I guess I took a wrong turn somewhere, and somehow I ended up right here with you. It’s not where I thought I would be when I came back from the island.”
“Well, we’re glad you’re here.”

“Arrows and all?”

“Arrows and all,” Felicity said, curling in closer to all of them, and closing her eyes. “I’m so glad to have a partner, Oliver.”

She didn’t open her eyes, but she heard his breath catch. It’s more honest, emotionally, than they’ve been with each other in a while, and there’s power, and vulnerability in the air. With one accord, neither one of them speaks again, pretending to sleep for the next hour, curled up in the big, soft bed in the master bedroom.

**

The kids didn’t let them sleep for long, and when they wake up it’s a rush of activities: supper must be made, then the mess they’d made in their afternoon of revelry had to be picked up, which was a bigger battle than Oliver had been prepared for. Then it was time for bed, which was another battle. Their unexpected nap and their long day had really thrown the twins’ schedule off. He was still, from time to time, struggling to find his balance with this new life of his. He wanted to be the best father he could be. He felt like he needed to be the best club owner he could be, and he couldn’t afford to be anything less than the best vigilante he could be.

It was starting to wear on him. He didn’t want to snap at the kids, but it took all of his effort not to. Felicity started watching him out of the corner of her eye when he took a moment to breathe. He could sense the weight of her gaze, and turned to give her a rueful smile.

“Why don’t you go take a minute, Oliver?” she asked, as she helped Matthew pick up the rest of his Legos. “Get a shower or something.”

“I don’t…”

“We’ve got it here. By the time you come back, we’ll be ready for bedtime stories and goodnight kisses, right guys?”

Matthew and Maddie both nodded at him. He struggled not to feel guilty as he made his way to their shower and stepped inside the glass enclosure, turning the water up as high as he could bear it. Years
without running hot water had made this one of his bad habits. While he was here, he would enjoy the convenience of hot water heaters and never take them for granted again.

After ten minutes – much longer than he needed, really, but Felicity’s intent had obviously been to give him time to compose himself and to take a break, he stepped out of the shower and into a pair of sweatpants, not bothering with the shirt. He would, of course, have to change again later, but he had no interest in explaining to his children just yet what he got up to at night. He stared himself in the face in the fogged-over mirror, reminding himself of what he’d been thinking about earlier: that he was so unexpectedly lucky to have this life. Of course it wouldn’t be perfect all of the time, and of course it would be stressful. But he didn’t want any other kind of life. Not for all of the money in the Queen family vault.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Oliver opened it, expecting to find Felicity. Instead, it was Maddie, dressed in some kind of a Princess nightgown. Maddie hadn’t really gone for Princesses, Felicity told him, until Thea had come along. She was currently admiring every move her aunt made and worshipping the ground she walked on.

Oliver tried not to worry about that too much. As far as he was concerned, Thea was too much like him to be that much of a role model, but Felicity rolled her eyes and said it was good for both of them. So. There it was.

“Are you ready for bedtime, Daddy?” Maddie asked.

“Yeah, I think I am,” Oliver said, turning off the light.

Maddie reached for his hand and set off down the hallway towards her room. “I want lots of stories tonight.”

“Your mother says two.”

“Aren’t you my Daddy?”

Oliver felt his lips twitch. This one had more Queen in her than he’d like to admit. “Yes, I am your Daddy, but your mother has a very good reason for saying only two.”

“Only two stories. Only one glass of water.” Maddie flopped on her bed dramatically. “It’s so
difficult.”

Oliver struggled manfully not to laugh. He didn’t want to hurt her feelings. “You’ve had a long day, princess. I think going to sleep might be easy this time.”

Maddie glared at him from underneath the covers. Matthew and Felicity came in just after them. “So, what’s it going to be tonight?” Felicity asked brightly. “Llama Llama? Skippyjon Jones?”

Negotiations were had – Matthew wanted an exciting book, and so did Maddie, but she didn’t want to listen to the same story over and over again, or so she said. Oliver sat back and watched Felicity handle the interaction, more than a little surprised when they handed him the Dr. Seuss classic, “The Cat in the Hat”.

“You turn to read, Daddy,” Matthew said sleepily, rolling over to face Oliver, who sat with Felicity in the space between the twin beds.

Ah. Reading out loud had terrified him in school. And Felicity was brilliant at reading out loud – she did voices and things, but –

Oliver swallowed his pride and opened the book. “The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play. So we sat in the house all that cold, cold wet day…”

It did not take long for the two of them to slip off to sleep, and Felicity and Oliver got up on their feet and headed out of the twins’ bedroom, shutting the door gently behind them.

“You’re going to be late,” she said softly.

“This was important,” Oliver said.

Felicity got up on her tip toes and kissed Oliver, wrapping her arms around his neck. Oliver was half-tempted to forget his obligation to his father and stay here, wrapped in Felicity’s arms, with his children down the hallway. But – Diggle was out there, about to meet with a dangerous man.

“Go,” Felicity said, stepping away from him and squeezing his hand. “I’ll be here on the computer
until you get back. And Oliver?"

“Yeah?”

“Be safe, okay?”

“Always.”

Felicity, he noticed, did an admirable job of not scoffing at that.

**

Okay, so – ambushing Gaynor didn’t *exactly* go as planned. He’d known, of course, that Diggle would be there. He just didn’t exactly anticipate how effective his bodyguard would be at preventing him from doing business the usual way.

Still. He had the fob. And at home, he had the best possible person to help him break into its secure passcode.

He stopped at the Foundry, changed into normal clothes, and then headed home, USB stick in hand, to get Felicity’s help.

**

The day of Thea’s party dawned brightly and full of promise. She was doing her best to be excited about the prospect of having all of her friends at Verdant to celebrate her day, but… there was also a lot going on at the mansion. Moira seemed to swing wildly between competence and despair, and there was no one around to help her manage those moods, or tell her how to react appropriately. Thea felt she couldn’t spend *all* of her time at Oliver and Felicity’s place. They had lives, and jobs, and children of their own.

There was a knock on her door, and Thea opened one eye. “Who is it?”
“Your brother, Speedy!” Oliver said. Thea jumped out of bed and ran to the door.

“What are you *doing* here? And holy cripes, you look exhausted.”

“Long night,” Oliver said easily.

“Ah. Trying to burn both ends of the candle, hm? Daddy by day, successful club owner by night?”

Oliver was clearly amused. “Something like that. I uh, I came here because I wanted to wish you a Happy Birthday. I missed so many, that, uh…”

Thea launched herself at her brother. “Thanks, Oliver. That’s really nice to hear.”

“Hey, everything okay?”

“Everything’s *fine*. I just need to get out of this house and do something fun.”

“Aunt Thea!” Maddie rushed passed Oliver, her arms extended. Thea didn’t have much warning before the exuberant little girl was in her arms. “Happy Birthday! Mom says you’re eighteen, which is one more than seventeen, which is what you were before.”

Thea’s eyes sparkled in amusement. “Well, she’s right.”

“Do you get a car?” Thea asked.

“I don’t know. Oliver, do I get a car?”

Oliver looked away from her. “I have no idea.”

Thea inwardly did a celebratory dance. She was *totally* getting a car. “You all came over to the mansion just to wish me a Happy Birthday?”
“Nope!” Matthew said. “Daddy wants to take all of us to Funland.”

“We thought you might want to go,” Oliver said.

“Funland with the Queen twins?” Thea grinned. “I can’t think of a better way to spend my birthday.”

**

Felicity was downstairs, hard at work, cracking the security code. Raisa, at some point, had provided her with a cup of coffee and a warning that it appeared like she was working too hard. Since Oliver had also gotten a comment about how he needed more sleep, Felicity decided not to take it personally.

“Mom!” Matthew raced down the stairs. “Aunt Thea says she’ll go with us.”

“Awesome,” Felicity said, hitting a few more keys. Almost there…

“Do you want some breakfast, Mister Matthew?” Raisa asked. “I think your mother is working very hard so she can enjoy your trip.”

Felicity lifted her head and smiled. “Raisa, we should have you come stay with us.”

“It would not be a hardship to come cook for these two angels everyday,” Raisa said, kissing Matthew’s cheek before they discussed exactly what kind of pancakes they would be having.

“How’s it going?” Oliver asked, as soon as he entered the kitchen.

“Almost through.” They exchanged a quick kiss. “Are you sure you want to do this today?”

“Very sure. Thea’s been having a hard time lately. I think this will be good for her. Ted Gaynor can wait,” Oliver said in a low tone.
“All right, good.” Felicity pushed her glasses up her nose. “I’m through, by the way.”

