With the Speed of an Arrow

by AcademyOfShipping

Summary

Oliver Queen’s elite and silver-spoon life has taken some blows in the past few years, but he is still the carefree billionaire everyone knows of and loves. When his role in the family business is in jeopardy and he is introduced to a motley of new people, his status quo is threatened. With a changed perspective, Oliver realizes his feeling for his best friend and anchor-in-life, Felicity Smoak, may be more than just platonic.

OR

A modern adaption of Jane Austen’s Emma with a gender swap* and no island.

*Knowing that gender is not binary

Notes

Thank you betas! Ruth (@austencello) for letting me bounce ideas off you, supporting me, and being the first to read this story. Shelby (@miss_writer) for your enthusiasm and encouragement. Jamie (@J_Sevick) for meticulously going over my words and fixing them. You are awesome and I'm so grateful for your efforts!
Oliver Queen pulled his suspenders up over his shoulders and then tucked the escaped ends of his
dress shirt back into his pants. He looked out his window down onto the grounds of Queen manor
and the twinkle-light illuminated tent as the sun had all but set behind it. Turning around to grab his
tuxedo jacket, Oliver saw Kendall-no Kendra-zip her dress up. Oliver looked over to his bed and
was impressed it hardly showed any evidence of their previous activity, just a couple of lumps on the
duvet.

He knew he should feel guilty, but Oliver found it difficult. He, nor Kendra, did anything wrong.
They hadn’t completely abandoned the reception, only escaped it for a few minutes. That had to be
allowed. The tent overflowed with so many people, several spilled out into the grounds surrounding
the tent. Oliver reasoned no one could be expected to be present 100 percent of the time.

A thought occurred to him, which he knew he should have considered before bringing Kendra up
here. As he slipped his arms in his tuxedo jacket, Oliver asked, attempting for delicacy, “Kendra,
you’re not related to Digg nor Lyla? Are you?”

Kendra stopped on her way to the door and turned around, her yellow dress swung around her
ankles. She let out a humorless laugh. “No, Oliver. You didn’t screw one of your best friend’s
relatives. Just a friend of one said relative.”

She turned back around and huffed out of the room.

Oliver thought she was a little too high and mighty for someone who had agreed to fuck him without
knowing him more than twenty minutes.

At his mirror, he fixed his bow-tie and ran his fingers through his hair. He stared at his reflection and
blew out a breath. Oliver quickly left his room, navigated through the manor and ran outside, past the
fragrant rose garden, to rejoin everyone at the reception.

Digg, Oliver’s recently-ex bodyguard, was the reason Oliver forced himself to go back into an
overheated and overcrowded tent in a tuxedo. Earlier in the evening Oliver managed to stand still as
Digg’s best man as Digg remarried Lyla in the very tent they stood in. Once guests had been
escorted out of the tent, staff had quickly set up tables for the guests and the catering staff brought out
the food. Oliver had met Kendra while outside the tent, and as soon as he had eaten dinner he went
looking for her.

“Hey, man,” Diggle came up behind Oliver and clapped him on the back.

“Hi, Digg,” Oliver responded as he turned around. Oliver forced a smile as he faced Digg and Lyla.
“Lyla. Congratulations, again. It’s about time.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sometimes marriages take two weddings to stick,” Diggle said. Both he and Lyla were
unable to take the smiles off their faces, and Oliver could tell they were anything but fake. The heat
inside the tent couldn’t take anything away from them on this day.

“I’m really happy for you two.”

“Thank you, Oliver,” Lyla said.

“Did Sara make it?” Oliver asked as he looked around the tent at the faces on the people who milled
around in it. “I know you were excited to see her again.”
Diggle’s face fell and Lyla’s followed.

“She wasn’t able to make it,” Lyla said. She looped her arms inside of Diggle’s crossed one. She placed a light kiss on his arm. Sara had been an army buddy of Digg and Lyla. The three of them had gone through some intense times together. Sara had helped the couple hide their relationship from their superiors until Digg and Lyla got married the first time. She was their witness for their first wedding. Oliver worked hard to not be jealous of Sara’s close relationship with Digg. “Apparently, her sister had a panic attack this morning and needed Sara.”

“I thought Sara was going to leave yesterday?”

“She changed her mind,” Lyla answered.

“Oh,” Oliver said. Off the gloomy look on Digg, added, “Well, if she had come today it would have been the three of you off in a corner telling army stories. Neither of your families would have liked that. Or you would have said hi and bye to her. She’ll just have to come another time when you’ll have more time to actually hang out.”

“That’s true,” Digg said. He contemplated Oliver’s words and found some truth in them. A smile started to form again on Digg’s face and Lyla’s smile returned in response.

Oliver smiled at the thought he was the best best man there had ever been. If he needed a part-time job, he would do excellent as a professional best man. It was a shame very few get this kind of treatment and service. The only person to experience it was Digg, and Lyla by extension.

But being someone’s best man required a close friendship before the wedding. Oliver was only close to a very select few. Diggle, Felicity, his mother to an extent, and his sister to a lesser extent. Thea had moved away from home with her husband to National City. Oliver had made an effort to include Lyla in that list for Digg’s sake. Oliver hadn’t been largely successful, but they were closer than they had been when Digg and Lyla had gotten engaged again.

There had been jokes made at Oliver’s expense leading up to the wedding. The jokes consisted of Oliver losing his best and only friend when Digg became a married man. Oliver had laughed along with everyone; he knew Digg would never abandon him. Even if Oliver lost Digg as his bodyguard.

“Where’d you head off to before?” Digg asked in his way in which appeared as if he was concerned.

“Just needed some time alone.”

“You seemed nervous during dinner,” Lyla said. Oliver did not like being ganged up on. “Your leg wouldn’t stop bouncing.”

Oliver shrugged. “Just a lot of caffeine I guess.”

“Hmm,” Digg nodded a little too much. “And my cousin Stacy’s friend’s absence happening at the nearly the same time interval was coincidence?”

“Must be.” Oliver learned to never admit to anything, especially if damning evidence was in Digg’s hands. Deny, deny, deny.

“You were gone for a long time,” Digg said in a softer voice.

“No, I wasn’t.” Oliver had tried not to be. He had best man duties he had to do, even if he didn’t
“You missed the toasts,” Lyla said with a slight tone of judgment and her eyes narrowed somewhat toward Oliver. Oliver didn’t like being judged by her. Lyla didn’t understand the friendship he and Digg shared.

“I’m sorry, Digg,” Oliver turned to Digg, ignoring Lyla. “Really. I wrote a spectacular speech. It was going to make your relatives cry. I could do it now. Do you want me to do it now?”

“No, it’s all right,” Digg smiled. “How about you email it to me.”

“I can do that. I am sorry.”

“Don’t worry. Lyla’s sister was a little too drunk to be coherent and she was rushed off stage.” Digg said. Off an offended look from Lyla, Digg added, “That is an accurate account and it’s not my fault. Your absence just made it look like we skipped toasts and her sister got a little loud for a couple seconds. The extra time allowed us to actually have a piece of cake.”

“I still don’t understand how you are opening your own bakery, Digg, but you didn’t make your own wedding cake. What does that say about your skills as a baker?” Oliver asked.

“Lyla and your mother wouldn’t let me,” Diggle said with a laugh. “I wanted to, but was told I would be too busy to do it.”

“You were,” Lyla insisted.

“I could have done it.”

Lyla shook her head at her husband. She understood Digg’s stubbornness almost as much as Oliver did.

“Oliver, we have a favor to ask you,” Digg said after he looked down at his wife and had a silent conversation with her. Digg’s face went into serious mode and Oliver wondered how hard this favor would be or how much it would cost him. Oliver would happily open up his wallet. In fact, he preferred it.

“What?”

“We’d like a few minutes at our place before we have to head to the airport. Would you mind covering for us?”

Oliver didn’t know how he was expected to cover for a bride and groom escaping their own reception. He was good, but he wasn’t sure he was that good. Looking at the newly re-married couple and the hope and love in their eyes, Oliver knew he couldn’t say no. And he couldn’t disappoint them, though he thought they were naïve.

“Umm,” Oliver said as he swiveled his head around and looked for anything that could help. He looked over and around the guests and the band. Finally, his eyes landed on exactly what he needed, which would be the key to the endeavor. “Yes. I will cover for you.”

“Thank you, Oliver, for hosting the wedding and reception here. The grounds are beautiful,” Lyla said. “The pictures are going to look amazing.”

“Of course. Text me when you get back from your honeymoon.”
“Ok,” Digg pulled him into a hug. Oliver decided someone’s wedding was one of those moments you hug your best friend. Therefore, he didn’t fight Digg and put his arms around Digg’s wide torso. After twenty long seconds, Oliver was released from Digg’s grizzly of a hug. Oliver carefully put one arm around the middle of Lyla’s back and hugged her for two seconds. Digg whispered to Oliver, “Thank you. We’ll see you later.”

“Shh,” Oliver whispered back. “Go when you see the signal.”

“What’s the signal?” Lyla asked.

“You’ll know it when you see it,” Oliver answered. He then walked away and maneuvered his way around all of Digg’s and Lyla’s relatives. Most were from Digg’s side of the family. Oliver didn’t understand how one person could be related to so many people who were still alive.

Once just outside of the tent, Oliver crouched down to look at the power generator. Fortunately there was a big power button. Oliver pressed and released it. The whole tent went dark and quiet. The guests gasped and a couple people yelled out. Oliver felt the confusion spread through the crowd.

Oliver envied Digg and Lyla as they got to escape their families, while he was stuck there.

He gave Digg and Lyla three and a half minutes and turned the generator back on. It took a bit for the generator to kick back in. When the power had been fully restored Oliver stepped around guest after rattled guest, and looked for his mother.

Jax and, looking down at his watch, Oliver realized Mike might also be with her. It was later than he realized. Moira should have gone to bed over an hour ago, but he doubted if it occurred. His mother was incredibly stubborn and refused to give up her independence. Despite the help she needed and the more she would need as time went by.

On the opposite end of the tent, Oliver saw Moira with both Jax and Mike. She was clearly arguing with both of them. Oliver was surprised the rules of decorum weren’t prohibiting her from making a scene. But then again, Oliver needed to remember she wasn’t who she used to be.

“Mom,” Oliver greeted as he walked up to them.

“Oliver,” Moira turned toward him and her shoulders visibly relaxed. “Will you please tell these two bullies that me staying a little longer at the reception isn’t going to hurt me.”

It was in times of her most argumentative, Oliver reminded himself he paid her CNAs very well.

“Actually, Mom, I was surprised to see it was this late. I was just looking for you to take you back up to the house.”

“Oliver,” Moira’s tone was one of warning. “I am the parent. Not you. Besides I feel fine. I was just talking to Mr. Diggle and Ms. Michaels.”

Jax cleared his throat. Both Moira and Oliver turned toward him, one of them more open to hear what he had to say than the other. “Actually, ma’am, it has been almost an hour since you talked with the couple.”

“Has it?” Moira asked, confused. “I was sure it was just before the blackout. Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I think,” Oliver said as he placed his hands on his mother’s upper arms, “that it is time to call it
night.”

“I suppose so. But how will the staff know how to clean everything properly?”

“I’m sure they know by now,” Oliver replied, amused. “Do you want me to walk up with you?”

“No,” Moira shooed him off. “Enjoy the reception. I’m sure you have a few more duties as best man to complete.”

With Digg and Lyla’s escape he didn’t, but Oliver’s mother was in capable and well-trained hands. “Ok. Sleep well.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Oliver leaned down and kissed her cheek. He ensured Jax and Mike had a hold on Moira before he took a step back into the tent.

The band started up again and the guests seemed unconcerned about the power outage as most seemed to squish their way on the wooden collapsible dance floor.

Oliver made his way to the bar. Once the bartender set down his shot of vodka, he turned and found Felicity staring at him from a table on the other side of the tent. He held his drink in salute and smiled. She returned the salute and the smile, then turned back to the group she was talking to.

Melancholy swept over him. Oliver wasn’t sure he wanted to examine it, but it had been there all day and ignoring it hadn’t made it disappear.

He knew Digg would be his friend. Always. They were very much like brothers. But Oliver knew Digg’s marriage to Lyla would change things. Digg wouldn’t always be around to give Oliver advice or get Oliver out of trouble. Oliver relied on Diggle to talk with; to think problems or issues through. Things were going to change. For the better for Digg. Oliver wasn’t sure how it’d be for himself.

Digg’s marriage wasn’t the only change. With Lyla’s income to rely on, Digg could finally try to live his dream of owning a bakery. The bakery his grandmother, who had raised Digg, had always wanted to own. Losing his grandmother early led to some tough financial decisions. One of those was joining the army. The other was becoming a bodyguard when Digg came back after two tours in Afghanistan.

The new bakery meant Digg had quit as Oliver’s bodyguard.

Oliver didn’t need a bodyguard. Not anymore. It gave Moira some relief to know her son was protected, but there were no longer any threats. There may have been a brawl or two at Verdant, but nothing serious. So, there was no need to replace his bodyguard.

He did wonder if he needed to replace his best friend.

Or if he had been the one replaced.

“This is a wedding, not a wake,” a soft voice said behind him. Oliver smiled without turning around. If anyone could make him feel better, it was Felicity.

“Some would say there isn’t much difference. Maybe I’m mourning my friend’s lost freedom.”

Felicity cupped his lower shoulder while she placed her arm on the rest of his shoulder. Her chin settled on her arm as she looked at him. “How are you?”
“I’m fine, Felicity,” Oliver answered. Off of Felicity’s scrutiny, he added, “Really. I promise I’m doing better than I thought I’d be doing.”

She held eye contact with Oliver until Felicity was certain of the truth of his words. “I’m glad you’re okay. But if you need to talk to somebody, I’m here.”

“I don’t, but if I change my mind I know where to find you,” Oliver replied, mostly to appease Felicity. Oliver hated combining talking and feelings.

“Good,” Felicity said. “Unless you want me to stay, I’m heading out.”