“You’re remarkable.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said, trying not to preen as Oliver kissed her cheek, lingering there in the seductive way that he had. “Do you want to look now, or –”

“When we get back is fine,” Oliver said.

“All right!” Thea came down the stairs in jean shorts and high-top sneakers with a crop top. “Who’s ready to go have some fun, eat ‘til we puke, ride some rides, and puke some more?”

“ME!” Matthew and Maddie shouted. Oliver and Felicity exchanged looks.

“Oh boy,” Felicity mouthed.

“Let’s load up,” Oliver said, “and try not to puke on the way there.”
trust but verify, (iii/iii)

Chapter Summary

Thea Queen’s eighteen today.
Not everything goes her way.

Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to all of the reviewers, both here and on Tumblr. Thank you for the messages asking about the story. Thank you for your kind words about my mental health. I appreciate you reading and reviewing and leaving kudos more than I can say. As we continue on, I appreciate your patience, as well. I sincerely hope you enjoy this installment of the story and look forward to sharing with you guys a very special DVD extra sometime soon.

Thea didn’t know if Oliver had come up with the idea because he remembered sneaking her out of school at least once a year to come up to Funland and ride the rides. Thea had memories of being swung wildly by her arms, Tommy on one side, Oliver on the other. She remembered out-of-control giggling, the way they would stuff her full of cotton candy and get on the tea cups and spend her round and round until she puked.

She hadn’t been back in a while. Tommy came by and took her for her birthday one year, but it wasn’t quite the same. He didn’t swing her the way that he used to, and the joviality that had seemed to come so easily to him before had felt forced, even to her. So they’d done other things on other years to honor her birthday. Tommy had never forgotten it, not once.

“It feels like Tommy should be here,” Thea said to Oliver. “Do you remember how you guys used to come and get me from school so we could do this?”

Oliver chuckled. “Yes. I was an excellent role model right from the start. And Tommy’s doing a few things at the club for me today.”

“Working hard so you don’t have to?” Thea teased him.

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”
Maddie ran up and grabbed Thea’s hand, and she was effectively distracted from thinking about Tommy and what life had been like before her brother had been lost at sea by her niece’s bright blue Queen eyes. It was a little bit like looking at a portrait of her father, she sometimes thought. If her father had been a very cute, inquisitive four-year-old. Matthew grabbed her other hand and they were off, running through the theme park together, while Oliver and Felicity strolled behind them, hand in hand.

Thea hadn’t missed the way her brother had been right when he got back from the island: the way that you would expect someone to be who had spent so many years by himself: distant and closed off. The first time she’d seen him smile, for real, since he’d been back, aside from that first time that he’d hugged her close and she’d felt like her world had righted, had been right after he’d met the twins and let Felicity back in his life.

For that reason alone she would have loved them all. But there was also just… Maddie and Matthew and Felicity themselves. Maddie was bright and inquisitive and funny, and while Matthew was a little bit more shy, he was smart and quick-witted. She loved them both. And she loved that Felicity never once made her feel like she was intruding on their time. She made her feel welcome, which Thea was grateful for. There hadn’t been much of that in her family growing up. In a way, she was jealous of Oliver and the fact that he got to leave the mansion and go home to people who were open and affectionate and honest.

What was that like, she wondered.

“Hey, no sour faces,” Felicity said as she threw her arm around Thea, leaving Oliver behind to walk with Matthew and Maddie. “Or we’re going to think that you aren’t excited about Funland on your eighteenth birthday. Honestly, I did try to talk Oliver out of it, but he said this place was special to you guys growing up.”

Thea tried not to cry. “Yeah, it was. He used to come get me out of class and take me here. I think, probably, whenever there was something that wasn’t going right in school, you know? Looking back on it. But at the time it was just cool because he was my big brother and he wanted to spend time with me.”

“He still does want to spend time with you. I think, you know – I’m not Oliver, I can’t speak for him, but he’s finding the task of balancing all of this to be more difficult than he thought it would be.”

Thea nodded. “But it’s so good for him, you know? He needs you guys. I don’t know what he would be like without you.”
“I don’t know what he would be like without you,” Felicity said firmly. “Don’t doubt for a second that you’re a big part of the reason he managed to come back from the island alive.”

“Does he talk to you about it?”

Felicity shook her head firmly. “No. He’s not ready yet. But he talks in his sleep. Has nightmares, sometimes.”

“Is he okay?”

“I think so,” Felicity said. “He’ll talk about it when he’s ready.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, stuff like that is like…” Felicity searched for a metaphor. “Like gas stuck in a container, pressure building up… he’ll blow his top, eventually. He’ll talk to someone. He’ll let it out, piece by piece. He won’t have any other choice.”

“How do you know?”

Felicity shrugged. “You know, admittedly, not all of us spend five years on an island in our own private version of hell. But we all… go through something that changes us. And you can’t have a journey like that and not talk about it. We need to tell the story out loud to make sense of it, to start to sort out the things we learned.”

“And yours was… what? Having kids so young?”

“Mostly,” Felicity said with a smile. “But that is a long story. And it’s your birthday. What do we do first: the tea cups or the Monster Jaw?”

“Always the tea cups. But first-first,” Thea said with a grin, “cotton candy!”
Felicity and Oliver moved around each other in rhythm in the bathroom. Her hair dryer clicked off, and he reached for his toothbrush while she stepped to the side to grab her mascara. It had been a long, but fun day. The kids had enjoyed spending the whole morning and most of the afternoon with their aunt, and nobody, thankfully had puked, although they had eaten way too much sugar and fried foods and had ridden so many rides that they had screamed themselves hoarse.

Felicity had ridden the dragon with Matthew and held Maddie’s hand on the airplane. Thea had watched the kids while she and Oliver took a turn on the Flying Dutchman, clutching hands and screaming together.

All that meant that they were very tired as they prepped to make their way to Verdant to put in an appearance at Thea’s party.

“So what’s the plan?” Felicity asked. “Are you going to do your Hood thing before the party or after it?”

“Hopefully before and after. It shouldn’t take me that long to follow Diggle, figure out this Gaynor situation, and get back to Thea’s party before anyone notices that I’m gone.”

“If nothing goes wrong.” Felicity said.

“Well… yes.”

“Okay. If not, I can always make your excuses to Thea.”

“Thanks.” Oliver smiled at her and kissed her cheek. Idly, he let his hand drift down her body to cup her ass. “Do you want to be late to the party? Raisa’s got the kids all night, we could…”

“You’re not serious right now,” Felicity said, whirling to face him.

“What?”
“You’re not serious. Your head is somewhere else. You’re already thinking about being the Hood, Oliver.”

“I…”

“It’s okay. I appreciate that you’re giving the part of your life where you get shot at regularly all of your concentration in this moment. Just know that I can tell when you’re not thinking about me the way that you should be thinking about me when you say things like that. You don’t have to wear a mask with me, Oliver.”

“I…” Oliver let out his breath. “I’m sorry. I’m just… I’m…”

“You’re trying,” Felicity said. “It’s okay. I get it. I’m not upset, Oliver. I realize you’re just – trying to check things off your list. Be a good brother to Thea, check. Be a good father to Maddie and Matthew, check. Honor your father’s memory? Check. But I don’t want to be a part of that list. If you’re going to touch me, I want you to touch me because it’s what you’re thinking about, what you’re wanting, what you’re feeling. I don’t need to be a part of your list, Oliver. It won’t hurt my feelings if you’re somewhere else sometimes. It will hurt my feelings if I’m one hundred percent into what’s happening between us and you are not.”

“Okay.”

“Hey.” Felicity cupped his head in her hands. “Don’t beat yourself up about this. Keep your eyes on the prize, stay safe with Ted Gaynor, right? Be sure you tell Thea to have a Happy Birthday and do all of the things you have to do tonight. And then tonight, if you’ve still got some energy…”

“Felicity.” Oliver bent and kissed her, deep and tender and sure. “I will always have energy for you, and I always, always want you.”

“Okay, then. Whew.” Felicity fanned herself. “You make some good points there, you really do.”

“I can be very persuasive when I want to be.”

“Put your pants on. We have a party to go to,” Felicity said, but she was smiling.
The music soared and bumped and shook the building of Verdant and it was everything Thea was hoping it would be. All of her friends from school, and some people she didn’t care as much about, were there and the music was perfect. Oliver and Tommy had gone out of their way to make the party the way that she wanted it, going so far as to close the club down to their regular customers. The hardest thing being served at the party officially was cola, although of course, Thea’s classmates had done their best to smuggle in the beverages they really wanted in flasks and water bottles.