“Felicity, go. It looks as if you don’t the Diggles will be adopting you.” Oliver indicated to a cluster of the Diggle family at Felicity’s former table. They were smiling and pointing at Felicity with the look of being dazzled by her. Oliver knew the feeling.

“Yeah. Their friendliness is a bit overwhelming. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yes.” The two leaned over and kissed each other’s cheek. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Call me if you need to.” With that Felicity walked away and out of the tent.

Though her company soothed Oliver some, he didn’t want to bring Felicity down. She was completely happy for Digg, whereas he was 75 or 80 percent happy for their friend.

He tipped the rest of his drink into his mouth and savored the burn down his throat. Oliver knew he needed to find a way to get over himself and let Digg lead his new life.

Kendra walked over to the bar and it took a moment for Oliver to remember her. Once he did, he smiled and slid closer to her. The Queen charm was almost impossible to resist, and there was hardly anyone who wanted to. Kendra rolled her eyes but smiled back and leaned closer to him. Oliver thanked god for the willing distraction. An hour with her was the perfect thing for Oliver to feel like himself again.

The following evening, Oliver sat across from Moira in their dining room. Felicity occupied her usual spot in the middle of the table, facing the French doors leading out to the grounds. As Oliver cut into his pork, the pitch of his mother’s voice filled his head. The words, however, weren’t sticking. Her voice was just a dull tone that accompanied the thoughts, which hadn’t left his head since the wedding.

He looked up and found Felicity staring at him. Her brows scrunched together and Oliver could tell she knew he wasn’t listening. He straightened up in his chair and focused on Moira.

“And I know it was the cleaning staff who left marks on the kitchen floor. They tried to blame the bakery staff, but I know Aveline, and what’s the girl’s name who helps her out, would never do such a thing. Aveline is much too careful. Otherwise, I would say the wedding was a success.”

“Yes,” Oliver answered. “Digg and Lyla seemed very happy.”

“They really did. And the wedding was gorgeous.” Felicity turned toward Oliver and asked, “I was meaning to ask you, did you have anything to do with the blackout?”
“I had many duties as best man. Some of them are confidential.”

“Oliver!” Moira admonished. “That was frightening.”

His hands went up in surrender. “The couple asked me to do it.”

“John and Lyla,” Felicity asked slowly, each word deliberate and over-pronounced, “asked you to cut the power during their reception and terrify their guests?”

“Yes, they did,” Oliver replied, his tone cheerfully defiant. Then in a quieter voice, added, “In a manner of speaking.”

“What exactly did they ask you to do?” Felicity pressed, skepticism ran across her face.

A slight sigh escaped Oliver’s grinning lips. He liked misleading Felicity, unfortunately it never lasted very long. ”They wanted a little time at their house before they had to go the airport. So they asked me to create a distraction.”

Felicity scoffed.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“That was the only distraction you could think of?”

“In the limited amount of time I had to hide a groom and bride, who was in her wedding dress,” Oliver emphasized wedding dress with jabbing his fork in the general direction of Felicity, “yes.”

“You know,” Felicity responded, “I’m actually impressed.”

“Thank you,” Oliver puffed out his chest a bit.

“How you haven’t been arrested more times than you have already, is astonishing.”

Oliver looked at Felicity who smiled innocently at him. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Hmm, just a bit,” she generously admitted as she brought her pointer finger and thumb up and less than a half inch apart.

“Will you two ever get tired of teasing each other?” Moira asked.

“Probably not,” Oliver responded and gave Felicity a wink. Felicity threw a mock glare at Oliver, which only served to widen his smile.

A responding smile and a particular gleam, that Oliver had the unfortunate experience of seeing many times before, appeared in Felicity’s eyes. That gleam could only mean trouble for him.

“So, Oliver,” Felicity called over. Oliver tensed. “Who was the woman I saw you with at the bar at the reception?”

With a glance to Moira, Oliver answered, “Just a guest.”

“Hmm. I couldn’t decide if she was a Diggle or not.”

“Oliver, really!” Moira exclaimed. “She is a relative of Mr. Diggle. It’s highly inappropriate. You couldn’t have found a non-relative to have a dalliance with?”
“I…she,” Oliver sputtered. He threw a quick glare at Felicity. She usually didn’t discuss his hookups with him, let alone around his mother. Oliver deflated, “Her name was Kendra. She was a friend of a Diggle cousin. I’m not that insensitive.”

“That is good to hear. Mr. Diggle is one of your best friends next to Felicity. I wouldn’t want to see you ruin your relationship with him.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Oliver said in a sincere tone.

After a moment of studying Oliver, Moira stated, “I think I will go to bed early tonight. I just started a new book. Did I tell you about it?”

Moira had in fact told both Oliver and Felicity several times. She had also started the book several times. Oliver inwardly cursed her vascular dementia and the stroke, which caused it, for the ten thousandth time. He had suggested it was maybe time to give up reading, but Moira had not taken it well and became more determined to keep reading.

Oliver schooled his features and answered, “Yes, you did. It sounds interesting.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” She placed her napkin on the table and stood up. Oliver called out to Jax to have him escort her out and up to her room. Moira grazed her hand over Felicity’s shoulders as Moira made her way to Oliver. She leaned down and placed a kiss on his head. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Moira,” Felicity said as Moira walked out of the room.

“Goodnight, Mom.”

The two stared down at their plates and moved their food around without eating. Their sadness crowded the room. It took a moment for both Oliver and Felicity to regain their composure.

Oliver turned toward Felicity, intent on things being normal and telling her what he really thought of her line of questioning in front of Moira. Though when he looked at her face he saw her concern written on her face.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“Are you okay?”

“Why?” He really didn’t want to talk about Moira or her condition. He had done that enough.

“Because John got married. Which will eventually change your dynamic with him. Not that it has to. But when he starts talking about married life or, maybe someday, babies, you aren’t going to be able to relate and it might cause some distance between you two. And not to mention he’s not your bodyguard anymore, so you won’t see him nearly every day. Though I’m really happy he’s finally able to try to live his and his grandmother’s dream. And I know you are too. But it’ll be different and require more effort. You’ll have to go to the bakery-I still love he named it Kick Ass Bakery, it’s just so perfect-anyway you’ll have to go out of your way to see him now,” Felicity took a breath when she saw Oliver tried not to smile and failed. “I’m just worried you might feel a little abandoned.”

“Felicity, I’m fine.”

“Really?” Felicity asked.

“I am happy for Digg. And I do know it’ll be an adjustment. But it’ll be fine.”
Felicity paused as she assessed Oliver. She squinted her eyes, as if it would help her see inside Oliver, into his soul.

“I think you’re saying fine when you’re not fine. You just think you should be fine and telling me what you think I want to hear.”

“Felicity,” Oliver said as he stood up and ran his hand over his face.

“No, listen,” Felicity said. She stood up to and took Oliver’s hand. “It’s okay to not be okay right now. It’s a big change and it’s going to take time to get used to it. But I promise it’ll work out and your friendship with John will stay intact.”

Oliver looked down at Felicity. He never knew how she could see him so clearly, when no one else could. Sometimes not even himself. But she had been right about him having concerns regarding the permanence of Oliver’s friendship with Digg. And not only did Felicity refuse to drop the subject, she had somehow reassured Oliver he’d be all right.

Oliver applauded his luck when all those years ago, Felicity had taken pity on a stranger and rescued his naked self from a Bellagio’s security officer.

“Thank you, Felicity,” Oliver said. He knew he had, in essence, admitted she was right. But they both knew she usually was. He pulled Felicity into a hug and squeezed tight. Felicity squeezed back and then released her hug.

“I better get going,” Felicity said. “I’m meeting with a potential new client tomorrow and I have some final preparations to do.”

“So responsible,” Oliver said with a slight mocking tone.

“Something you wouldn’t understand.”

“I am the CEO of a successful Fortune 500 company.”

“But if it were up to you, you’d run Verdant until you became an old creepy guy who owns a club.”

“Being a billionaire takes the creep factor away.”

“Only for those looking for a sugar daddy.”

“I’m not sure I’ll mind then,” Oliver said and laughed at Felicity’s grimace. “I’ll text you later about meeting up for lunch this week.”

“Sounds good,” Felicity said as she clasped his upper arm as she made her way out. “Goodnight, Oliver.”

“Goodnight, Felicity,” Oliver responded with a smile.

Oliver took his phone out of his pocket. He pulled up Diggle’s second cousin’s daughter contact and deleted it. He then sent a quick text to Sin, letting her know he was coming into Verdant. After grabbing his keys, he walked out the door and drove out of the gate.

Pulling up to the red painted curb with a hard break, Oliver exited his Porsche with his most
charming smile. The sun reflected off his sunglasses, which hid the dark circles underneath his eyes. He buttoned the suit of his jacket and waved to the crowd of journalist, board members, and investors who had gathered around a staging area.

He laughed at the professional attire everyone wore to stand around on a dirt lot under the hot sun.

Oliver walked around them and joined the CFO, Walter Steel, his mother, and the director of the board. He wanted to say his last name started with a S, but Oliver wasn’t sure. Oliver was fairly proud he remembered the guy’s title. He nodded at a reporter he had hooked up with a few years ago, she looked down at her hands in her lap. Oliver smiled.

A construction type guy handed Oliver a blue hard hat. He looked at it quizzically, and looked around to see all the people “on stage” had one on as well. Oliver put it on, even though he knew it was ridiculous. What did they think he was going to do? Fall into a well?

“You’re late,” the director person said.

“And?” Oliver asked. Didn’t this guy know Oliver’s reputation? Oliver knew he had never been on time for anything. By now no one expected it of him. And really, if anyone here had the kind of night he had at Verdant the night before, they would be late too. Getting out of bed had been damn near impossible.

“Oliver,” Moira whispered as she turned her head to the side. “This is important. As CEO you’re going to have to learn to be on time for things.”

“Ah, come on, Mom. I’m not that late.”

“Walter told me it has been 45 minutes.” Moira used her strict voice. Her CEO boss voice. Basically, her scary voice. As there had always been at least one nanny around, Oliver doubted she had a mom voice. But she had a boss voice. Dementia hadn’t taken that away. “We scheduled this at 11 to give you plenty of time to be here. You need to make more of an effort.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.” Oliver looked around and saw James standing to the side, ready to help Moira if she needed anything. Another reason they had scheduled this at 11 so Moira could keep her bi-weekly appointment with her RN, Kara. Kara came to the house once a week to check on Moira’s medication compliance, new symptoms, and anything else that came up. Moira hated them.

“Oliver,” Walter said in his crisp accent. “You just need to say a few words, do the ceremonial shovel dig, stay for a few pictures, and then it will be over.”

“Thanks, Walter.” Walter was the only one at Queen Consolidated who was nice to Oliver. Considering Walter taught him what he needed to do and how to do it, that was an extremely good thing.

Oliver stepped up to the microphone and cleared his throat. He hated business press conferences. Pulling his shoulders back and putting on a practiced smile, Oliver said, “I want to thank you all for coming today. Queen Consolidated was a dream of my father’s. But not even in his wildest dreams did he ever think it would be as successful as it is today. He was always proud of how Queen Consolidated positively affected the lives of people around the world. In that token, we dedicate this new building, which will soon be built right where we are standing, and everything that comes from it to him. Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to announce Queen Consolidated’s latest, and most innovative, division, the Robert Queen Memorial Applied Sciences.”

Clicks of cameras went off and a smattering of polite applause followed.
The same construction guy handed him a shovel. Oliver had never shoveled dirt before, but he had seen it done. It couldn’t be that hard, right? Thoughts of how he should have practiced beforehand swarmed his head and Oliver really hoped he didn’t embarrass himself. After working the shovel in the dirt, he stepped on the shovel to put weight on it and pushed it into the dirt about an inch and a half more. Not wanting to focus on it, Oliver scooped up a measly amount of dirt and threw it next to the little dent he created.

More applause and clicks occurred.

Another person at the edges of the event waved to him, her dark long hair shaded her face. Oliver smiled. A good PR person he could tolerate had been damn near impossible to find. She motioned for him to take his sunglasses off. Being as cool as he could with a blue hard hat standing to a little dent of dirt he made, he smiled and casually took off his sunglasses. Moira stepped up to him and Oliver put his arm around her.

Moira whispered, “What are we doing here?”

Oliver kept a straight face despite wanting to scream and whispered back, “Just a little QC business. Don’t worry. James will take you back home soon.”

Pictures were taken. They would have continued if Oliver hadn’t insisted Moira needed her rest. James helped her to the car.

As the journalist and others packed up and left, Walter and the board’s director, whose name Oliver sussed out to be Mr. Dennis. Whatever his name, Oliver didn’t like him.

“Will you be heading into the office after this, Mr. Queen?” Mr. Dennis asked in a condescending tone.

“The bulk of my agenda today has been taken care of with this event,” Oliver replied. The guy was such an asshole.

Mr. Dennis shifted his weight between his two feet as he studied Oliver. Finally he said, “I was under the impression you weren’t a teenager anymore.”

“I don’t think my voice broke once in my speech,” Oliver responded as he put as much sarcasm into his tone as possible. He turned to Walter and asked, “What do you think? Did you hear any unexpected high pitches?”

“I was assured,” Mr. Dennis interrupted, his voice raised, “your juvenile behavior was no longer a problem and you would be able to handle the demands that come with the position of CEO after your mother’s stroke.”

“Okay?” Oliver had no idea where the ass was going with his line of questioning. He also didn’t know who had given assurances on his behalf. The thought didn’t sit well with Oliver. He cared about QC and wanted it to be successful. His father had built the company up from nothing and was Robert’s legacy. Oliver never wanted to sully that legacy but he knew with him being CEO there would be a good chance Oliver did just that. He decided if he just did what Walter, and Felicity to a degree, told him to do QC would be fine.

“Oliver hasn’t been given the chance,” Walter argued, and Oliver internally thanked the fact Walter was always unflappable, “to do anything as of yet. There is a lot to learn about the company and the many duties of CEO. I have no doubt Oliver will succeed.”