Oliver’s security had caught some of it but not all of it, of course. It was being passed around underhand and distributed as well as it could be, away from the prying eyes of the adults who were supervising.

It wasn’t just alcohol, of course. Other things were being passed around, and it didn’t surprise her at all when a couple of her classmates offered her the latest and greatest in party drugs. Without a thought, she accepted the gift, and ran off to find a good hiding spot in case her brother and his seemingly psychic nature found them on her.

That was when she saw her mother and Malcolm Merlyn talking to each other outside of the club.

Talking a little too softly. Standing a little too close. The arguments from her childhood right before the Gambit went down flashed through her mind. It all became crystal clear, painful as a papercut to the heart.

“Oh my God,” she said, startling them apart. “At my party? Jesus Christ, mother.”

“Thea!” her mother protested. But she just shook her head.

Rage filled her brain as she entered the club. The music, which had seemed so joyful before, seemed to pump her blood through her veins and reinforce the thoughts swirling in her head. Did her mother even care that Walter was gone? Did she care that Thea’s father was gone? Had this been going on the whole time? Did no one have any respect for her?

Felicity and Oliver walked through the door, hand in hand, their faces bright and smiling. Thea couldn’t take it. She couldn’t take how happy her brother was. She couldn’t take how happy her mother was. She couldn’t take how everyone else’s lives seemed to be chugging along and she was
just trying to hold everyone together with her bare fingers.

It seemed she was the only one interested in having a family unit anymore. Her mother didn’t care, obviously, not the way she was jumping between men, and Oliver had Felicity now. They tolerated her well enough, of course, but eventually they would get tired of her encroaching on their space eventually.

It was all too much. Too much feeling. Too much emotion. Too much confusion. She ran to the coat room and found the packet of drugs she’d hidden there. She slipped three in her mouth.

And then she got in her car.

**

The night had started off so well, Felicity thought, as she drove, white-knuckled, to the hospital. Oliver was still minutes out, helping Diggle wrap up Ted Gaynor. And so it was her, going to check on Thea for him. It occurred to her that she had spent more time in hospitals since she’d let Oliver Queen back in her life than she had since the twins were born.

She found a spot and stepped out of the Mini Cooper, still in her party clothes. She bypassed the hospital staff, by now familiar with the route to the private suites the Queen family used when they had to be hospitalized. Suites, she knew, they had paid for themselves.

As she made her way up the stairs, skipping the elevator ride up, she thought to herself all of the things that she’d like to say to Thea. She’d like to scream. She’d like to slap her. Didn’t Thea realize how much they all loved her?

Probably not, if she’d done something this reckless. Felicity’s mother’s heart was pounding in her chest. She couldn’t imagine what Moira must be feeling in this moment.

She managed to make it to the sixth floor, and found the familiar bench that she’d spent so much time on during Oliver’s hospitalization was occupied. Moira Queen was sitting on it, staring at her hands.

“Moira. Are you okay?” Felicity asked, rushing up to her.
“I’m fine.”

“She?”

“They’re concerned about a head injury. A few bruised ribs. They tell me it’s all very normal for a car crash. They say she drove her car right off the road.”

“She probably…”

“She was upset with me.”

“Oh.” Felicity sat down next to Moira. “I’m … It’s not your fault, you know that, right?”

“It is, though. She was upset with me, and she got behind the wheel. And if I had just…” Moira let out a breath. “If I had just had an opportunity to explain…”

Oliver burst through the door out of the stairwell. “Mom! Is Thea okay?”

Moira went through all of it again, her hands shaking.

“Felicity’s right, Mom, you can’t blame yourself,” Oliver said firmly, but his eyes were on his sister’s hospital room.

“She won’t see me,” Moira said softly. “But she would probably see you two.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. “I’ll talk to her. We’ll see if we can’t work this out, Mom.”

Moira nodded, but didn’t say anything. Felicity stayed next to her on the bench, and then slowly, carefully, covered Moira’s hand with one of her own. “It’s going to be okay, Moira,” she said softly.

“Thank you, Felicity. Why don’t you go in there and help Oliver? That boy has a unique talent for
“putting his foot in his mouth, sometimes.”

“I will, if you want to be alone.”

Moira squeezed her hand. “You’re a very dear girl, Felicity, but I think, for the moment, I would like to be alone with my thoughts.”

“Of course.” Felicity got to her feet and followed Oliver into Thea’s room.

The teenager was sleeping soundly, probably drugged to that state, Felicity thought, taking deep breaths that caught every once in a while.

“I’m failing,” Oliver said softly to her. “It’s what you were saying earlier.”

“How… I keep… trying to check people off on a list, you know? The kids, you. Thea. I must be… phoning it in, somehow, or…”

“Hey. You know what? No.” Felicity squeezed his hand in hers. “Absolutely not, Oliver Queen. Your sister had a lot of choices tonight to deal with her emotions. She made a bad one. We all made bad choices as teenagers. She’ll learn from it and grow. You can’t take responsibility for her development at this stage in the game. All we can do, you and I, is be there for her and help her when we can and love her, right? And you do all of those things. So don’t beat yourself up.”

“Ollie?” Thea’s voice was hoarse. “Are you here?”

“Hey, Speedy,” Oliver said, with a half-smile on his face. “You gave us all quite a scare.”

“The… car? Did I…?”

“The car is toast,” Felicity said firmly.
“Oh, man,” Thea groaned. “Mom is going to kill me…”

“I think we’re all just grateful that you’re alive, Thea,” Felicity said, stepping forward and laying her hand gently on Thea’s arm. “Okay? Just get some rest…”

There was a quick knock at the door, before two uniformed police officers stepped in. “Ms. Thea Queen?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“We’ve got some bad news,” one of the police officers said. “Your drug test has come back positive for Vertigo. I’m afraid when you’re released from the hospital, it will be into our custody.”
The night after Thea’s date in jail, Oliver laid next to Felicity in bed, his eyes open and his hands clenched, although he regulated his breathing as much as possible so that it would appear he was sleeping. At least until Felicity rolled over and laid one hand on chest. “Oliver?”

“Yes?” He turned his head to look at her. There was enough light streaming in from the slits in the blinds that he could make out her eyes in the dark, the outline of her face.

“I’m sorry. This has been a rough week,” she said.

“Yes. It has.”

“But it’s going to be okay. The lawyers will work something out. I doubt she’ll have to go to jail.”

“No, probably not,” Oliver agreed, and then he heaved a sigh. “I’m just so… pissed at her. And at myself.”

“Oliver.”

“No, I mean, this is the kind of stuff I got away with when I was her age, you know? Party-boy Oliver Queen crashes car headfirst into railing. Billion-heir Oliver Queen pees on a cop, ha ha ha, isn’t that hilarious. But I don’t want that for Thea.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t want that for our kids, either.”

“Oliver, they’re a long ways away from wrecking whatever modest, reasonable car we buy for them as a first vehicle. Like a tank.”

“I was thinking a pedal car. At least until they’re twenty-five.”

Felicity laughed. “Your sister is going to be fine. Eighteen is just rough, and she’s had a rougher go of it than most. She lost her father, and then her brother. And she got you back, but she’s having a
hard time trusting Moira, and there’s nothing quite like the mother issues that go on when you’re a teenager learning how to be a young adult, let me tell you.”

“Oh?” Oliver raised his eyebrows. “Did you and your mom…”

“We didn’t agree on a lot of things. But she was there when it mattered,” Felicity said. “Thea and Moira will work it out.”

“So you’re telling me that I shouldn’t worry about this.”

“No. That’s an unreasonable demand, don’t you think? I think we should channel our nervous energy into more appropriate venues.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, we should do what we can as Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak, but maybe there’s something the Hood can do. This Vertigo stuff isn’t just a party drug. I’ve been doing some reading on it, and it’s killing people, Oliver.”

“Yes, I know.” Oliver let out a breathy laugh. “I was going to ask for your help. I guess we’re starting to think alike.”

“Isn’t that frightening,” Felicity said dryly.

“Or it’s just a sign that we’re perfect for each other.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Felicity teased. “Just as soon as your looks are gone, I’m out the door, mister.”

“What about the money?”

“I can live in a paper box. So long as I’m living with chiseled abs.”

Oliver let out a belly laugh, the kind he rarely indulged in. The kind that Felicity seemed to elicit from him more and more often. He rolled over and threaded his fingers through her hair. He kissed her until she drew breath around him and opened her legs so that he would fit between them. He rested all of his weight on his arms and pressed his forehead against hers.

“I can’t believe how much I love you.”

“Yeah, well, that blows my mind sometimes too. The fact that you love me. Oh, and also, I love you a lot too. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Oliver laughed again and slid his hands down her body.

“Were you wanting to get laid, then?” Felicity asked him, wriggling underneath of him.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Oliver said.

“Well, if you insist, I suppose I could dredge up an orgasm or two for you.”

“Oh,” Oliver said, as his mouth slid ever downward while he slowly lifted her nightgown up, “I’m afraid I must insist.”

**
Thea’s reluctance to get going that morning had them all running a little late. Felicity and Oliver held on to Thea’s hands tightly, shielding her on either side from the questions being shouted at her, while Moira brought up the rear, looking fierce and cool and calm.

Oliver whispered one last, “Good luck,” to her before they had to part ways, Thea sitting up front at the defendant’s table with her lawyer. Felicity took Oliver’s hand and held it tight.

“She’s going to be okay, you know.”

Oliver nodded, linking eyes with Moira. “Best criminal defense lawyer in the city,” he said under his breath. “She should be.”

Felicity nodded.

And then they all watched, horrified, as the judge rejected the plea bargain and insisted that the case go to trial.

“This isn’t fair,” Moira muttered under her breath.

“All the stupid things I did as a kid, I never had to go to trial,” Oliver whispered to Felicity.

“Let’s focus on Thea right now.”

“Oliver…” Thea’s eyes were lost as she came through the divider and reached for her brother’s hand.

“It’s okay, Thea,” Oliver said, “we’re going to figure something out.”

“Don’t worry, baby,” Moira said, but Thea just shot her a look that would have frozen a lesser woman in her tracks. Felicity wondered, for a moment, if that ability was something Moira taught her young children, or if it was genetic.

“A judge wants to make an example out of me, Mom. I think it’s okay if I worry, don’t you?”

“Yes, well…”

“I think we should take this back to the house,” Felicity said briskly. “Lots of reporters with big ears around.”

Oliver nodded, and reached for her hand. The Queens left the courtroom the same way they had entered it, determined smiles on their faces.

They were seated in the car, speeding back towards the manor when Oliver turned to Felicity. “Once we get Thea and Mom settled at the house, I think we should talk to Laurel.”

“Oh? Do you think she’ll be able to help?”

“Her dad’s a cop. Maybe he can pull some strings.”

“Okay,” Felicity said.

“I just… I want to make sure we cover all of our bases here,” Oliver said.

“Oliver, if you’re worried that I’m worried, I can assure you that I’m not. I trust you and I trust Laurel,” Felicity said.
“You want to come with me?”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “If you want me to, I can.”

“I do. I want you to go.”

“Okay.”

**

When the sun broke over the horizon and flooded Laurel Lance’s townhouse with light, she was immediately and irrevocably awake. It came from her law school days – staying up until late, working a closing shift at the local pizza parlor, and then cramming in studying and writing papers, crashing and sleeping for a few hours, and then waking to head to classes fueled by caffeine and pure ambitious drive.

Tommy had crawled in the bed next to her sometime in the last few hours and wrapped himself around her. He would wake when she got up, he always did. Then he’d make that protesting sound in the back of his throat, like a child whose teddy bear was being coaxed from his arms, but he wouldn’t wake all the way up, normally.

She was in a great mood all around, actually. She slipped her feet out of bed and let them hit the ground. Tommy, as predicted, made his noise, but didn’t wake up. It must have been a rough night at the club. She made quick work of her morning routine – brushing teeth, washing her face, running a comb through her hair. She was inclined to spend some of the rest of her morning working from home, since she didn’t have any cases going to trial. She could just as easily get started on some paperwork here, while she was still in her pajamas.

That was why she was seated at her desk when the knock came, hours later. She picked up her coffee and headed for the door. It was unusual for her to get a visitor this early, but her father might have stopped by if he had worked a late shift to ask her to go to breakfast.

Honestly, Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak were near to the bottom of the list of people she was expecting to see. But then she remembered something, something in the background of the television she’d been watching.

“You’re here about Thea, aren’t you?” she asked, stepping aside.

“We’re so sorry to come first thing in the morning,” Felicity said, smiling apologetically. “It’s just that we came straight from the trial and…”

“You’re worried, I completely get it,” Laurel said. “Come on in.”

“Hey, babe? What’s going on?” Tommy stepped out of the bedroom, clearly straight from her bed.

“Thea’s in some trouble,” Oliver said. “We… well, we were wondering if maybe Laurel might be able to help us out.”

“The judge wants to make an example out of Thea,” Felicity explained, spreading her hands.

“I can make a few phone calls but I can’t promise anything,” Laurel said.

“Whatever it is Oliver and I need to do to help, just let us know,” Felicity said. “We’re willing to – if it would help, Thea could move in with us. We’d be willing to supervise her getting community service hours or… whatever she would need, really.”
Oliver shot her a look, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Yeah, whatever she needs."

"Okay. I’ll be sure to pass that along."

"You guys – want to stay and have some breakfast?" Tommy asked. "I know we’ve got the makings for French toast around here somewhere."

Oliver looked at Felicity in askance. "It’s up to you," she said, "I took the day off of work not knowing how long this hearing would be."

"Sure," Oliver said. "If it’s not too much of an imposition."

They spent the next hour and a half with Tommy and Laurel – just… pleasantly. More stories were exchanged, the kind that were obviously edited for content and chosen so as not to stir up any old wounds. Tommy was a more-than-passable cook, which kind of blew Felicity’s mind until Tommy said something flippantly about always having to cook for himself as a kid. Then she was just sad. Still, eventually, Oliver got up. "Well, we’re sorry to have to run, but we wanted to get in some extra time with the kids and I wanted to stop by Verdant."

"You need me there for anything?"

"Nope," Oliver said. "No worries. Just left something there the other night that I wanted to pick up."

"Okay." Tommy cleared his throat. "Well – thanks for stopping by, you guys. You should come over more often."

Felicity smiled. "Yes, I think we should. Actually, why don’t you guys come over to our place sometime soon? Maddie and Matthew just love spending time with you, Tommy."

"Yeah… sure," Tommy said, glancing at Laurel. "I think we’d like that."

Hugs and handshakes were exchanged all around. Laurel pulled Felicity in close for a hug – which was not something she was expecting, really. "Thanks," she whispered. "I… know this whole situation could be hard, if we let it be."

"That’s why we won’t let it be," Felicity said, smiling. "No reason not to be grown-ups about it, right?"

"Absolutely right," Laurel said, but there was something pinched in her face when she looked at Oliver.

But that didn’t matter, because Felicity had noticed the same look in Oliver’s eyes. Old wounds, she’d decided, that hadn’t quite healed, hadn’t quite found their resolution. Given time, perhaps they would.

**

“I’ve been thinking,” Oliver said, leaning back in Felicity’s chair in the Foundry while she fiddled with a monitor. "It’s not enough to just… lean on Quentin and Laurel Lance for a favor.”

“I didn’t think you would find that adequate,” Felicity said dryly. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking someone had to hand my baby sister those drugs. Or she went looking for them, which means someone sold them to her.”
“You want to take out the dealer.”

“Dealers. All of them. The whole network. It’s not just that Thea could have died, it’s that this drug is killing people, left and right. And I should do something about it.”

Felicity nodded and straightened. “Yes, you should. Unfortunately, information like that isn’t something you usually find with Google, so…”

“I think I’m going to have to reach out to an old friend of mine, and see what information he has for me,” Oliver said.

“An old friend? Do you mean Russian mobster?”

Oliver tilted his head at her.

“What? I’m just saying. You don’t have to sugarcoat things for me, Oliver.”

“No, I know that,” Oliver said, kissing her cheek.

“Do me a favor?”

“Yeah?”

“Call John. Take him with you. I think you can use another set of eyes when you go places like that.”

“I was just about to,” Oliver said.

“Oh, we are starting to think alike. Spooky,” Felicity said, widening her eyes comically.

“Uh huh.”

**

Maddie and Matthew sat coloring at the table, completely engrossed, when Felicity walked into the Queen family kitchen. “Thanks for watching them today, Raisa,” Felicity said.

“It’s no problem, Miss Felicity,” Raisa said. “I enjoy having them around and they are good helpers.”

“Where’s Dad?” Matthew asked, already putting his crayons away.

“He had to work,” Felicity said. “So it’s just going to be the three of us time. What do you say, want to get some ice cream?”

“Yes!” They both shouted it, and Felicity smiled. “Okay, let’s go.”

They were quickly bundled up in her car and on the way. The twins babbled at her about their day and all of the things they did, grocery shopping and coloring and folding sheets and all of the things that Raisa could somehow make into magical experiences.