As long as Walter was doing all the work, Oliver was certain he’d succeed too. “And what are you
going to do, fire me? My family owns the company and, I don’t know if you noticed, my name is on the building.”

Mr. Dennis laughed without humor, and then said, “Please believe me when I say the board and I can, and will, fire you if your incompetency threatens the company in any way.” Oliver tried not to look shocked. How could this little piss-ant fire him? The piss-ant continued, “But, I’m willing to give you a chance.” He pointed around him. “This is your test. You will succeed or you will fail with Applied Sciences. And before you think Mr. Steele will be doing your job for you, the company does actually need its CFO.”

“I wasn’t aware my job had been suffering?” Walter asked, cooler than he usually was.

“It’s not. But you are needed in our Sydney office. I’m sure you’re aware of the financial situation that is happening there?”

“Yes,” Walter answered unhappily.

“We need you on a plane tomorrow. Mr. Queen, you’ll be on your own. Try not to bankrupt the company.”

The ass walked away and Oliver gathered all of his willpower to not punch him.

“Oliver,” Walter called him out of his violent daydream. “You can do this. You’ve been studying with me for months on how to run QC.”

“And getting Applied Sciences off the ground?”

“Hire an experienced and well-educated, multi-disciplined scientist for a director. They should be able to guide you well enough and lead Applied Sciences on their own.”

“Okay, hire a director.”

“And Oliver? Go back to work today. You really need to use every available minute to get Applied Sciences off the ground.”

“Yeah. Of course, I was going to go back. I was just messing with that ass.” Oliver had not planned on going to the office today. He hated the office. All he saw there were his father and his formerly healthy mother. But he had to. If only to show that stuck up idiot he was wrong.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

As Oliver attempts to woo Star Labs he meets someone who could be a perfect fit for Applied Sciences. In return, Oliver plans to make said person’s life better.

With his head facing up to the heavens as if asking why him, Oliver opened the door to Cisco Ramon’s office. He had put off seeing Cisco, even though Cisco had sent Oliver several emails and messages. Something about needing to update Oliver on his progress. Oliver was never quite sure what Cisco did or built. He knew it was tech stuff, and important for QC. Since Cisco was the liaison between QC and the future Applied Sciences, Oliver was forced to work with him.

With Walter gone, he would be forced to spend more time working with Cisco.

“Mr. Queen!” Cisco shouted from across the room. “I’m so glad Gladys was able to find you. I have so many updates to give you.”

“I heard,” Oliver said. “I have a meeting in thirty minutes, so this needs to be quick.” There was no meeting. But if Oliver put a time limit on his meeting with Cisco, he was less likely to end up with a pounding headache.

“Of course,” Cisco said. Cisco set down his powdered donut and wiped his hand on his t-shirt. The t-shirt had some sort of physics joke on it, which Oliver didn’t understand. As Cisco walked closer to Oliver and gestured to one of his work benches, Oliver noticed crumbs from the donut at the corner of Cisco’s mouth. Oliver’s hand twitched to point out the crumbs but decided against it.

Oliver made a mental note not to have Cisco at any of the press conferences for Applied Sciences. Cisco did not make a good impression.

“So, if you’ll look at this,” Cisco picked up a metal arm thing and pointed at a joint. “It only swings on one axis, which would be fine if it were just supposed to move things back and forth two feet away. We really need more mobility now that we know…”

Oliver forced his eyelids open, crossed his arms, and shuffled his feet around. He had no idea what the metal arm would be used for, let alone axes or anything else that came out of Cisco’s mouth. If it were ever possible for Oliver to sleep standing up, it would happen when Cisco updated him on whatever the metal arm was.

After covering his third yawn, Oliver looked around Cisco’s desk. His eyes landed on a picture of Cisco’s brother. Normally Oliver would never open the can of worms. But Oliver was desperate. “So, Cisco,” Oliver said, interrupting Cisco mid-sentence, “how’s your brother?”

Cisco’s eyes lit up and a wide grin stretched across his face. Oliver immediately regretted his question.

“Thank you for asking,” Cisco said. “He’s doing great. He is adjusting well to the bionic limb. Though Dante is still not going out and socializing much. According to my mother, she has to force him to even talk to Nyssa. The woman who saved his life! My mother talks with her once a week. I
actually just got an email from Nyssa last night. Did I show you a picture of her?” He ran back to the corner of the room and grabbed a picture from another desk.

Cisco jogged over with the picture clutched in his hand. It was crinkled and curled up a bit. Oliver didn’t understand why Cisco would have a physical copy of the photo when Cisco was such a tech guy.

“This is my brother, Dante, and Nyssa just a few hours after she dug a bullet out of him.”

The picture showed a more buff, older version of Cisco with a military buzz cut and way too pale for his own good and a dark-haired woman with no smile. They were both in army fatigues and the desert sand of Afghanistan swept through the medical tent they were in. Dante was barely able to sit up for the photo and Nyssa had dried blood, supposedly Dante’s, on her shirt.

“His unit had just been surrounded by radicals and- “

“His whole unit was shot,” Oliver interrupted. He wanted to get this over with. “He was the only one who survived because Nyssa and the rest of the medical team nearby found him and patched him up. You’ve told me the story before, Cisco.”

“Right,” Cisco barreled on, “So anyway, she is staying with her father right now. She went back to school to get her paramedic certification. You know paramedic programs in the U.S. won’t accept her medic training in the army. Isn’t that ridiculous? Anyway, she, uh, she has had some issues with her father.”

“Hmm,” Oliver said with a slight nod. He had no idea why he was supposed to care about this Nyssa or her family drama.

“I know, it’s a bad situation,” Cisco continued. “But, he’s planning a trip to Gotham City to visit his other daughter and her husband. Nyssa thinks she may get out of the trip and be able to visit me. Isn’t that great?”

“Oh, ah--sure. Yes.” Oliver said.

“I mean I don’t want to give my hopes up, but I can’t help but start planning what I’m going to show her. Do you think she’d like to see the Arts Center?”

“I don’t know.”

Cisco listed off places he could take Nyssa. Oliver looked down at his watch.

“Shit. Cisco,” Oliver interrupted again. “I’m sorry but I do have a meeting I’m late for. Can you email me anything that you need my approval on? Everything looks great. You’re doing a fantastic job.”

Oliver backed out of the work space as fast as he could without appearing to be rude. Cisco looked uncertain but then gave Oliver a thumbs up. Thankfully Oliver hadn’t given Cisco a chance to reply verbally or Oliver would be stuck there until Cisco decided to go home for the day.

At the elevator banks, he looked down at his watch again. He could leave now, right? Oliver had gone into the offices, like he had promised Walter. And he had a meeting with Cisco. Oliver had a meeting the next day about Applied Sciences, which he had planned for earlier.

After a conversation with Cisco, he couldn’t be expected to think about serious business subjects. Given the numb state of Oliver’s brain, it was impossible.
Oliver rushed from his office to the conference room. He ran late again, or still. Oliver had a theory he had been late once in childhood and had fallen behind schedule ever since. But being late to this meeting was bad.

Applied Sciences depended on this meeting. Obviously, Oliver had no idea how to run a lab or what a lab even needed to be successful. That was why this meeting was so important.

Oliver hoped to partner with Star Labs in Central City. If they agreed on sharing ideas, and personnel, QC could share some of the profits. It seemed like the perfect partnership, as Star Labs usually ran on grants. This could allow them some financial independence.

All Oliver had to do was convince Dr. Harrison Wells of the benefits to him and Star Labs. And being late did not help Oliver’s cause.

As he walked into the dimly lit conference room, Oliver saw two men. One was clearly Dr. Wells, as Oliver had seen him on the news often enough. The other was a fresh-faced kid who looked like he was simultaneously given free reign over a candy shop and being sent to the principal’s office.

“Dr. Wells,” Oliver greeted as he shook the doctor’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Sorry about my lateness. I had a conference call with our manufacturing plant in China.”

Oliver had had a call to China that morning, so it wasn’t a lie. He didn’t say the call ended over two hours ago.

“Of course, Mr. Queen,” Dr. Wells said. “I’m sure you’re very busy, both with starting up the Applied Sciences Division here and your club.”

Oliver could tell Dr. Wells didn’t believe his excuse. It was also clear Dr. Wells didn’t think Oliver had any business acuity with his mention of Verdant.

Oliver widened his smile. He wouldn’t let Dr. Wells think the comment affected Oliver. Oliver just knew his sell would be harder now.

He turned his focus on the kid. “Hello, I’m Oliver Queen. And you are?”

“Excuse me,” Dr. Wells said. “Where are my manners? This is one of my interns, Barry Allen.”

“Mr. Allen,” Oliver said as he shook the kid’s hand. Oliver knew referring to him as mister would throw the kid off but also prove to Dr. Wells that Oliver’s manners were better than his own.

“Mr. Queen, it’s an honor to meet you,” Barry said in a squeak. Oliver wondered if the kid had gone through puberty yet.

“You’re an intern,” Oliver stated. “What school do you go to?”

“Central City University,” Barry said. Oliver noticed a drop of sweat as it trailed down the side of Barry’s head. “I’ll be graduating this year. A semester early if I’m lucky and keep up with the work.”

“Why don’t we all have a seat?” Oliver offered with a hand directing them towards the front of the table. “Are you comfortable? Would you like anything else to drink besides water?”

“We’re fine,” Dr. Wells answered for both of them.

Oliver was thankful to not have Dr. Wells as a boss. Oliver made a show of turning to Barry to
ensure Barry’s answer was the same. Though if Barry was smart he wouldn’t disagree with his boss, in front of said boss.

“No,” Barry replied in a somewhat deeper tone. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Oliver said with a smile. “Have you had a chance to look over our proposal? I’d like to go over some of the finer points and then answer any questions you might have.”

“I did look over your proposal,” Dr. Wells said as he pulled out said proposal and put on his glasses. “And I have many questions.”

“Great,” Oliver said. He wasn’t thrilled he’d have to give them a show and prove to Dr. Wells he knew what he was talking about. Especially when Dr. Wells, with all of his degrees, would be able to see through Oliver. And Oliver’s one business degree. And his bullshit Oliver spouted at the board. But Oliver knew the longer the meeting, the more likely it’d be successful. Oliver was willing to sit there with them all night, if necessary.

Oliver glanced at his watch and realized why he was exhausted. Two hours later, ten minutes to five, Dr. Wells, Oliver, and Barry, emerged from the conference room. Oliver rubbed his temple. Dr. Wells hadn’t agreed to the partnership yet, but he hadn’t said no. Oliver wanted to say he could work with that, but the condescension of Dr. Wells did not encourage Oliver. Yet, Dr. Wells seemed content on stringing Oliver along.

“My primary concern,” Dr. Wells said as they walked to the elevator bank, “is taking the impartiality out of our research so you can make a buck. I don’t want to do away with the scientific method or the appearance that we have. I’m sure you understand, Mr. Queen. Reputations are so hard to recover after they are spoiled.”

Oliver amazed himself when he withheld the snarky comeback that had immediately come to mind. He had been able to ignore all of Dr. Wells’ jabs throughout the meeting. Oliver knew he only had a few more seconds left to endure the provocations and not respond.

“So of course,” Oliver said. His smile tensed as he gritted his teeth. “Please call with any questions or concerns. I’ll give you a call later this week.”

“That’d be fine,” Dr. Wells said.

“Oh,” Barry said from behind them. “I forgot my phone. I’m just going to go grab it real quick.”

“Allen,” Dr. Wells said, “I don’t have time for this. Just meet back at the train station.”

“Yeah, okay,” Barry said as he skidded back into the conference room.

Oliver shook Dr. Wells’ hand again as the elevator doors opened. He stayed in the elevator bank until the doors closed and his smile and shoulders dropped. Irritation didn’t begin to cover what Oliver felt from his meeting with Dr. Wells. He knew he would have to come up with a Plan B to get the lab up and running, without Star Labs’ help. Walter’s suggestion of hiring a director replayed in Oliver’s head.

Oliver had a gut feeling he would get the runaround from Dr. Wells, and it would be better if the doctor didn’t know how desperate Oliver was. The best way to do that was to not be desperate.

An idea popped into Oliver’s head that gave him a lot of satisfaction. The plan would irritate the hell
out of Dr. Wells. It was too crazy to implement though. It had to be. But Oliver really liked it. There
had to be a way to pull it off.

He stepped back in the conference room to find Barry about to run out the door.

“Barry,” Oliver said as he held his hands up to stop the young man. “I’m so glad I caught you. Do
you mind if I call you Barry?”

“No, that’s fine,” Barry said with a dazed, don’t-know-what-is-happening face.

“Great. I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions.”

“Okay.”

“What are you getting your degree in?”

“Uh, science. Well, I’m getting my B.S. degree in physics with a minor in forensics. Just in case the
whole research scientist thing doesn’t work out.”

“Smart,” Oliver said as he nodded his head. “So you know how to set up and run a lab, right?”

“I’ve been in my fair share of labs, yeah.”

“And you must get good grades. Dr. Wells wouldn’t have an intern who isn’t smart.”

“I have a 4.0. I’m working hard to keep it.”

“I’m sure. And that can’t be easy.”

“The subject matters all make sense to me,” Barry said with a sheepish grin. “It’s not too bad.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Barry,” Oliver said with a genuine smile. “I’d like to talk about the
possibility of you running the Applied Sciences Division.”

“Wh-what? Me?” Barry looked at Oliver with wide eyes. “That—-that seems like not a good idea. I’ve
never worked anywhere before. Well, I have some experience at Star Labs, but I’ve only been there
for a couple months. You want someone who has been working in a lab for years. Lots and lots of
years.”

“No, Barry,” Oliver said as put his arm around Barry’s shoulders and guided him toward his office.
“I want you. Why don’t we discuss it more right now? Like how much more money I’m willing to
pay you compared to the zero dollars I’m guessing you’re getting from your internship.”

“I have a train to catch,” Barry said with his voice wavering.

“QC can get you another ticket,” Oliver said as he dismissed Barry’s reason. “In fact, after we’re
done talking, I can take you to my club and show you what kind of entertainment we have here in
Starling City. In case you decide to move here. We’ll get you a hotel room and you can leave in the
morning.”