Felicity drove with care, maneuvering her Mini Cooper in and out of traffic deftly. She frequently checked her mirrors, which is how she came to notice the odd sedan following them. Every turn she would take, they would take. Every lane change she made, they made.

She pressed the button for the in-car call service Oliver paid for and insisted on.
“John Diggle speaking.”

“John? Is Oliver around?” Felicity asked.

“He’s a bit busy at the moment.”

A scream could be heard in the background. Felicity swallowed and closed her eyes for a fraction of a second.

“John, could you please tell him that we need him? We’re being followed.”

“You say we,” John said slowly. “Do you have the children with you, Felicity?”

“Yes. We were going to go for ice cream.”

“Pull a U-turn as fast as you can,” Diggle said. “Whatever you do, don’t stop. I’ve turned on the GPS tracker on your car. Oliver and I will be there to help you as soon as we can. Stay on the line, Felicity. It’s going to be okay.”

“Mom, what’s happening?” Matthew asked.

“I don’t really have time to explain right now. I need you two to be very, very quiet and let me focus on driving,” Felicity said, turning down the Disney tunes and cranking her car around at the nearest stoplight. She hit the gas like she had a lead foot.

Sure enough, the sedan did the same. Her heart started to race and leapt up in her throat.

Fortunately, they weren’t that far from Verdant. Instinctively, that’s where she started to head. When she heard the roar of a motorcycle next to her, she looked over. And Oliver’s voice came over her in-car phone.

“It’s me, Felicity. Here comes John. Black sedan behind us, that’s who you’re worried about?”

“Yes, they made the same u-turn I did,” Felicity said.

“Okay then.”

Oliver fell back just as John Diggle’s town car took up the flank next to her. “Okay, Felicity,” his voice said, “No matter what happens, you follow me. Don’t look back, okay? Oliver can take care of himself. Let’s get the kids safe.”

Felicity took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Then she heard pops of gunfire and screaming tires.

“Hit the gas, Felicity! Go, go, go!” Oliver and John both shouted at her.

She did.

**

By the time they made it to Queen Consolidated, Felicity was shaking, careful not to fall apart in front of her children.

“Can we talk yet?” Matthew asked as they pulled into a parking space.
“Yes,” Felicity said, throwing the car in park. She ran out of her car and found Maddie and Matthew had released themselves from their booster seats. They flung themselves at her and she clung tightly to them. “Everyone okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” they chorused.

John Diggle approached quickly. “Felicity, are you all right?”

“I’m as good as I can be,” Felicity said. “Is Oliver…”

“He’s right behind you,” Oliver said. Felicity turned around and jumped into his arms. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s all right.”

“Who shot the gun?” Felicity asked. “Them, or you?”

“I don’t like guns.”

“Did you get hit?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea who –”

“No,” Oliver said. “Not yet. I got some license plates, though, if you wanted to…”

“Yes. I would very much like to.”

Oliver then turned to Maddie and Matthew. “Are you guys okay?”

They nodded.

“I’m sorry it was scary,” Felicity said, dropping to the ground to embrace them once more.

“It was kind of fun,” Matthew said with a big grin. “You should drive like that more often.”

“No,” Felicity said. “No, I absolutely should not.”
Chapter Summary

Thea reaches a deal, and Oliver deals with multiple threats to his family....

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter is short, but there wasn't a good place to cut if I continued on from this point. I am taking a mental health break from Tumblr, but I've been using the time I would normally use to be surfing and reblogging to refocus on things that creatively fulfill me, like writing. That being said, I'm heading into a very busy time, as a music student and a music teacher... bear with me as I do my best to keep enjoying the show I love.

Oliver burst through the door of the Russian garage, Diggle behind him, gun already drawn. He strode across the room, ignoring the shouts of protest around him. It didn’t take long for the Bratva boss to meet him at the bottom of the stairs.

“Mr. Queen, I told you I would contact you as soon as…”

Oliver shoved the man against the wall, his eyes so cold and dead it stopped the words in the man’s throat. “We have a problem.”

“Mr. Queen, standard protocol…”

Oliver drew his knife. He had no patience for this particular line of bullshit. “We have a very, very serious problem.”

“Mr. Queen, you will want to calm down, or you will find yourself with several bullets in the back, I am afraid.”

“I’m not scared to take a bullet. You ran my name, you should know that about me. Tell me something. You tell me you looked me up. Did your friend tell you anything about Moscow? The things I did there.”
The man’s face paled. “It was… mentioned, yes.”

“That was me when all I was trying to do was prove a point. Imagine how much more… creative I could be if someone was threatening the lives of my family.”

“Mr. Queen, I assure you, we were only doing our best to monitor the situation.”

“The situation does not need monitoring,” Oliver growled. “I had better not get another panicked phone call from the mother of my children telling me that she is being followed with my children in the backseat.”

“Mr. Queen, of course, we can…. We can ease back our surveillance.”

“It stops. Immediately,” Oliver said. “Or I will be more ruthless than you are prepared to deal with.”

“Of course, we will respect your wishes to the best of our ability, Mr. Queen, just as we respected your wishes when it comes to finding the distributor of the particular pharmaceutical you were looking for.”

Oliver’s grip slowly eased, and the man found his feet approaching the ground once more. “You found me someone to target.”

“Indeed, Mr. Queen. It should be noticed that this… is not a nice man. Not a man inclined towards sharing.”

Oliver lifted one corner of his mouth in a half-smile. “I can be very persuasive when I need to be.”

The man rubbed his throat. “It appears that way, yes.”

They arranged a meet time, and he and Diggle strode out of the garage without a drop of blood being shed. They were in the car and moving down the highway before Diggle spoke again. “What exactly did you intend to accomplish, Oliver?”
“I intended to set boundaries,” Oliver said. “Which hopefully they won’t feel the need to test.”

“Is there something I should know about the time you spent in Moscow, Oliver?”

“Not at the moment.”

Diggle sighed. “You know, I’m here to help you, man, so any time you want to, you know, open up, I’m around.”

“It’s not… relevant, Diggle. When it is, I promise you, I’ll be as open as a book.”

“At least now I know why you warned me to be ready for anything.”

Oliver lifted his mouth in a half-smile. “Well, it got the job done, and nobody had to die.”

“Wasn’t that nice?”

Oliver nodded.

**

Thea stared at her hands, clenching and unclenching in the sheets of her bed. She’d spent the whole day in bed, and she’d refused to get up, no matter how many times her mother knocked, so when her mid-afternoon nap was interrupted by incessant banging on her door, she was less than pleased.

Finally, she rolled herself out of bed and threw open the door. “What?”

Laurel Lance stood on the other side of the door. “Hello, Thea.”
A wave of different emotions washed over Thea. She could never quite sort out how she felt about Laurel. On the one hand, when she’d been a kid, and Laurel and Oliver had been attached at the hip, she’d felt as close to her as she felt to Oliver. Laurel would braid her hair and paint her nails, include her in things that would make her feel grown-up. But then Oliver and Robert had gone down on the Queen’s Gambit, and Laurel’s sister had disappeared as well, and all of sudden, the girl that Thea thought of as her sister was gone from her life without an explanation or a word.

“Did Oliver send you?” Thea asked. “Because I really don’t need help.”

“Actually, Thea, you probably do,” Laurel said. “Can I come in?”

Thea looked down at her pajamas, and around at her practically destroyed room, and sighed as she stepped back, letting Laurel inside her private sanctuary. “Yeah, sure. I guess.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re right,” Laurel said, as she found a spot to sit on Thea’s slept-in bed. “Oliver did come to me – well, Oliver and Felicity. They’re worried about you.”

“They don’t need to be. I’m a big girl. I can handle myself.”

“We all need help sometimes,” Laurel said gently. “And you’re eighteen years old – you don’t need to go to jail, you need a chance to turn your life around.”

“Hey, I’m not some kind of delinquent, okay? That would be my brother. You remember, he peed on a cop.”

“No. You’re just the teenager who took an illegal drug and drove your car off the road,” Laurel said dryly. “I’m sorry, Thea, but it has to be said. This in combination with some of the other things that have been wiped off of your record… The judge picked you to make an example for a reason.”

“Aren’t you here to give me some sort of pep talk or something?”

“No. I’m here to wake you up to the reality of what’s happening to you,” Laurel said. “My father’s
made some calls – I think between his friends and mine we’re going to be able to get you an alternate plan – at the very least we’ll be able to keep you out of jail.”

Thea looked down at her hands. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” Laurel said with a small smile. “But you should know – that deal includes community service, and it involves an alternate living arrangement.”

“What?”

“The judge thinks maybe you ought to spend some time with Felicity and Oliver.”

“My brother doesn’t need me… hanging out and getting in his way,” Thea snapped.

“No, he doesn’t,” Laurel agreed. “But he wants you there. He wants to give this a shot. I think he thinks – and I happen to agree with him, that maybe you need a change of pace.”

“I could live on my own?”

“That’s not the deal,” Laurel said firmly. “And I wanted to offer you a spot at CNRI as a legal intern. It would be a good way to meet the qualifications of the deal.”

Thea felt a cold wave of shame wash over her. “I’m sorry, Laurel, I’ve been acting like a bitch.”

“It’s been an interesting year,” Laurel said, forgivingly. “It’s okay, Thea. Your brother was dead, and now he’s back… you have new children in your life… your life changed rapidly in just a few months. Anyone would struggle with that, okay? Let us help you. There’s nothing wrong with needing some help.”

Thea nodded. “Okay… I guess…”

“Better start packing,” Laurel said as she got up. “Looks like there’s a lot of stuff here, and I’ve been to Felicity and Oliver’s townhouse – definitely not as much closet space as you’re used to.”
“Hey, minimalism is in, or haven’t you heard?” Thea said with a half-smile. “Thanks, Laurel.”

“Hey, no problem. See you soon at CNRI.”

“Yes, of course.”

Laurel left, and Thea was alone again, in her big room at the mansion. A thought crossed her mind that if she left, she would be leaving her mother alone. Her mother, who had lost two husbands – but Thea shook it off. Moira didn’t seem to need her around, not when she could be intimate with Malcolm Merlyn every chance she got.

Thea went to her closet, pulled out her favorite suitcase, and began to methodically pack.

**

Felicity thought the townhouse was probably going to stretch to its limits. She had offered the possibility of Thea staying with him, and she had meant what she said – family was the most important thing, and she would do anything for the people she considered members of hers, but she had some slight worries about… well, space.

“It’s an office, Oliver,” she said, putting her hands on her hips as she looked around the small third bedroom they had decided they would convert to Thea’s room. “There’s just not a lot of room.”

“What?” Oliver asked, snapping to attention. He’d been looking out the window at something else for as long as Felicity had been standing there.

“I’m just thinking about this room, and all of your sister’s… things.”

“Thea knows what the townhouse is like,” Oliver said gently. “She knows what a reasonable amount of stuff to bring is. Don’t worry. Our mother pounded all of that etiquette stuff into our brains.”

“I’m just worried she’s going to resent being here, eventually,” Felicity said.
“Well, she’s still a teenager. I kind of thought being resentful was a default setting most of the time?”

“Look at you, using words like default. That’s adorable,” Felicity said, going up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “And you’re still not giving this conversation one hundred percent of your attention, so what’s going on?”

“I uh – I know who was following you and the kids.”

Felicity sat down in one of the office chairs. “Oh?”

“Yeah. It uh… I recognized the Bratva markings on one of the men.”

“Russian mafia? Russian mafia was following me around town?” Felicity sighed, and closed her eyes. “I have to tell you, being with you has introduced some interesting conundrums into my life.”

“I took care of it.”

“You took care of it? How?”

“I… calmly and rationally discussed my feelings about my family being monitored to them, and they agreed that perhaps it would be better for everyone if they backed off.”

“You threatened to kill them and it worked because quite frankly you can be terrifying when you get in the right mood, is what you’re saying.”

Oliver chuckled. “More or less.”

“Oliver…” Felicity shook her head. “Okay.”

“What?”
“Nothing. Just… is this a good long-range plan? I mean, it works for now, but what if you’re gone from Starling City? Or… what happens if…”

“Hey. You’re my family. The Bratva… as odd as it sounds, they have a code of conduct they live by, and I’m a Captain. That means I get afforded certain respect. Even if I’m dead. From now on, they won’t watch us. They’ll only be around when we need them to be around.”

“Okay,” Felicity said, but her tone was still doubtful. “So – when are you having that meeting with that… person?”

“Diggle got it set up for tonight,” Oliver said. “So as soon as we get the kids down…”

“You’re off to meet with the largest supplier of the most deadly illegal drug in Starling City,” Felicity said. “Like I said… being with you. It’s a trip sometimes.”

“Good or bad?”

Felicity chuckled. “Both.”

“I’ll take it,” Oliver said, and bent to kiss her.

“Hey, none of that funny business until you help me take this stuff apart and move it to the kitchen.”

“The kitchen? What?”

“I have to have an office, Oliver. And neither of us cooks that often, so I thought I’d turn that one counter into a mini-office space.”

Oliver sighed. “We’re going to have a space issue, aren’t we?”

“Ah, there he is,” Felicity said, smiling, “arriving at the right conclusion with me.”
The streets were damp in the night. It felt strange to be out in the dark without the protection of his leather, but this was something that had to be done by Oliver Queen. It made no sense for the Hood to be interested in the buying and selling of drugs, but playboy Oliver Queen? Well.

The dealer was… not what he was expecting. And he certainly wasn’t expecting the deal to be broken by the police – a factor he probably should have accounted for, he thought, as it was all falling apart around him…

And he definitely wasn’t prepared to be injected with the highest concentration of Vertigo that could be taken without overdosing.

There was nothing he could do to stop the rush of chemicals into his bloodstream, nothing he could do to fight the effects of the drug. It was all he could do to call Diggle for help, and then succumb to the hallucinations that were suddenly overcrowding his conscious mind.
Thea moves in, and Oliver wraps up dealing with the Count.

Two quick-ish updates! I'm doing what I can to write more often while I have some free time. There's a calm in the storm of my 22-hour semester load. Anyway! I hope you enjoy this conclusion of "Vertigo". I really enjoyed letting Felicity and Oliver flirt all they wanted to in this chapter.

Diggle caught him just as he was falling to the ground. “Hang on, Oliver,” he said.

“The Foundry,” Oliver managed to gasp. “The herbs there…”

“Yeah, man, of course,” Diggle said. The next few minutes, hours, actually, were agony. The island came back to him in stunning clarity, his first year there. He kept flashing back and forth – the cool of the metal slab at the Foundry beneath his back, and the horror of what had happened with Yao Fei still real and vivid in his mind.

He knew he was screaming, he knew he was screaming and he couldn’t stop, and then there was Diggle forcing something down his throat, and then he was finally blissfully asleep.

**

The next time he opened his eyes, it didn’t feel as though any time had passed, although clearly it had, since Diggle had removed his jacket and tie, and was sitting in front of one of the computers, and Felicity was sitting in a chair next to the table, rocking the chair side to side.

“You’re going to fall out,” Oliver whispered, closing his eye against the brightness of the lamp overhead.
“I wouldn’t worry about me,” Felicity said. “I would worry about you, and what you’re going to do.”

“Oh?”

“Apparently, someone on SCPD spotted Oliver Queen in the middle of a drug bust last night.”

Oliver tried to sit up. “I’m… handcuffed?”

“Yes, apparently, you tried to kill John in your overdose rage last night. Justifiably, he handcuffed you to the table.”

“Hi,” Diggle said from the corner.

“I get this feeling that you’re mad at me….”

“Why on Earth would I be mad?”

Oliver blinked, slowly. “I’m so very, very hungover right now.”

“You scared the crap out of me, Oliver Queen.”

“Oh.” He closed his eyes.

“First of all – what’s in these crazy herbs you made John force feed you, hm? Never mind, I’ll just have them analyzed myself, and secondly… I could throttle you, I’m so mad.”

“Because I got caught?” Oliver asked, still confused.

“No, you idiot, because you could have died.”
“Oh. That.”

“Yes. That.”

“You’re mad at me. Because I could have died.”

“Yes. That is what I’m choosing to do with all of this energy I have stored up and whoa – Oliver, you definitely should not be trying to stand right now.”

“Diggle, give me some good news,” Oliver said, his eyes still mostly-shut. “Did our friends at SCPD at least catch this guy?”

“They definitely did not,” Diggle said. “But I did manage to hold on to the syringe that the Count stuck you with, Oliver. Maybe Felicity can have it analyzed.”

“What am I going to tell the boys down at the lab at QC, hmm?” Felicity asked.

“I don’t know. Tell them it’s an energy drink or something,” Oliver said.

“An energy drink?” Felicity glared at him. “That you inject via syringe?”

“I don’t know. It sounded good in my head.”

“That’s just ridiculous,” Felicity said. “I’m going to have to come up with something better than that. And you are going to have to go down to the town house and convince the police that you’re not a complete idiot, which in my current mood, I’m going to go with is an accurate assessment.”

“Hey.” Oliver reached for her, grabbed her arm loosely. “I’m sorry, Felicity. I wasn’t trying to get injected with Vertigo.”