“I-I still have to get my degree,” Barry said.

“You said you were going to graduate early. Just listen to my idea and see if I can convince you. The
worst that’ll happen is you spend a fun night in my club and always have me, a cool boss, to
compare to the one who just left you and seems to always demean you. Okay?”
“Uh, sure. I guess. I just need to text Dr. Wells.”

“Of course. Though maybe don’t tell him about the job offer. Just say I’m going to show you around Starling City. That okay?” Oliver asked as he laid down more charm. Barry nodded his assent, as Oliver knew he would. Oliver could tell Barry was the type who wanted to please everybody. “My office is right in here. I’ll have Gladys, my assistant, get us a couple of cold refreshments. Come in when you’re done.”

“Okay.”

“I think you and I, Barry, are going to be good friends. I can feel it.”

“Barry, relax. Have another beer,” Oliver said over the club music. He gave Barry the star treatment. Barry walked in with Oliver at Verdant and the bouncer waved them in immediately. Oliver then escorted Barry to the exclusive VIP area, after waving hello to several gorgeous woman, and a couple of gorgeous men. A waitress brought drinks up as soon as they sat down at a plush, red velvet curved booth. The best part was when the waitress, Sandy or Mandy or Beth, flirted at, though not really with, Barry.

Barry’s jaw was on the floor the whole time. After the flirting, Barry’s eyes bugged out.

At this point in Oliver’s life, Oliver assumed everyone expected the VIP treatment when they arrived with Oliver. Because they expected it, most people pretended this treatment was normal for them and worked to keep it all in stride. Not Barry. Barry stared at everything. Like Barry was Dorothy and Oliver was the wizard who whisked him away to Oz. Or something.

It was like the kid had never been outside his own house before. Barry kept staring at the people dancing, the DJ, and the flashing lights.

“You know,” Barry yelled as he reached for another beer, “I’ve never been to a club before.”

Oliver shook his head. Maybe Barry was more like Bambi. Or another naïve Disney character.

“You could come here every night if you wanted to,” Oliver said, “if you took the Applied Science position.”

“Every night seems extreme,” Barry yelled again. He wasn’t mastering the art of talking in a club. “Maybe like once a month.”

“Once a month!” Oliver said with a laugh. “No, it’d have to be more often than that. What else are you going to do for fun?”

“Well, Iris and I usually go out for pizza on Friday nights. And then there’s bowling. Or we just meet at a coffee shop and talk,” Barry yelled and the girls who sat at the next booth turned and glared at him. Oliver gave them a smile that placated them.

Barry didn’t notice as he stared off into the ceiling and a dopey smile took over his whole face. He laughed and continued, “One time we snuck into the library because Iris had to write a paper she forgot about and needed some books, but the library was closed. We took the books she needed without checking them out. It was hilarious. We wished we could have seen the look on the librarians’ faces when they got the books back but they hadn’t been checked out.”

Oliver stared at Barry with his brow furrowed, studying the younger man as if Barry was an alien
visiting Oliver’s Earth.

“Is Iris your girlfriend?”

“Oh, no,” Barry said with a blush. “She’s just a friend.”

“She’s in school with you?” Oliver asked. Oliver didn’t believe Barry’s bullshit line about this Iris person and Barry being just friends. Even if they had never hooked up, and that was a big if, it was clear Barry was attracted to her. Oliver realized to get Barry to Starling City, Iris would have to be included.

“Oh, yeah. She’s studying journalism.” Barry’s lips turned upward into a smile and continued their assent. Barry leaned closer to Oliver to keep from shouting as loud. He was still loud. Oliver winced from the pain in his ears. “She’s so good at it. Iris is going to make an incredible reporter.”

“She wants to be a reporter?” Oliver smirked at how much easier his plan was going to be. It really wasn’t fair. “I know a lot of reporters here. I’d be happy to give Iris an introduction to the few good ones.”

“Really?” Barry was way too excited about someone else’s opportunity, but it played well into his scheme so Oliver dismissed it. Barry and Iris were actually going to make a great story. A young and good looking couple take Starling City by storm in once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. The image of the two of them would help boost Applied Sciences’ image with the public. There was no way Applied Sciences wouldn’t be a success.

Oliver would need to see a picture of this Iris though but that didn’t matter too much. Make up, a good haircut, and the right clothes could hide a multitude of problems.

“Yes, really,” Oliver replied. “And then she can decide who, of those, she’d like to work for and I’ll make it happen.”

“Just like that? No interview?” Barry questioned.

Sitting back Oliver said, “Let me ask you this: Is Iris a good reporter?”

“She’s the best,” Barry blushed again. “Iris is an amazing writer. And super compassionate so anyone will talk to her. And she’s super stubborn. Always has been. Iris doesn’t rest until she has the story.”

Oliver’s gut sank. “How long have you known her?”

“Oh, geez. We’ve been best friends since elementary school. And after my parents died, Iris’ dad, Joe, adopted me. So we kind of grew up together.”

“Kind of?” Oliver shook his head.

Barry gave Oliver a sheepish smile.

“So,” Oliver had difficulty getting his head around Barry’s situation, “Iris is your adopted sister?”

“Technically. But I’ve never really seen her as that.”

Clearly.

It was bad. It was beyond bad.
Barry and Iris were no longer the young, sweet couple on the fast track to becoming a power couple in Starling City. They were the crashing-and-exploding-on-impact incestuous couple who would take Applied Sciences down with them.

And who knew what it would do to Oliver’s reputation.

He could handle the three arrests where he just had too much fun and no one got hurt. Hiring and promoting a couple who were brother and sister? No. And ew.

Oliver didn’t think it’d be possible to talk Barry out of his lust for Iris. But a hint or two wouldn’t hurt. “I’m close to my sister, too. Even though she moved to National City with her husband. We still talk at least once a week.”

“That’s nice.” The smile on Barry’s face slowly retracted and he scooted further away from Oliver.

Realizing his bluntness, when he had been trying for subtly, Oliver put on a gentle voice. “I can see you have feelings for Iris. But you and her, as a couple, wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“For one, it’s illegal. Two, even if it weren’t, people wouldn’t understand. It would affect every aspect of your life. Your ability to get a job, buy a house, even being taken seriously.”

Barry slouched down and guzzled his beer.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt,” Oliver said, leaning toward Barry. “You have a bright future and I don’t want to see anything stand in the way of it.” When Barry continued to say nothing, Oliver added, “At least think about it? For me?”

The kid looked up at Oliver and after a moment nodded.

For now, Oliver would take that.

Oliver selected his next words to Barry with care. If he pushed too hard, Barry would run as fast as he could to get back to Central City. Oliver needed to be a friend to Barry. A mentor. “I know that this will be a big change for you, Barry. And that can be scary. But you’ll have me there guiding you.”

“Thanks,” Barry said after he cleared his throat. “That means a lot.”

“Of course,” Oliver said. “And you can talk to me about anything you want. I’m going to be there every step of the way.”

Barry nodded. Oliver noticed Barry forgot he hadn’t actually agreed to take the position Oliver offered. Oliver took that as a good sign and assumed Barry just accepted. All Oliver had to do was groom Barry into a mini-version of Oliver, who happened to know all about science stuff.

“I have your best interest at heart, Barry,” Oliver continued. Barry just needed a little more prodding. “So when I say something would be good for you, I don’t say that without really thinking about it.”

“Yeah,” Barry nodded.

Barry needed to be distracted. A distraction in the form of woman would be best. Show Barry he had other options. So many other options besides his sister.

Just when Oliver thought finding a distraction for Barry might require more work and have to
actually talk to several women, Oliver spied his public relation specialist.

She would be the perfect match for Barry.

She could help Oliver mold Barry into the perfect image of director for Applied Sciences and give Barry a much needed boost to his ego. The younger man seriously lacked confidence. In turn, Barry could help loosen her up. Because as great as the PR consultant was, she could have a stick up her ass sometimes.

Isabel and Barry would be an amazing celebrity couple of Starling City. Her beauty and his brains would take them both far.

Isabel Rochev owned her own PR consulting business. QC contracted her to help with the company’s image and any possible nightmare scenarios, which might come up. Since Oliver had become CEO she had helped Oliver polish his image and walk the delicate line of responsible CEO and fun club owner.

Oliver knew he couldn’t spring Isabel on Barry as a potential girlfriend right now. No, first Oliver had to introduce one another in a favorable light. He had to make sure they liked each other from the first moment they met.

“Oh,” Oliver said as nonchalantly as he could, “there is my PR consultant, Isabel. I should say hi.”

“Okay,” Barry said.

“Actually, I should invite her over. There’s a couple of events I need to clarify with her. Do you mind if I do a little business?”

“No, of course not.”

“Great,” Oliver said. He managed to get Isabel’s attention within seconds and waved her over.

“Oliver,” Isabel greeted once she got to their booth, “I’m so happy to see you.” She kissed both of his cheeks and sat down next to him.

“Isabel, always great to see you. I want to introduce Barry Allen. He’s going to be my new director of Applied Sciences.” Oliver said. “Barry, this is Isabel Rochev, QC’s genius PR consultant.”

“Glad you finally realize I’m a genius,” Isabel said. She looked over at Barry and shook his hand. “Nice to meet you.” She turned back to Oliver, “Maybe now you’ll be more prone to listen to me when I make suggestions.”

“I listen to you. I just don’t always agree with you, there’s a difference.”

“No, there’s not. If you really listened to me, you would know I’m always right.” Isabel stroked Oliver’s arm and smiled sweetly at him.

“Barry,” Oliver said, wanting to keep him in the conversation, “Isabel is very smart, but she is not always right. You’re allowed to have your own opinion, okay?”

“Okay,” Barry said as he smiled at the two.

“I have an idea,” Oliver said. “Why don’t we get more drinks and really enjoy ourselves? It’ll give the opportunity for you two to get to know each other. Since the three of us are going to be working closely together to get Applied Sciences up and running, it’d be better for all of us to get along and
have fun.”

“That sounds wonderful, Oliver,” Isabel said almost directly into his ear. Oliver wondered how much she had had to drink already, but figured she was responsible enough to monitor her own alcohol consumption. “I was going to suggest you post a couple pictures of tonight on Instagram. Make sure Barry is in a couple to slowly introduce him to your fans.”

“I don’t have fans, but it’s not a bad idea,” Oliver replied. “Barry?”

“What? Oh sure, that sounds like fun. Though I’m not sure why any of your Instagram followers would care about me.”

“Don’t be silly,” Isabel responded. “You are a smart, good looking guy who is about to have a powerful position. Everyone will be intrigued by you. Especially if I document your and Oliver’s night right.”

“Great.” Oliver responded. “Tonight the three of us are going to have an epic night. One day they’ll write songs about it.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Felicity and Digg meet Barry and Oliver is disappointed Felicity doesn’t approve of Barry. Later, Barry receives a text.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for your kudos and comments! They mean a lot to me.

Garlic-infused air assaulted Oliver’s nose as he opened the door to the restaurant. Low light glowed at each table and created shadows, which gave a sense of seclusion from the other customers. Oliver had taken a lot of dates here, as most women couldn’t resist the romantic nature of the ambiance. He was thankful the Italian restaurant had finally splurged on an air conditioner late that summer. Sweating through a meal diminished some of his charm. Though as summer neared its end, it lost its grasp on the weather as a cold windy front came in.

Ignoring the hostess, Oliver walked straight to his usual table in the back, which provided more privacy, with Barry in tow. Oliver was happy to see Felicity and Digg. It had been two weeks since the day of the wedding and Digg was finally back from his honeymoon. The three of them had planned this dinner six months ago, when Digg had told Oliver and Felicity he was remarrying Lyla.

At the time, it seemed the perfect way to catch up with Digg. But the thought of looking at pictures of Digg and Lyla’s honeymoon all night seemed way too boring. Oliver hoped Digg had a good time and Oliver could handle pictures of the two of them with no problem. But there were only so many pictures of beach landscapes and sea animals he could take before he took hostages.

That was why Oliver brought Barry. Not only would it help steer the conversation away from Digg’s honeymoon after the 500th picture of a sunset on the beach, Oliver could get Felicity’s and Digg’s praise for hiring Barry. They’d be proud of Oliver when they realized how seriously he was taking Applied Sciences. Plus, it’d be good for Barry to see what kind of friends would be better for Barry’s, and therefore QC’s, image.

“I hope Felicity ordered the wine,” Oliver said when he and Barry arrived at the table. Oliver stooped down to place a give Felicity a half-hug then shook Digg’s hand. “Sorry Digg, but you have horrible taste in wine.”

“Maybe you’d get a say in the wine if you arrived on time,” Felicity said. Her eyes went from Oliver to Barry. Her eyes studied both men and her teasing grin froze in place. She settled her eyes on Oliver, an unspoken question on her face.

“Guys, this is Barry,” Oliver said as he gestured to the kid. Barry stopped fidgeting and held his hand out to Digg. Oliver almost laughed at Barry’s gulp. “Barry, this is Digg and Felicity.”

“Hi. I’m Barry Allen,” Barry said in his high nervous voice. Oliver would have to train that out of
him. “It’s very nice to meet you. Oliver’s told me a lot about you both.”

“It’s nice to meet you too, Barry,” Digg said. The friendliness Digg exuded was one of Oliver’s favorite things about him.

“Hi, Barry. I’m Felicity Smoak. Why don’t you two sit down?” Her voice held its normal friendly tone. Oliver relaxed at her smile.

Barry walked around the table and sat down. They both sat in between Digg and Felicity and across from each other.

“Oliver,” Felicity whispered and gestured for him to come closer. As he leaned close to her, Oliver got a hint of Felicity’s sweet floral perfume he loved on her. As discreet as he could, he moved closer to smell it more.

“What?” Oliver asked, amused she tried to have a private conversation when both Digg and Barry knew they were talking. Oliver looked over and saw Digg talking to Barry, clearly trying to put the kid at ease.