Instantly, her face crumpled. She turned away from him so that she could compose herself. “No, I
know that. I just – I had to wake Maddie and Matthew up and rush them over to Raisa and come here and… I just got really scared for a half a second there.”

“If it helps, I was plenty scared, too.”

“I know, with you… being hell-bent on being some kind of vigilante, I thought I’d made peace with getting phone calls like that. See. This is why I was so…. Uh. It’s just easier for me to be mad at you than to be this…”

Oliver stood, and patiently waited while Diggle came over and released him from his handcuffs. Then he wrapped his arms around Felicity and didn’t let go. “I’m sorry, Felicity,” he said. “I really am.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Well, it’s not okay, but I acknowledge that you’ve apologized and will try not to get injected with unsafe dosages of narcotics again.”

Oliver chuckled. “I suppose that’s all I can ask of you.”

“Right, okay. For the record, I know you’re going to pretend that this drug overdose thing doesn’t faze you, but you look like shit –“

“You do,” Diggle agreed.

“—so you should make an effort to finish whatever you need to do so you can get some rest before we attack this Count Vertigo thing from a different angle,” Felicity said.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Oliver said. “Hey, Felicity?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming down here, being here when I woke up. I uh – I appreciate it.”

“Oliver, of course I came.” Felicity shook her head. “This is what being together means, right?”
He nodded, and squeezed her hand. He didn’t have anything more to say.

**

Matthew watched, interested, as Aunt Thea brought in several suitcases from her car. He liked his aunt. She was funny and sometimes gave him candy. But lots had been changing in his life lately, and he wasn’t sure, exactly, why his aunt was coming to live with them. “Are you going to live with us?” he asked, as he threw himself on the guest bed.

“Yeah, just for a little bit,” Thea said. “Is that okay?”

“I guess,” Matthew said. “Is Grandma Moira going to be lonely?”

“I think she might come to see you more often with her whole family being here,” Thea said. “Is that okay?”

“I guess so,” Matthew said.

“You know what?” Thea said, landing on the bed next to him and tucking him into her side. “I’m nervous about living here.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I haven’t lived with my big brother since I was twelve. I don’t know any of the rules.”

“Well, you can’t hit,” Matthew said seriously.

“Okay, good to know,” Thea said solemnly. “What about taking Oliver’s stuff?”

“Mom says you can’t borrow without asking first.”
Okay… how about tickling? Is that allowed?"

Matthew didn’t have time to move, his aunt was too sneaky and conniving. She had him pinned and tickled him as he shouted with joy. Pretty soon, his sister came running through the door and joined in, tickling Thea fiercely while she shrieked with laughter.

“Hey,” his Dad said from the doorway, “it looks like everyone is having fun without me.”

Everyone on the bed paused and looked over at him, and Aunt Thea sat up. “Wow, Ollie,” she said, “you look like warmed-over cr… er, death.”

“Gee, thanks,” Oliver said. “Think I’m coming down with something. Maybe a cold.”

“Well then, get out of here,” Thea said. “I don’t want it!”

“But I want to share my germs,” Oliver said, coming into the room and shedding his coat and tie as fast as he could, and jumping on the bed from far away. The whole bed bounced and Maddie and Matthew screamed.

And the tickle war resumed, lasting for a few minutes before Aunt Thea put a stop to it, and they all laid exhausted on the guest bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Hey, Ollie?” Thea said.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for, you know… having my back. Letting me live here and stuff.”

Matthew’s dad smiled. “It’s not a problem, Thea.”

“Hey, Aunt Thea, you know we have one super important rule,” Maddie said.
“What’s that?”

“Mac and cheese for dinner every night!” Maddie shouted. Matthew giggled, getting the joke.

“No bed times!”

“We never have to pick up Legos!”

“Well, that sounds like this is an awesome place to live, guys,” Thea said.

Oliver laughed and shook his head. “You’re all nuts.”

A rap on the door brought everyone’s attention to the doorjamb, where Matthew’s mom stood. “Hey, everyone. Oliver, can I talk to you for just a second?”

Oliver’s dad’s face changed into his “taking care of business” face, and he got up and left.

“Oops, that was a serious face,” Maddie said. Matthew nodded.

“Hey, while they’re doing that, you guys want to go hunt down some mac and cheese? Maybe we don’t have it every night, but I can whip up a batch right now if you want.”

Matthew decided right then and there that having Aunt Thea there would be awesome.

**

“I know where you can find this guy,” Felicity said. “Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“I’m going to have to be,” Oliver said. “I want this taken care of as fast as possible.”
“But first, how did it go with the police?”

Oliver chuckled. “Well, let’s just say I don’t think I’m making any friends in that department.”

“Hm, well, I guess you can’t win them all with the charming smile and the killer good looks.”

Oliver grinned. “You think I have killer good looks?”

“Oh shut up, you know you’re gorgeous.”

“No, tell me more.”

“Did you want to know where you can find the Count, or not?”

Oliver pulled her close and kissed her. “I think you can feed my ego and feed me information.”

“You wish,” Felicity scoffed. “You can barely stand right now so I don’t know where you think this is going.”

“To bed? Where I won’t have to stand?”

“Our children are still awake and are down the hall with their aunt. So… hold that thought.”

Oliver bent and kissed her again, slowly and surely. “I think I can do that.”

“In the meantime,” Felicity said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “You can know that that we tracked an isotype in the chemical composition of that drug you were injected with.”

“Meaning?”
“I can tell you exactly where in the warehouse district you can find this guy.”

“You’re a genius.”

“Well, not me, technically. The people in the lab at QC are. I just… show up and make unreasonable demands on behalf of the family.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Hm, you better. Hey, do me a favor?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.”

“Always.”

***

Felicity sat up with Thea after the children had been put to bed. She nursed a glass of wine while Thea sipped a soda. She’d pouted a bit, but Felicity had gently pointed out that people who had just been arrested for driving while under the influence didn’t get to drink in her house, regardless of their age, and they flipped on the TV, scrolling through channels while Felicity did some work.

“I told Oliver earlier, but I wanted to tell you that I really appreciate what you guys did for me. I know you went out on a limb.”

Felicity shook her head. “It’s not a problem, Thea.”

“Actually, it kind of is. I can see that you moved your stuff around and you’re letting me live here with your kids and… I get it, I really do. So thanks.”
“You’re family, Thea. We would do anything for family.”

“So… uh. Is this what you do every night while Oliver’s at work?”

“What? Drink a glass of wine and watch TV?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, the wine is just because today has been interesting. But I don’t… settle well, unless Oliver is in the house.”

“Awww. That’s precious.”

Felicity lifted one corner of her mouth in a smile. “I’m glad you think so.”

Her phone rang, and as soon as she saw Oliver’s name, she picked it up. “Hey, hon, Thea and I were just watching that show you like.”

There was a beat. “You don’t need to leave the room, I can tell you everything right here.”

“Okay.”

“The Count’s as good as dead.”

“Oh?”

“Injected with so much Vertigo he’ll never think straight again.”

Felicity tapped a few keys on her laptop, trying to hide the utter relief in her voice. “That’s nice.”
“I’m not hurt.”

“Oh good.” She clenched one fist and then relaxed it. “So are you on your way home early?”

“Yeah, Tommy’s got the club for tonight.”

“Good. Can’t wait to see you.”

“Hey, remember what we started earlier?” Oliver asked, his voice dipping down into husky territory.

Felicity chuckled. “It’s on the top of the to-do list, Oliver.”

“Good.”

Felicity hung up the phone and took a deep breath.

“Everything okay with Oliver?”

“Yeah,” Felicity said. “He’s on his way home early.”

“Good,” Thea said. “He didn’t look well this afternoon.”

“I think all he needs is some extra time in bed,” Felicity said, off-hand.

Thea raised her eyebrows. “I’m sure that’s all he needs.”

“Oh my God,” Felicity groaned. “I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m totally adult enough to handle my brother having sex with his…. Girlfriend.”
“Good, because I’m not old enough to handle how embarrassed I am.” Felicity shook her head.

“I think I’m going to like living here,” Thea said, settling deeper into the couch. “Thanks, Felicity.”

“Not a problem, really. If I can continue being awkward to make you feel more comfortable, let me know.” But Felicity was smiling, and so was Thea.
Chapter Summary

A DVD Extra about Oliver and Maddie, and the promises we make to our children.

Oliver left Felicity sleeping deeply in their bed. He’d fallen asleep for a short period, but often, he found that the eight hours she required he simply wasn’t capable of anymore, and so he had come up with other things to do in the hours between when they fell asleep and when Felicity would likely wake again. She would wake if he attempted TV, so he’d taken to quietly reading magazines in Russian and Chinese on the couch. If Felicity noticed the growing pile of reading material on their coffee table, she never said anything.