“Oliver, look at me,” Felicity whispered again. Oliver looked back at her. Her face was stern. “Why did you bring him?”

“Barry?” Oliver asked innocently.

“I don’t see anyone else with you.” Felicity’s retorted back.

“I wanted you two to meet him.”

“Great. You couldn’t have done it another night? John was supposed to tell us about his honeymoon.”

“I know, he still can.”

“With someone he just met?” Felicity asked, her whisper becoming harsher as the conversation continued. “Did you ever think John is a private person and maybe wouldn’t want to share details of his life with a complete stranger?”

Felicity’s face became flushed and Oliver knew she was preparing for an argument. He looked for any way out of it when the server came up to the table to pour wine and take their orders. Oliver leaned back in his chair and smiled at everyone.

When the server left, Oliver addressed the table. “Barry is a semester away from graduating from Central City University. And I just hired him to work at Applied Sciences.”

“That’s great,” Digg replied in his normal, welcoming way.

Oliver avoided looking at Felicity, though he could feel her glare on him. His topic changed had not gone unnoticed.

“Congratulations,” Felicity said with a smile as she turned toward Barry. Oliver was thankful she didn’t call him out in front of Barry and Digg. “What’s your major?”

“Uh-Physics,” Barry said. “And forensic science.”

“Wow. Applied Sciences at QC is a great first job to get right out of school,” Felicity said. “I’m sure you’re going to be great. What position did Oliver hire you for?”
“Barry is going to be Applied Sciences’ director,” Oliver answered for Barry. Oliver beamed at his announcement. Before Digg left for his honeymoon, Oliver had been flippant and unconcerned who would be running the day-to-day operations of Applied Sciences. He hoped his friends weren’t too shocked from his 180. “Barry will be setting up Applied Sciences and going to school until he graduates.”

“That sounds like a lot work,” Digg said as he faced Barry and raised his eyebrows.

“It will be,” Barry said. “But it’s only for a semester. And most of my classes, minus a couple of labs and tests, are online. So I will only have to commute a handful of times.”

“Did you say director?” Felicity asked.

“Yep,” Oliver said with his chest puffed out.

Felicity took a large gulp of her wine. It was not an encouraging gesture for Oliver.

With Felicity’s clear determination to keep her opinion to herself, the table fell into silence. Oliver slouched back into his chair and reached for his own wine. The clear rejection of his choice for director stung and Oliver felt a bit of resentment toward Felicity’s judgment. What was wrong with Barry?

“So, Digg,” Oliver said to kill the awkwardness that had settled over the table., “Tell us about your honeymoon. I assume you have pictures. I can’t wait to see them.”

Digg went on about white-sandy beaches and sun and snorkeling. Oliver hoped the conversation change to Digg would appease Felicity. As the food arrived and they ate their first and second course, Digg showed pictures and kept telling stories about a tour guide named Randall. Oliver hmm’d and ah’d at the right times and appeared interested in every picture, even though only a handful seemed interesting to Oliver. Humoring Felicity exhausted Oliver at times.

Barry became more involved in Digg’s stories than Oliver. It was good to show Felicity Oliver brought a polite and enthusiastic guest. Barry asked questions and interjected facts about the Caribbean islands and Aruba in particular. Because of Barry’s sincere interest in Digg, Felicity warmed up to Barry.

Oliver was thankful they all got along. He was sure it’d be more difficult for Felicity and Digg to object to Barry as director of Applied Sciences, if they liked Barry.

“So, Barry,” Felicity said. Dessert had just arrived at the table and Digg had put his phone away after showing his last picture of Aruba. “What about you? Do you have someone special in your life?”

“Oh, no, I-I don’t-I mean I’m not seeing anyone,” Barry stumbled. His face got red and Oliver saw a drop of sweat trail down Barry’s neck. Oliver couldn’t hide the smug smile from the source of Barry’s obvious embarrassment. Barry had clearly developed romantic feelings for Isabel from just one night at Verdant.

Oliver couldn’t resist a nudge or two in Isabel’s direction. “Do you want to tell them about her, Barry?”

Felicity turned slowly towards Oliver and gave him a questioning look. Oliver shrugged his shoulders and looked back at Barry.

“Is there someone you’re interested in?” Digg asked.
“Well,” Barry started. “No. I mean not really. Sort of.” Barry sighed and gulped down the rest of his water. “There is a girl-woman, but she’s totally out of my league. It’ll never happen.”

“Have you told her how you feel?” Felicity asked as she put her head in her hand and leaned towards Barry.

“No. I don’t want to put her in an awkward situation. We know a lot of the same people, so it wouldn’t be fair to her or them.”

“Barry,” Oliver said, “you have to seize the day. If you don’t tell her, you’ll always wonder. You got to take a risk.”

“I agree,” Digg said. “The best thing in my life happened because I took a risk. I don’t know where I’d be without Lyla.”

“See?” Oliver asked, thankful for the backup.

“Or,” Felicity said and Oliver unwittingly sighed. “You could take your time. Explore your own feelings and observe their actions in regard to you. I, personally, think maintaining your friendships, with her and the people you know together, is preferable over your own romantic feelings that may be fleeting and/or unrequited.”

“That makes sense,” Barry said as he nodded in agreement.

“Barry,” Oliver interjected as he leaned forward toward Barry, “I know what I’m talking about.”

“And I don’t?” Felicity asked. Her eyebrows crinkled as she fixed Oliver with a glare in challenge.

“I didn’t say that,” Oliver said as he held his hands up to shoulder level and leaned back again. “I’m just saying, in Barry’s instance, love is worth the risk.”

“How do you know?” Felicity continued to prod.

“I know Barry.”

“You’ve known Barry a little more than a week.” Felicity replied.

“Barry,” Digg interrupted, “I think you should do what your heart tells you. Ignore these two knuckleheads. Do what’s right for you.”

“Uh, thank you,” Barry said. Digg’s words seemed to snap Barry out of his deer-in-headlights look off his face. “I think I’ll think about it more.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. He had almost convinced Barry to pursue Isabel, with a little help from Digg. Felicity had to contradict him. It didn’t matter that Oliver had a plan or that Oliver knew what was best for Barry. She always thought she was right and had to give her opinion no matter what the situation.

“Well I am full,” Digg said. “And I have to get home to my wife.” A smile formed across his face. “I really like being able to say that.”

Felicity smiled, “John, I’m so happy for you. Please tell Lyla hi.”

“I will,” Digg said as he stood up. Everyone else stood up and Oliver went to pay the bill before anyone, i.e. Felicity, could object.
The warm night air blew across Oliver’s face when he stepped outside. He looked around and saw Felicity and Barry talking to each other. Oliver quickly walked up to them to end any bonding that happened. Felicity proved she could not be trusted with his plan.

“Goodnight, Felicity,” Oliver said as he leaned and hugged her. “I will see you later. Barry, we should get going.”

“Oh-okay,” Barry responded. “It was nice meeting you Felicity.”

“You too.”

Barry ran to catch up to Oliver, who had walked away as Barry and Felicity said goodbye. Oliver knew he had to get away from Felicity and avoid her for a good 36-48 hours so she wouldn’t question him about tonight.

“Oliver,” Felicity yelled at his retreating figure, “I’ll talk to you later.”

Oliver wasn’t sure if there was ever a threat that frightened him more. Felicity’s promise she would remember she owed Oliver a talk was almost as bad as an IRS audit of all his offshore accounts. Or like Oliver not being able to use the corporate jet for a weekend away because it was being used for actual business, and there were no planes to charter so he was forced to fly commercial.

“Oliver, why are we hurrying?” Barry asked, a little winded from his jog.

“I just want to talk with you. Get in the car, we’ll talk there.” Oliver unlocked the Porsche and got in the driver’s seat.

Once they were on the road towards Verdant, Oliver controlled the damage.

“I wanted to reiterate that I think taking a risk and talking to Isabel about your feelings is the best thing to do.”

“For who?” Barry asked.

Oliver looked over at Barry for a second, caught off guard by Barry’s question. Deliberately, he answered, “Isabel.”

“I-I wasn’t talking about Isabel,” Barry said quietly.

Shit. Oliver realized Barry had been talking about his foster-sister. He took a deep breath. If they continued to bring up this Iris, Barry would continue to think about her. Oliver needed to shut down the idea of Barry dating the foster-sister and force Barry’s attention onto Isabel.

“Well, I mean,” Barry said, “she’s an attractive woman.”

“She is. And strong. And a great person to have in your corner.”

“I could see that about her.”

Oliver waited a beat and then said, “I guess, to me, it seemed so obvious you had feelings for Isabel. Or at the very least, could easily start having feelings for her.”
“Really?”

“Yes. And, not to step out of line. Actually, if I tell you this, don’t mention it to Isabel. Okay?”

“Sure,” Barry said, anxious to hear gossip.

“Isabel told me, more hinted to me, that she has feelings for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Oliver lied. Isabel had said nothing of the sort. She did say Barry was a nice guy. That was almost as good. And before Oliver had left with a redhead, Isabel had asked Oliver where he met Barry and what his experience was. “And I’d say they are strong feelings, if her curiosity about you is any clue. Plus, her attention that night was focused solely on you, for the most part.”

“Wow. Isabel Rochev? That’s incredible,” Barry said. He dragged his fingers through his hair. “I just never suspected someone like Isabel would be interested in a guy like me, you know?”

“You’re a great guy, Barry. So much kinder than the type of guy she has dated in the past. I think that might be part of the appeal.” Or, at least, that’s how Oliver saw it.

“Mmm,” Barry replied as he looked out his window at the lights passing by.

“And, I have to say, I think you two would make a great couple.”

“You think?”

“Yes, you would balance each other out. And you both would be supportive of the other.”

“I guess.”

“Just think about it,” Oliver said. “Can you promise me that?”

“Uh, yeah.” Barry looked over at Oliver. “I’ll think about it. It does seem impossible though.”

“Didn’t you say the other day at work everything is possible, Barry?”

Oliver scrolled through all the texts he had received in the last hour.

I need to talk to you.

Where are you?

Either respond or pick up your damn phone.

Fine. At least show Barry more of Applied Sciences instead of every place in Starling City that is not QC or Applied Sciences. If he really is going to be your director he needs to know the job.

When I see you in person I can tell you why, though a nice guy, Barry is completely unqualified for the director position.

He hasn’t even graduated yet. He has no management experience whatsoever.

You should be giving him an entry-level position. What happened to those résumés Walter and I sent you for the director position?
Barry is not someone you can shape and mold into a mini-Oliver.

I’ve been talking to Barry because he’s not avoiding me. He deserves to be more than a pet project of yours that bores you in a month.

WHY AREN’T YOU SHOWING HIM QC???. HE’S WORRIED!

Don’t think you can avoid me forever, Oliver.

Felicity’s text messages furrowed their way into Oliver’s head. He didn’t agree with her about most of it, but Oliver felt guilty. He hadn’t given Barry a proper tour of QC or introduced him to the heads of other departments with whom Barry would be working. There was always something more exciting happening in Starling City Oliver felt Barry needed to see more. Felicity didn’t realize Oliver needed to sell Starling City just as much, if not more, as Applied Sciences and QC to Barry. Barry was used to Central City where everything was nicer and crime was lower and people were nice. The one thing Starling City had going for it was it held more excitement. So Oliver exploited it.

But Felicity was right about the fact Barry needed to know what the position was all about and all that went with it. Also, if Barry was worried, Oliver had to calm him down. Though Oliver doubted the legitimacy of Felicity’s claim. Oliver knew Barry better than her, and Barry hadn’t said anything to him. The many unanswered texts were Felicity’s way of badgering Oliver. From experience, Oliver knew if he didn’t do something to appease her, Felicity would pop up wherever he was and babble until she got her way.

He picked up his phone and sent a text to Barry telling Barry to meet him at QC. He sent another text to Felicity.

Relax. I’m giving him a tour and introducing him to everyone today.

Oliver quickly turned his phone off to avoid Felicity’s numerous responses.

“Hey, Oliver.” Barry appeared in Oliver’s office ten minutes after Oliver had sent the text. Barry tried to smooth out the wrinkles in his shirt but soon gave up. Oliver noticed Barry’s hair stuck up in random places. “You wanted to see me.”

Oliver narrowed his eyes as he heard the nervousness in Barry’s voice. Apparently Barry needed more lessons in self-confidence.

“It’s fine, Barry. Relax,” Oliver said as he stood up from his desk and reached for his suit jacket. Barry needed lessons on how to dress too. Perhaps Isabel could help. She could dress Barry exactly the way she wanted to see him. Oliver made a mental note to call her and see when she was available. “I just want to show you around more, introduce you to people, give you more of an understanding of your job description. That sort of thing.”

“Oh, great,” Barry said with a relieved sigh. “I told Felicity I wasn’t sure what was expected of me here yet, and I started to get anxious about it.”

“You’ve been talking to Felicity a lot, then?”

“Yeah, she’s been awesome.”

Oliver ignored the fact Felicity was right again.

“First, I’m going to introduce you to the liaison between Applied Sciences and QC. And if we’re lucky, after we leave we’ll still have time to visit one, maybe two, other departments. His name is
Cisco Ramon and he talks. A lot. More than Felicity. But, unlike with Felicity, it is anything but endearing.”

“Cisco Ramon,” Barry repeated as if to get the name to stick in his brain.

Oliver waved at Gladys as the two walked to the elevator bank. Gladys barely noticed as Oliver left the office multiple times during the day. Oliver appreciated he was the boss and could do as he pleased and wasn’t tied to a set schedule. His free nature wouldn’t have allowed for anything else.

“When we get to Cisco’s office,” Oliver said once they were in the elevator, “we’ll need to do all we can to be in and out. He’ll be important to you as a resource. But, and I can’t stress this enough, give him time limits on talking. Otherwise you’ll never get anything else done.”

“Okay,” Barry said. His voice wavered for a moment. “Who reports to who?”

“Technically, you’ll report to him,” Oliver answered. “But really you’ll just report to me. You’ll want to keep him in the loop though. He is brilliant and can help if he can ever get around to telling you the point.”