He sank into the couch cushions with a low groan. Everything hurt. He hadn’t recovered from having his system overloaded and rebooted, as Felicity would say, quite as quickly as he liked to pretend he did. His body was used to punishment, but being able to handle it didn’t mean he couldn’t feel the twinges and aches of being unforgiving to his physique all of the time.

He reached for the magazine on top of the pile -- it was new, and he hadn’t cracked it open yet. Reading in these languages had always been harder for him than speaking in them, since his training had been very “hands-on”, but he found he was slowly making progress in that area. Slowly, he thumbed through it, picking out a few articles to read here and there, trying not to think about Felicity’s face when he’d woken up and looked over at her.

He tried not to think about what she’d looked like, earlier that night, all spread out underneath of him, writhing, and then giving as she got. They’d done their best to wear each other out, almost like they were trying to consume each other, memorize each other. He didn’t quite know what to do with her, where to put her in his brain, besides next to him, always. Adjusting to the idea of having partners, people who could help him in his quest… well, that had been quite the task. But now he couldn’t imagine his life without Felicity next to him -- on the computers in the Foundry, a steady hand between his shoulder blades in the morning when he handed her a coffee cup, the quick kisses they exchanged like habits, but somehow had yet to sink into routine. Felicity as his bed partner, her mischievous eyes sparkling behind glasses and her golden hair spread out across his pillow. Felicity on top of him, Felicity underneath of him, Felicity’s fingers around his….

“Dad?”

To say that he jumped would be an exaggeration. But he did startle, fighting a flush of color rushing to his cheeks. “Maddie?”
“Daddy?”

There was heartbreak in her voice and Oliver pushed himself off the couch and rushed over. Her face was covered in tears and snot, her hair disheveled and her eyes red-rimmed.

“Oh, baby,” Oliver muttered. “What happened?”


Oliver felt, rather than imagined, a rush of icy-cold water, and the sting of salt in his eyes. The sting of gunpowder and the smell of a days-old corpse, a decision made at gun-point that he could never take back….

“I know a little bit about that, princess,” he said. “Wanna come hang with me for a bit?”

Maddie shook her head. “I want to cuddle. Can daddies cuddle?”

Oliver nodded seriously. “Yes. Should we wipe your face first?”

“Mommy always does,” Maddie said, scrambling up on top of the couch and laying on top of Oliver, trusting and sweet. She smelled like apple juice and animal crackers. Oliver was as gentle as he could be wiping her face with a Kleenex from the box next to the couch, but he was nowhere near as skilled as Felicity at being efficient and kind at the same time, and Maddie winced once or twice, but didn’t say anything.

He ran his hand through her hair. It was the same honey-brown color as his own, and her eyes were all his, as well, but her nose and lips and ears were all Smoak, and she was built slight and scrawny, like Thea had been. She clung to him the same way he’d seen monkeys cling to their mothers in zoos, legs wrapped around his chest and both arms around his neck. She was still trembling, shaking with childhood terror, and Oliver tried to remember what his mother or father had done when he’d woken with nightmares.

He couldn’t recall.
Moira and Robert had spent much of his childhood absent -- attending this function or that function, seeing him at suppers and in the afternoons, briefly, when nurses and nannies would bring him by the office. They might come and tuck him in every night, but Oliver wouldn’t have tramped down the hallway to find his father reading a magazine by lamplight at three in the morning.

No, the person Oliver would have found, he realized, was Raisa. Raisa, who stayed a hallway over, but who always left her door open a crack. Raisa who let him wake her, who would take him by the hand to get warm-milk, who would sit by his bed until he would fall back asleep, and he would wake in the morning, and she would still be there, kneeling beside his bed, but asleep.

Had he ever thanked her for any of that? Probably not, he realized. It was only recently that he started to realize everything she’d done for him, the sacrifices she’d made, the devotion she showed to him and to his children.

He started to hum, low and soft, a melody he remembered Raisa humming to him. It wasn’t Russian, but rather an Irish tune she’d picked up, he remembered her telling him, from her first husband, who had been a pharmacist in the Glades who got shot to death during a robbery attempt.

“Daddy, did you live on an island?”

Maddie’s eyes were wide open her hands were splayed over one of his most vicious scars.

“I did.”

“My friends said that you were there for a long time. They said you could get sent back, like jail.”

Oliver tilted his head to the side. “Baby, I am never going to go back to the island. It was… I didn’t like it there.”

“I don’t want you to go back, either. I like having you here.”

Oliver closed his eyes, his hand wrapped in Maddie’s hair. “Is that what your dream was about? Me being gone?”
He could hear her swallow. “Yeah. I heard Mommy on the phone. She was worried you were going to leave again.”

Oliver felt a flash of panic. He couldn’t promise her that he would never leave her -- the likelihood was simply far too great that all the lives he’d taken would someday catch up to him -- either Quentin Lance would catch him, or someone else would be too quick with a gun….. he’d learned a long time ago that he was as far from immortal as it got. But he wanted to promise his baby girl that he would always be there.

“If I ever leave you guys, I promise, it will be because I had no other choices. And I will fight to get back to you. And if I can’t….” Oliver shrugged. “I know it’s a lot for a four-year-old to understand, but I would be with you now, in your heart.”

“Like before?”

Oliver nodded. “Like before, but different. Because you know all kinds of stuff about me now, don’t you? Like what my voice sounds like and that I like to put ketchup on my mac and cheese, just like you.”

“Yeah,” Maddie said. “And I know you like to kiss Mommy’s neck and your breath smells like coffee.”

“Exactly.”

“And if I ever left you, would I… get to be with you, too?”

A cold panic seized him at the mere thought. “Princess, you leaving me is not an option. Not even a… a possibility. But… yeah, I think I believe that. That we stay with the people we love. One way or the other.”

“Okay.” Maddie snuggled back down into his chest. “I don’t to leave you either, Daddy.”

“How about this? How about neither one of us leaves forever and ever, okay?”
“Okay!” Maddie giggled suddenly. “I scared you!”

“What, when?”

“When I said Daddy. You jumped!”

“I was… thinking about… yes. Yes I jumped. Because you are as quiet as the mice that used to live on the island and visit me at night. You, you are a Maddie-mouse.”

Maddie giggled and burrowed in closer to him. “I love cheese!”

“Just like a mouse!”

Maddie cackled, and Oliver pressed a finger to his lips. “We have to be quiet, or we’re going to wake everyone up.”

“Okay.” Maddie let out a huge yawn and rubbed her eyes. “I can be quiet.”

“Good,” Oliver said, and he went back to humming, rubbing her back while his mouse fell back asleep. When she finally was still and quiet, and asleep, Oliver pressed a kiss to her forehead. Then he lifted his head and without moving addressed the other person standing in the hallway just outside the living room.

“I know you’re out there, Thea,” he said softly.

“How did you know?”

“Unlike Maddie, you are not as silent as a mouse. What are you doing up?”

Thea shrugged. “I don’t sleep very much sometimes. Especially if my brain is… whirring. I had forgotten that song, actually, until just now.”
“Yeah, Raisa used to sing it all the time,” Oliver said. “I think the lyrics are, you know, tragic and horrible, but I can’t remember exactly what they are.”

“Neither can I.” Thea entered the room all the way, sat in the recliner opposite the couch. She crossed one leg over the other. “She’s a darling, you know.”

Oliver smiled. “I wish I could say I had anything to do with that.”

“You’re doing a good job, now. I like that bit you told her, about getting to stay with the people we love. I used to go out to your grave and talk to you, you know.”

Oliver stilled. “No, I didn’t know.”

“I’d tell you about my boyfriends, and tests, and what mom was doing and… anyway. I could just imagine you laughing at me, or telling me, you know, that I was exactly right and mom was being insane, or whatever. I kept you with me. Even if it felt like sometimes it was by the skin of my teeth.”

Oliver reached for her hand. “I meant what I told Maddie, you know. I’m not leaving you guys, ever again, not without the fight of my life. You, Felicity, Maddie, Matthew… I’d hack my way through armies for you guys.”

Thea tilted her head to the side, even as she took his hand. “That’s… an odd phrasing, Oliver, but…. I appreciate the sentiment, all the same.”

Felicity’s voice drifted down the hallway, “Oliver?”

“You should go put your daughter to bed, snuggle with your girlfriend,” Thea said softly, dropping Oliver’s hand. “And I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight, Oliver. Goodnight, Mouse.”

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