“Oh, all right.”

Oliver knocked on the glass door to Cisco’s office and let him and Barry in.

“Cisco,” Oliver called out. The door may be glass, but the office itself was cluttered with so many shelves filled with projects, which looked like junk to Oliver, no one could see its occupant.

“Mr. Queen,” Cisco yelled. A loud clunk and an expletive followed. Cisco’s head popped around a shelf. “I wasn’t expecting you. Come on in.”

A sigh escaped Oliver as he looked heavenward. He gave Barry a look that said ‘didn’t I tell you’. Oliver gestured for Barry to head deeper into the office, which reminded Oliver of a cave, and Oliver followed the kid.

“What brings you in today?” Cisco asked. “I emailed you my progress report yesterday. Nothing much has changed since then. Well some things have changed, but not a significant amount to warrant another report. Did you not get it?”

“I got it,” Oliver said. Oliver had marked it as read without reading it and promptly forgot about it. “I want to introduce Barry Allen. Barry, this is Cisco Ramon.” The two shook hands. “Barry is going to be the director of Applied Sciences and report directly to you.”

“Oh, cool,” Cisco said as he looked Barry up and down. Oliver could tell Cisco withheld his approval, but Oliver was glad Cisco kept his opinion to himself. Both Oliver and Cisco knew Cisco didn’t have any room to complain about Barry’s youth, as Cisco was approximately the same age.

“It’s really nice to meet you,” Barry said.

“You too, man,” Cisco said.

A silence filled the air, which unsettled Oliver. He wasn’t sure what to do as he had never heard Cisco be this quiet. Ever. Oliver knew they needed to get along. Even if their working relationship would only ever be strictly civil.

“Oh, crap,” Oliver looked down at his watch. “I was going to introduce Barry to some other department heads, but I have a teleconference with one of our other branches. Cisco, would you
mind showing Barry around, and introduce him?"

“I’m not sure I should be the one to introduce them to the Applied Sciences director,” Cisco said.

“It’s perfect,” Oliver said. “You’re the liaison, right? Besides you know Applied Sciences better than I do.”

“That’s true,” Cisco said. “And by that I mean, why would you need to know the tiny details? That’s not your job, Mr. Queen.”

“That’s right,” Oliver replied tersely. He walked toward the door. “Barry, you’ll be all right?”

“Uh-yeah. Yes.”

“Good. Come back to my office when you’re done.”

“Finally! Barry, you’re going to have to learn how to escape Cisco when he starts babbling,” Oliver said as he waved Barry into his office. Oliver had been looking at the same financial reports for an hour and had only understood the summary page. The rest was just a bunch of numbers which, for Oliver, might as well have been random.

“Actually, Cisco’s tour didn’t take long. I met all the other directors, but only briefly. Most were really busy and I didn’t want to bother them”

“So the rest of the time was spent on Cisco’s mumbo-jumbo?”

“Ah, no,” Barry stuttered. His voice squeaked out, “I, uh, I actually got a text. And it’s taken a while for me to wrap my head around.”

“Good news?” Oliver asked as he looked back down at a graph of Applied Sciences’ assets’ estimated depreciation over five years. Or possibly the amount spent on interest rates on loans for real estate over the past five years. Oliver made a mental note to pick something up to bribe Felicity with to get her to explain it all to him.

“And it’s taken a while for me to wrap my head around.”

“Um, yeah! Great news, actually,” Barry said.

Oliver looked up at Barry and hoping the kid would repeat what they had been talking about, as Oliver had already forgotten.

“The text came from Iris.”

Text. Great news. Iris. That girl constantly tried to wreck Oliver’s plans.

Oliver worked to keep his face neutral and asked, “What did she say?”

“She asked me out!”

“Asked you out where?” Oliver refused to make this easy for Barry.

Undeterred, and almost more excited, Barry bounced on his feet and twisted his hands in front of him, “On a date! I can’t believe it. I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder. She said she has really missed me, more than she thought she would. And that made her examine her feelings for me and realized she likes me. A lot!”
“She said all that in a text?” Oliver’s voice remained somber despite Barry’s enthusiasm.

“Yes,” Barry answered, less excited as he studied Oliver’s reaction. “Do you think she should have sent an email?”

“If she couldn’t do it in person, I think she should have at least called and talked to you,”

“Iris doesn’t like to call me,” Barry said quickly. “She says she never knows what I’m doing, especially now, and doesn’t want to interrupt anything important.”

“Hmm.”

“And she didn’t want to wait. Iris said she was afraid of chickening out.” Barry sat down across from Oliver and jiggled his leg up and down. “She was really nervous.”

“Okay,” Annoyance crept into Oliver’s voice as he tried to keep his responses minimal. He didn’t want anything about his reaction to encourage Barry. The last thing Barry needed was encouragement to do something Oliver had already warned against. Twice.

“So, what do I say?”

“To whom?”

“Iris!”

“Oh, I can’t help you with that,” Oliver said in a dismissive tone. “That’s way too personal for me to be involved in.”

“Right,” Barry nodded as if he agreed. Without taking a breath Barry asked, “But do I just tell her when I’m available? Or do I suggest something for us to do?”

“Oh,” Oliver said. He put his pen down and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms in front of him. Oliver shoved the image of physically throttling Barry out of his mind. He needed to focus. Oliver needed Barry to think Barry was the one making this decision. With a disapproving look, Oliver asked skeptically, “You’re thinking of saying yes?”

Barry paused. “Hmm, yes?”

“I was sure you decided, with Iris being your foster-sister, she would not be a good person for you to date. Dating her would only open yourself up to the public’s scrutiny and harassment which wouldn’t only affect you personally, but also professionally.”

Barry’s head lowered as he stared at the carpet. His legs stopped jiggling and his hands stilled. Oliver wasn’t convinced he had gotten completely through to Barry, so, in a soft voice, he added, “We talked about the effect this could have on Applied Sciences, and, consequently, QC.” After a beat, with more volume and exasperation than Oliver meant to show, he asked, “Have you checked to see if it’s even legal?”

“Well, I—it’s just-umm,” Barry stumbled over his words. The kid rubbed the back of his reddened neck and looked up to ask, “What do you think I should do?”

“No, this has to be your decision. I can’t make it for you.”

Barry stared at his feet for a full 45 seconds. He looked back up to Oliver. “I don’t know. Can you give me any advice?”
“As your boss, I can’t interfere in your personal life. I do know you’ll make the right decision for you and your career.”

“Right. Okay,” Barry chewed on his lip and stared back at the ground.

Oliver did his best to hold onto what little patience he had. Oliver knew this wasn’t a difficult decision. It was ridiculously easy. Yet Barry struggled with it. Oliver wondered how long it took Barry to order a sandwich. Hadn’t Oliver painted a straight line from Isabel to Barry’s success? What could there possibly be to think about?

“I guess I’ll tell Iris no?” Barry said in a questioning tone, as if he asked for Oliver’s approval.

“Great,” Oliver said with a wide smile and he leaned forward again. “I think that is wise decision. I knew you were the right person to hire as director.”

“Thank you,” Barry said with a small smile back and a flush of his cheeks. As he looked away, Barry’s smile deflated. With sadness in his voice, Barry asked, “How do I tell Iris?”

“Well, you can obviously just text her back, as that was how she sent the message. But you should still be nice about it.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Say something like her friendship is important to you, but right now you’re focusing on your career,” Oliver said. He looked back at the financial papers in front of him. “Girls use that all the time, so they understand it when it’s said to them.”

“Oh, okay.” Barry said. “Should I do it now?”

“Yes,” Oliver replied. “Don’t be rude and make her wait for a no. Better to just rip the bandaid off.”

“Right. That sounds right. Better than making her wonder.”

“Yes,” Oliver said, his head back down again. The numbers needed to make more sense. Oliver looked back up at Barry. “After you’re done texting her, we should go to Verdant. Doing hard things is always made easier with a little bit of alcohol. Maybe Isabel is free and can meet us there.”

“Uh, sure,” Barry said. “If you think we should.”

“Yes,” Oliver said as he shuffled the report back into one pile and shoving them into his much hated briefcase. The briefcase he only used when Oliver had homework. Oliver often thought of burning it. “Let me know when you’re done so we can head out.”

“Uh-hmm,” Barry said as he looked down at his phone. Barry wasn’t typing anything. He just stared at phone.

“Barry?”

“Yeah?” Barry looked up at Oliver.

“Just rip the bandaid off.”

“Okay,” Barry sighed and looked back down at his phone. After a couple seconds, Barry typed.

Oliver stood up and went around his desk to stand next to Barry’s chair. After a minute of Barry typing, deleting, and retying, Oliver decided Barry needed some space. The crush Barry had on Iris
had lasted for a while and was only recently gone. It probably wasn’t easy to give up on something, even though it was for the best. Barry had wished for it for years.

“I’m just going to check with Gladys about my schedule for tomorrow,” Oliver said. “Come out when you’re done. Take your time.”

“Thanks,” Barry said with a grateful tone and another sigh. His thumbs paused over the phone’s keyboard.

Oliver stepped out of his office and looked back at Barry. Barry needed to have fun tonight, to remind him what Iris couldn’t offer him. Hopefully, Isabel would help ease some of the pain and make Barry realize he deserved better.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity argue. Oliver continues his attempts at molding Barry, with help from Isabel.

“I would be impressed you brought QC work home with you, but since it was only to have me look over it, not so much,” Felicity said as she walked into the living room.

She joined Oliver, after talking to Moira over dessert regarding the current climate of stock trading. Moira confused years repeatedly in their talk and Felicity gently corrected Moira each time. Oliver had been bored by the conversation and went to wait for Felicity in the living room. Moira had settled upstairs, after she argued with Winn, her CNA, about appropriate bedtimes for a grown adult. Again.

Oliver had spread the financial papers all over the coffee table and stared at them until they became a jumbled blurry mess.

“I just need some clarification and you know you love helping me,” Oliver said. “It just like old times when you tutored and got me through Harvard. And then you feel superior to me.”

“I don’t feel superior,” Felicity said with a huff as she plopped down so close to Oliver their arms touched. A breeze of her perfume fluttered by Oliver’s nose. “I don’t mind helping you because I want you to succeed.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Why did you set the report down out of order?”

Oliver just shrugged. He honestly hadn’t known they were out of order. Or what the right order was. He could probably figure it out, but with Felicity helping there was no need. Oliver would only make more of a mess with it.

Felicity shook her head and gathered the papers of the reports. As he hid a smirk underneath his hand, Oliver internally gave himself a high-five.

“You’re not ‘helping’ Barry feel superior by having him do all your work, right?”

“No,” Oliver said. “There’s no way Barry will ever be superior to me. I’m more mature and confident. But there’s no reason to believe Barry won’t become more confident. He may very well become just like me, except the exceptionally rich part, because there’s no way he’s becoming richer than me.” Oliver laughed at his own joke.

“I suppose that’s…better than it could be,” Felicity said as she dismissed her concern away with her free hand. With a jerk, Felicity set the report down in her lap and turned to faced Oliver. “Speaking of Barry, I have news.”

“Hmm?” Oliver turned his head down and to the side to look at the report. He hoped it would give Felicity the hint he wanted to get back to work. Oliver had thought about Barry enough for one day.
“He texted me earlier today. Iris asked him out!”

Oliver nodded and looked away.

“I’m surprised he hasn’t texted me back like he said he would. I asked for details after he talked to Iris,” Felicity said as she picked up the report and tapped the papers on the table to straighten them.

“You really should go digital.”

“Yeah, yeah, you keep saying that.”

“And I keep meaning it,” Felicity replied. “But Barry was so excited. I think he could have started flying with all the exclamation marks and all-caps he was using.”

“He’s easily excited,” Oliver said. He pulled out his phone and texted himself to have something to do besides look at Felicity.

“Aren’t you surprised?” Felicity asked.

“Umm.”

“Who are you texting?” Felicity asked as she set the financial reports down and turned more towards Oliver. “We have work to do and I’m talking to you.”

“Sorry,” Oliver said as he glanced up. “It’s super important.”

“Put your phone down.” Her voice filled with impatience.

“Fine,” Oliver said as if he was appeasing Felicity. He turned his phone’s screen off and set it down on the coffee table in front of them.

“Aren’t you surprised about the news regarding Barry?” Felicity asked in a more suspicious manner. Her eyebrows crinkled and she looked at Oliver as if he were a children’s alphabet book. Easy and quick to read.

“I already knew.” He leaned back crossed his arms. “He told me in the office today.”

“Okay. Why were you keeping it from me?”

“I wasn’t,” Oliver replied. “I just hadn’t thought of it.” Felicity would not like how Oliver led Barry to the right decision. She was strict in her allowance of people, especially people in her life, having free will. As far as Oliver was concerned, Barry had exercised his free will. Oliver had simply emphasized some facts Barry conveniently forgot.

“Oliver,” Felicity said in a stern voice and she sat up straighter.

“What?” Oliver said with a tone he hoped conveyed innocence. “It’s the truth.”

“Fine,” Felicity said. She sat back on the couch and put her arm that was closer to Oliver, up across the back of the couch. “You can tell me the details of their date.”

“What?”

“Barry must have told you after he told me. What do he and Iris have planned.”

Oliver coughed.
“What?”

Oliver turned to directly face Felicity.

“Fine, since you’re so nosy, I’ll tell you. But I’m surprised you aren’t waiting for Barry to tell you. It seems inconsiderate. If he wanted you to know, don’t you think he’d have told you already?”

“Just tell me.” Felicity knew Oliver wasn’t one to respect anyone’s privacy.

“Barry decided to tell Iris no.”

“What?” Felicity asked. Her eyebrows lowered and she tilted her head.

“He said no.”

“But, why?”

Turning back toward the coffee table, Oliver said, “I guess he didn’t want to.”

“Bullshit. He was so excited,” Felicity said. She pulled her arm off the back of the couch and leaned forward. She stared straight forward at the empty space in front of her. “You must have misunderstood.”

“He answered Iris in my office. Afterward we went for drinks at Verdant. He didn’t want to stay long though, so we left early.”

“Your office?” Felicity asked. “He talked to Iris in your office?”

“He texted her actually.”

“Text!” Felicity asked. “What did you do Oliver?”

“Me?” Oliver asked. He knew she’d find a way to blame him. “Why do you assume I did anything?”

Felicity stood up and walked around to the back of the other couch that faced Oliver. She wrapped one arm around herself and rubbed her right temple with the other. She paced and Oliver saw she mouthed something and realized Felicity was counting to ten.

“I think you did something,” Felicity said after she came to a stop and faced him directly, her hand braced on the back of the couch. Her voice was barely restrained and eerily calm. “Because before Barry told you, he was excited and couldn’t wait to say yes. And then he talked to you, texted Iris back a no, and went with you to consume condolence drinks he couldn’t even finish.”

“He just didn’t want to be hungover tomorrow,” Oliver said as he waved away her concern.

“The truth please.”

Damn! Why did she have to use his line against him? He only used it when he knew Felicity bottled her feelings and needed to vent. And one time she didn’t want to talk about the bad blind date she had been on when the guy continued to follow her for over a week. Oliver could still hear the satisfying sound of breaking his nose. There was another time when Oliver wanted to know if Felicity had cheated when they played blackjack. But mostly he used it for getting Felicity to open up about heavy emotional, important things.

Oliver was sure this situation didn’t qualify. But he knew he had to comply with the rules of the phrase. Though he was thrown by it.
Felicity had never used the line on him before.

“I may have mentioned the illegality of dating one’s foster-sister.” Oliver kept his eyes lowered to his phone.

“Anything else?” Felicity demanded.

He looked up to her face and admitted, “I referenced an earlier conversation we had about how dating Iris might affect his career given the ickiness any romantic relationship of theirs would have. But that’s it, I swear.”

“Meaning,” Felicity paced the whole length of the room, “you encouraged Barry to tell Iris no, without directly telling him what to do. Barry, wanting to please you, did what you wanted.”

“I can’t help what Barry does.”

“Yes, you can!” Felicity’s voice raised and she threw her arms in the air. “He looks up to you. You’re his boss. You gave him a position he is wildly unqualified for, and before he has even graduated. He looks up to you and wants to do whatever you say to do.”

“Barry makes his own choices,” Oliver said as he stood up and crossed his arm. “He’s a grown adult, if he chooses to listen to my advice, that’s still his choice.”

Felicity stopped pacing and faced Oliver. Her hands landed on her hips and her face flushed. She was the anger emoji personified.

“Yes, but he doesn’t have all the information.”

“What information?” Oliver asked as he mirrored Felicity and put his hands on his hips.

“The real reason why you want Barry around.”

“Because I need a Director of Applied Sciences.” Oliver shouted back. What other reason did Felicity think he had? She knew about Mr. Dennis’ threat. Felicity had consoled him and ensured him he could make Applied Sciences a success. She knew Oliver was desperately holding onto his family business.

“Because you’re worried about John getting married, opening his own business, and not having time for you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Oliver replied in a low, angry voice.

“No, it’s not.” With a softer tone, she added, “You want a replacement for John. But this time you want someone who looks up to you so you can get away with more than John allowed. And you found someone who is younger so they’d be less likely to leave you like John did.”

Oliver turned away, ran his hands through his hair, and huffed a breath out loud. It was now his turn to count to ten. When he felt calm enough, he turned back around to face Felicity. She stood in the same position, her face tensed.

“I am not looking for a replacement for Digg.”

“Of course, you don’t see it.”

“I don’t see it because it’s not true,” Oliver said without thought, in a raised voice. In a lower voice he added, “And even if it was, which it is not,” Oliver said sternly, “I’m helping Barry. How is that a
bad thing?"

“This situation right here. Barry likes Iris. But Iris lives in Central City, so you sabotage their potential relationship to keep Barry closer to you. You-”

“That is not why-”

“Don’t interrupt me,” Felicity said with a glare. She paused to ensure Oliver would comply with her request, though they both knew it was a demand. He waved as if offering the floor to her.

“There is also the matter of giving him a position where he has no chance of succeeding.”

“Barry’s a smart guy. You aren’t giving him enough credit.”

Felicity took a step back and paused. After a moment, she listed, “He is young. He lacks experience. He has no degree. Barry has never managed anyone or anything. With all that, his employees aren’t going to respect him. You really aren’t doing him any favors.”

Anger coursed through Oliver. “Thank you for telling me I’m entirely wrong. I’m so glad I was seeking your approval.”

“Someone has to tell you the truth, not that you’ll listen to me.” Under her breath she said, “You don’t listen to anyone.”

Oliver rubbed the bridge of his nose. Oliver had been certain Felicity would like Oliver thinking of someone besides himself and helping said person. “I guess if someone helps someone else in a manner you disagree with, it’s not valid. There has to be an ulterior motive.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying you should really listen to Barry.”

“I have been. He’s never said anything you’re saying to me. He clearly doesn’t agree with you.” And with a louder voice added, “And may I remind you, Iris is his foster-sister.”

“That is not as big deal as you are making it out to be. If neither of them care about it, no one else should. They don’t share any genes.” Oliver opened his mouth to argue her point, when she shushed him with an upheld finger. Oliver shut his mouth and allowed Felicity to continue, “Barry said to you, or at least implied, he didn’t want to go out with Iris?”

Oliver stared at her. If he lied, Felicity would know. If Oliver said, in this instance, he knew better than Barry, she’d accuse Oliver of manipulation or having a superiority complex.

Oliver thanked god his phone rang, as it ended their staring contest. Oliver walked back to the coffee table and picked up his phone.

Looking at his phone he said, “It’s Isabel. I have to get it.”

Oliver turned away from Felicity to gain the illusion of privacy. Normally, Oliver wouldn’t care if Felicity overheard his half of the conversation, but after the fight he wanted some space.

“Isabel,” Oliver said. “How are you?”

“Oliver, I’m glad I caught you,” Isabel said. Her voice was breathy and Oliver wondered if she was on a treadmill or elliptical. “I just wanted to confirm you’ll be walking the red carpet for the charity gala in November.”

“Uh,” Oliver said as his brain flipped to his mental calendar. Since Gladys managed his calendar, he
had no idea if he was busy or not. Oliver could have looked it up on his phone, but Oliver hated his time scheduled minute-to-minute like Gladys did and refused to use the calendar app. And November felt like years away. He had to be free. “Sure. I can make sure I’m free that night.”

“Great,” Isabel responded. “I’ll schedule a fitting with Hugo Boss. Or would you prefer to try that hot new designer everybody loves, Craig Green?”

“Umm, let’s stick with Hugo Boss.”

“Great, it’s good to have a signature look. I’ll text you when I schedule it.”

“Sounds good,” Oliver said as he looked back at Felicity in defiance. “Oh, one more thing. I’m going to bring someone with me.”

“Really?” Isabel asked, her tone turned snotty.

“Yes, you met him, Barry. Allen?”

“Oh, the kid--guy you’re taking under your wing.”

“Yes. Make sure he also gets a suit, too.”

“Of course. Is Barry going to walk with you on the red carpet?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“It’s just some people may talk about you walking with a guy, when you’ve never walked with anyone before. Start rumors you’re gay, that sort of thing.”

“I don’t care about that. If people want to believe that, they can go ahead. But also, I’ve walked a few carpets with Digg and Felicity.”

“Your bodyguard and,” Isabel said, “well, Felicity is practically your assistant.”

Oliver grimaced and kept his eyes off of Felicity. He quietly said, “I wouldn’t tell her that if you value your credit score or anything else online.”

“Fine, but everyone knew you two weren’t a thing. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Okay, Isabel,” Oliver said. “Just make sure Barry is there with me during the fitting to get him a tux. Are you going to be at the gala? I’ll need you to help prep Barry.”

“That’s my job. I don’t expect you to navigate the sea of sharks called reporters. I’m your girl.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Goodbye, Oliver.”

Oliver hung up the phone and turned back to Felicity. She gaped at him.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“Are you trying to pair Barry with…Isabel?” Her voice was incredulous.

“No,” Oliver denied too quickly. Felicity gave him a look that told Oliver she knew he lied. Oliver relented with, “She’d be lucky to have Barry.”
“I’m not disagreeing, but I personally think he deserves better. And Isabel will think she deserves better. You may genuinely think you don’t have a superiority complex, and maybe you don’t. Isabel has one, knows it, and acts like it.”

“No,” Oliver said, “she doesn’t. She just has expensive taste.”

“Both are true. And she won’t settle for someone like Barry, who has no social standing or money to indulge her expensive taste.”

“I disagree. She and Barry have already met. She wouldn’t have showed interest in him if she thought being with Barry would be settling.”

“Or she showed interest in someone else?”


“You really are blind sometimes,” Felicity responded without really answering. “I have to go. If you can’t figure out what QC’s financial reports say, have one of your accountants explain it to you. And maybe have them teach you how to read them all by yourself. You’re CEO now, you should be able to understand them without any help.”

Oliver shook his head in frustration as she gathered up her purse and cardigan. Felicity always thought she knew best for Oliver and had no qualms about offering her unsolicited advice. She pushed Oliver in directions Felicity knew he didn’t want to go.

And somehow Oliver’s plans for Barry were wrong? Oliver almost mentioned rocks and glass houses, when Felicity turned back towards him.

“Will you just think about the influence you have on Barry, please?”

“I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m making his life better.”

Felicity sighed, exhausted from the argument. “Oliver, you are playing with people’s lives. And when they find out the extent of your meddling, don’t be surprised if they don’t thank you for it.”

Resentment filled Oliver. He resented the lack of faith Felicity had in him. Just because she didn’t agree with him didn’t mean he was wrong.

Barry would thank Oliver. And when Barry did, Oliver would relish his I-told-you-so speech to Felicity.

Felicity turned away and walked out of the living room and out of the manor. Oliver plopped down on the couch and put his arm over his eyes. His head hurt as Felicity’s voice rang in his ears. Oliver hated fighting with her.

Oliver creaked the door open to one of the guest bedrooms, which was closest to his bedroom, and paused at the sight before him. Barry sat on the bed in his tuxedo pants and a generic white undershirt. In his hands, Barry held his phone. The dimness of the room seemed to surround Barry. The kid’s sad eyes, wrinkled forehead, and a frown could only be characterized as mournful. Barry’s shoulders sagged so much Oliver was surprised Barry hadn’t collapsed into a heap on the floor. That, along with Barry being inconsolable all week, led Oliver to believe Iris was the cause of Barry’s annoyingly morose nature that evening.
But that had to change.

They were attending the charity gala. The charity gala Isabel had helped prepare Barry for, with Oliver’s assistance. Oliver had managed to limit the amount of time the two spent together this week, as Isabel could not see Barry in his current state. The couple times they had seen each other, Oliver had practically bullied Barry into a good mood.

It had kind of worked. At least Isabel hadn’t commented on Barry’s behavior. But if she had stayed any longer during those meetings, she would have ridiculed Barry.

Which was why Barry had to snap out of it now. Isabel would arrive any minute and she needed to see a confident and put together Barry. Not someone-just-kicked-my-litter-of-puppies-individually mopey Barry.

“Barry,” Oliver said as he entered the room. Barry jumped up and hid his phone behind his back. “We need to be ready to leave when Isabel shows up. Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

“Oh, I-I just lost track of time.”

“Oh, well, hurry up. You want to make a good impression on Isabel, right?”

“Yeah-yes,” Barry said. He walked over to the other side of the bed where the rest of his tuxedo was laid out for him. Oliver decided he would ignore the red holey socks. They were dark enough no one would notice and Oliver was afraid it would lead Barry to bibbity-bop back into his, now usual, pumpkin of uncertainty and geekiness. “Um, Oliver?”

“Yes?”

“I've never tied a bow tie before.”

“That’s okay,” Oliver said, determined to sound calm and easy going. Just as Oliver was about to walk over to Barry and reach for the bow tie, a brilliant idea popped into Oliver’s head. “Actually, we can have Isabel help you with it. That way she’ll get into your personal space and be helping you.”

“She will be helping me?” Barry asked with a confused look on his face. He had his right arm in his dress shirt, and his left arm blindly looked for the other sleeve.

“Yes, and that’ll make her feel needed and in a teacher role. She won’t be able to resist you by the end of the night.”

“If you say so,” Barry said. He buttoned his shirt, being careful to match the right buttons to the right button holes.

“Barry, can you please hurry up?”

“I don’t want to look like an idiot or out of place.”

“That’s a fair point. Just be careful faster, okay?”

“Okay.”

Oliver leaned against a bedpost, with his hands in his pockets and a foot crossed over the other. Oliver knew it would take a while for Barry to learn Oliver’s relaxed finesse, and really, it’d be impossible to achieve every aspect of Oliver’s charm. Yet, Barry had to look the part enough to fool
Isabel.

Not fool, Oliver corrected in his mind.

Convince.

They both had to convince Isabel Barry would eventually fit in with any crowd, and she’d be smart to grab him before someone else did and took all the credit.

“When Isabel gets here, make sure to compliment her. Don’t get too personal, just comment on her dress or her shoes.”

“Dress and shoes, got it.”

“Act like a gentleman, get doors for her, stand when she arrives or leaves a table, that sort of thing.”

“Gentlemanly behavior,” Barry repeated as he tucked in his dress shirt into his pants around his jacket.

“And don’t mention any exes. Hers or yours. This is not the time to get to know each other’s pasts. It’s to get to know each other’s presents. In a relaxed, not-playing-twenty-questions sort of way.”

“No questions.” Barry put his jacket on, and paid close attention to his lapels.

“No, ask questions, Barry. Ask her lots of questions. Just not of her past. And not like you’re interviewing her for a job.”

“How do I do that?”

Barry was really lucky he had met Oliver. How had Barry survived all this time and be this clueless?

“Just make sure you keep the conversation going without sounding like you’re reading from a list of questions or potential topics. Act as if everything about her is fascinating.”

“O-okay,” Barry said. Barry tried to smile, but it looked more like a grimace.

“You’ll do fine. I have faith in you. Don’t worry.”

“Right,” Barry said more confidently as he squared his shoulders back. He bent down and struggled to get his shoes on. Tilting his head up, Barry said, “Wait. What was the first thing you said?”

“Knock-knock,” Isabel said in a saccharine high voice. She accompanied it with a physical knock on the door and stepped in without an invitation. Barry quickly stood up and forced his heel into a shoe. His back was so straight, Oliver would have thought Isabel was his drill instructor. Oliver bit back a laugh and turned back towards Isabel. “Your maid told me I could find you two in here. Are you ready to go?”

“Almost, I need to send a quick email. Can you help Barry with his tie?”

“Of course,” Isabel said. “I’d love to.”

“And this will be his first red carpet, so could you give him some pointers?”

“That’s my job.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said and headed towards the door. “I’ll meet you in the foyer.”
“Sounds good,” Isabel said. She had grabbed the tie off the bed and glided toward Barry.

“Y-you look really pretty,” Barry said, his voice ended on a squeak. Oliver walked out the door and hovered in the hallway to eavesdrop. Oliver hoped Barry gained or faked some confidence soon; Barry’s stuttering or adolescent voice breaks were not going to attract Isabel. “I really like the neckline of your dress.”

Oliver sighed and scratched his forehead. The neckline? Oliver clearly had more work to do with Barry.

“Thank you,” Isabel said. “That’s very, uh, sweet.” Oliver was going to have to do damage control.

“Don’t fidget. Don’t forget to smile at all times. Don’t talk when they’re taking pictures. Don’t yawn or sneeze. Try not to blink too much. Don’t stare, especially into the lights for too long. But look like you’re having fun. And stand up straight.”

Barry’s head nodded after every rapid-fire instruction Isabel gave him, his eyes wide. The three of them had just exited the limo and Isabel gave last minute tips to Barry. Oliver couldn’t help but think Barry looked like he was about to enter an arena with a bear or a dementor. A look that would do nothing for Barry’s confidence or swagger.

“Barry,” Oliver said, as he put clapped his hand on the kid’s shoulder, “just relax. You’ll be fine. No one is going to attack you.”

“But also, don’t trip,” Isabel added. “The paparazzi love getting pictures of people tripping and getting rug burn on their faces.”


“Just don’t trip and you’ll be fine,” Isabel said and then turned to Oliver. She responded with a smile after Oliver gave her a look to cool it. Turning back to Barry, Isabel added one last command, “Also, don’t step on anyone’s dress.”

Oliver knew if they stood there any longer, Barry would bail, possibly by running all the way back to Central City.

“Stick with me and follow my lead,” Oliver said as he physically steered Barry toward the carpet. “Isabel, we’ll meet you at the other end of the carpet?”

“Of course.”

“Wait,” Barry said. He stopped walking and faced Oliver. “How will she know if I’m doing this right if she’s not with us?”

“She’ll see the photographs posted online and she’ll be watching from the end of the carpet.”

“Oh, okay.”

Once Oliver turned the corner and stepped onto the carpet, with Barry at his heels, camera flashes tripled. Oliver swung his arm around Barry’s shoulders to prevent Barry from staggering.

Oliver had his practiced smile ready for the cameras. The smile said he was simultaneously charming and trouble. It was the smile Felicity hated. She said it wasn’t his smile. Oliver didn’t understand as
he was the one smiling, so whose smile could it be?

As the camera flashed and reporters yelled Oliver’s name, Oliver continued to steer Barry subtly to face the right cameras. They took their time going down the line. Enough time the paparazzi learned Barry’s name and yelled it, too. Though not nearly as much as Mr. Queen was yelled out. Oliver assumed Isabel shared that bit of knowledge and inwardly patted himself on the back for introducing the two.

After spending the appropriate amount of time in front of the paparazzi, Oliver moved Barry and himself to Starling City’s local news interview spot. The reporter was one Oliver saw often in his life as a Queen, but this reporter hadn’t intruded on the Queens after Oliver’s father’s death. Of course, that wouldn’t have prevented Oliver from stopping. Fame required certain things of Oliver. One of them was forgetting the intrusions it brought into his life. Though he may have clipped his answers if it had been one of the reporters who had shoved a microphone in his face when he and his family entered the cemetery for Robert’s funeral.

Oliver knew he knew the reporter’s name. But his brain refused to come up with it.

“Mr. Queen,” the reporter said to gain Oliver’s attention, “how are you this evening?”

“I’m doing well, thank you. Happy to support such a great cause.”

“Of course. Have you been affected personally?”

“Who hasn’t?” Oliver asked. He couldn’t remember what charity was being supported. And he knew looking at the backdrop of the red carpet would be too obvious now. “I’m doing what I can to make things just a bit better.”

“That’s great. Who did you bring tonight?”

“This, I’m proud to introduce,” Oliver said as he clapped Barry on the shoulder again. The reporter nearly drooled at the prospect of an exclusive on Oliver’s love life. “Is Barry Allen. He is Queen Consolidated’s new Applied Sciences Director. We are excited to have him on board and can’t wait to see what he and his team come up with.”

“Mr. Allen,” the reporter turned to Barry, obviously working to keep his disappointment from showing, “will Applied Sciences be doing any cancer research?”

“Well, um, we’re not a medical research lab. But if any of our work has potential in advancing cancer research, we would, uh, certainly pass that information to one. And fuc-um, that is, F cancer is a great charity.”

Oliver wasn’t surprised Barry knew the charity.

“Yes, it is,” the reporter said. “Have a good time tonight.”

“Thank you, we will,” Oliver said as he shook the man’s hand. Out of the corner of Oliver’s eye, he saw Barry wipe his hand on his pants and then shake the reporter’s hand as well.

Off the carpet, Oliver made his way to Isabel. Barry followed along, relieved to be done with the carpet. Just before Barry made it to Oliver and Isabel, Barry tripped over his feet, but caught himself before he face planted. Oliver closed his eyes and shook his head. Isabel sighed.

“Well,” Isabel said, finding a bright side to cheer Barry up, “at least you waited until you weren’t around any cameras.”
“Yeah,” Barry said with a chuckle. His face matched the color of the carpet they just walked.

“So, how’d he do?” Oliver asked. He knew the conversation had to pivot if Barry was to remain calm.

Isabel smiled up at Oliver, “For his first time, really well.” She took her phone and showed Oliver and Barry a picture of themselves set as her wallpaper. If Oliver didn’t know Barry, he would have said Barry looked comfortable in the photo. Minus his stiff, clenched hands at his side.

Oliver elbowed Barry with a smile and Barry smiled back.

“I’m just going to have the car pull around back,” Isabel said and then walked off.

“How about we celebrate at Verdant?” Oliver asked and clapped his hands together

“Aren’t we going to the charity thing? Here?” Barry asked as he pointed to the doors of the Starling City Hotel.

Oliver let out a laugh. “If I can avoid them, I do. Don’t worry, I wrote them a large check and that’s all any of these charities care about. Well that and the attention these events bring in. So, I’ve done my duty.”

Barry still looked as if they were skipping class.

“They won’t care, trust me. The only time I go to these is when my mother planned it or she guilt trips me into attending. Occasionally we have to keep up the family name and all.”

“Okay,” Barry said, his tone uncertain.

“Anyway, that’s not the important part.” Oliver smiled and leaned in more to ask, “Did you see her phone?”

“Yeah, the picture of us isn’t too bad. I’m surprised because I don’t always photograph well. I’m not photogenic.”

“Not the picture itself,” Oliver said as he dismissed Barry’s answer. “The fact a picture of you, is now her wallpaper.”

“You are also in the picture.”

“No, she has never had me as her wallpaper. It’s all you. This is great. The plan is coming along.”

“The plan?” Barry asked, confused.

“Just to have her realize how great you are. Remember, tonight compliments are your friend. Also, show her your carefree side. She needs to see, though you’re serious about work, you know how to have fun, too.”

“Right,” Barry said as he nodded. Oliver wondered if Barry had been a bobble-head in a previous life.

Oliver’s phone buzzed with a text from Isabel. “The car’s out back,” Oliver read out loud for Barry’s benefit. “Let’s celebrate your success.”
Verdant was loud, packed, and strong in sensory overload. It was the perfect atmosphere for Oliver to get lost in and not worry about living up to the Queen name. Oliver threw back a shot a server handed him when he walked in the door and made his way to the VIP area. When someone would yell out to him, he’d point at them and show off his most charming smile.

At his booth, Oliver turned around and surveyed the club from the higher vantage point. This allowed him to take in the crowd and have his guests sit down before he did. Barry, who had been following closely behind Oliver, sagged into the booth with a relieved sigh. The club was more packed than what was normal for a Tuesday night and Barry seemed overwhelmed. Oliver realized Isabel must have gotten the word out about his imminent presence at Verdant. When Isabel made it to the booth, her hand grazed Oliver’s arm as she slid gracefully into the booth. She made a show of making room for Oliver next to her, but he pretended not to notice and sat down on the opposite side, with Barry in the middle.

“Oliver, you need to remember to take pictures and post them to Instagram tonight,” Isabel instructed as she took out her phone. She took a dozen pictures of Oliver and a few of Oliver and Barry. “I’ll post the good ones to your account.”

“Sure. First though, I say, to celebrate Barry’s very successful first run on a red carpet,” Oliver said as he gestured to Barry, “we get a bottle or two of champagne. What do you think?”

“Perfect,” Isabel cooed. “Barry deserves it.” Oliver couldn’t help the sense of satisfaction that came over him as he saw her fawn over Barry.

“Uh-yeah,” Barry said with a blush. “Champagne would be nice.”

Oliver was almost convinced of Barry’s enthusiasm, hopefully Isabel bought it. “Great,” Oliver said as he slid out of the booth. “I’ll go check in with the bar and grab a couple of bottles.”

“Why don’t I go with you?” Isabel asked. “I could continue to take pictures.”

“No. Stay here,” Oliver stopped moving to look back at Isabel. “I have a little shop talk I have to do with Sin anyway. I don’t want to bore you with those details.”

“I very much doubt you could ever be boring. And I’d love to learn more about the running of Verdant.”

Oliver stood up and waved his hand in dismissal. “That’s okay. Keep Barry company for me.”

Once it was obvious Oliver wasn’t going to relent, Isabel replied, “I’m sure Barry and I can think of something to talk about. Applied Sciences is interesting.”

Barry perked up at a topic he could talk about and Oliver knew it’d be a good night for the kid. “Okay, I’ll go make appearances on other people’s Instagram feeds.”

His assumption was correct. As he made his way over to the bar, Oliver was stopped several times by customers who wanted selfies with him. During the selfies, the customers usually took the opportunity to get very close to Oliver. Oliver had gotten used to being felt up when this happened and was mostly flattered by the attention. It was part of his job.

Sometimes Oliver encouraged the attention when it was given by attractive women.

“Hi,” a gorgeous brunette flirted in a low, seductive voice as she pressed herself, and her cleavage, up to Oliver. “I’ve heard some naughty things about you.”
“Oh, yeah?” Oliver asked with his signature grin that had gotten him laid more often than not.

“Yep.” The p popped out of the woman’s dark red mouth and Oliver instantly thought about him popping out of her mouth. “I’ve always wanted to meet you and see if they were true.”

Oliver slipped his arm around her hip and pulled her closer into his side. In a low voice, for the woman’s ears only, Oliver asked, “You want to talk about all my dirty deeds?”

“Actually, I get bored with words,” the woman traced her finger in random patterns on his chest and stomach, then her hand dragged down to below his belt. “I was hoping you would show me.”

Oliver’s cock stirred as she traced it. It looked like Barry and Isabel weren’t the only ones who were going to connect with someone new. Too bad Barry and Isabel required more hints and nudges to get out of their own way. “Hold that thought. I have some business I need to take care of.”

The brunette pouted.

“I promise I’ll find you and we can make some naughty stories of our own.”

“I’d like that,” she breathed across his neck. Oliver grinned back at her and then removed her hands from around him. He held up a finger to her as he walked away, promising to continue their conversation.

“Hey, Sin,” Oliver greeted his general manager once he made it to the bar. “Why are you bartending when you should be managing?”

“Sam called out and no one else could come in on such short notice,” the petite manager said in her usual brusque voice. “So, this is called managing. Filling in where needed to keep the place running.”

“Have I told you lately what a wonderful manager you are?”

“No,” Sin said as she handed off six drinks to a server.

“Hmm, I should rectify that soon.”

“You are the most hilarious boss in the history of bosses,” Sin said dryly. She turned to another server abruptly and yelled, “Amanda, don’t serve the douche with the manbun anymore. We don’t want to be fined for over-serving.” Sin turned back around and faced Oliver. “Is there something you need?”

“Can you send a bottle of Grande Année Brut Rose 2004 to my VIP table with two--no better make it three--glasses?” Oliver asked, thinking it would be better if he wasn’t too obvious with Isabel and Barry. He learned early on in Sin’s employment it was better to ask her to do something instead of tell her. The results were much more positive if he stuck to that rule.

“Sure, but only if you don’t tell me why you need three glasses.”

“My sense of humor is rubbing off on you. And if you must know--”

“No!” Sin interrupted. “I said I don’t want to know. What you do with your man parts is none of my business.”

“Fine, but it’s not anything like what you’re thinking.”

“Don’t care. Don’t need to know.” She left the bar and went to the back to grab the champagne.
Oliver noticed the others at the bar. A couple of guys whom Oliver assumed would be going home alone despite their desperate attempts at hitting on two women who were annoyed and sent each other looks as they clearly planned their escape. Oliver watched as they gave some excuse and literally ran as fast as they could in their heels through the dancing crowd and out the door.

Sin came back and instructed Julie to deliver the bottle and glasses to Oliver’s table. After checking on the customers at the bar, Sin walked back over to Oliver.

“So business looks good tonight,” Oliver said.

“That’s what happens when your PR lady person tweets and Instagrams you’re going to be here.”

“I figured. Any problems I should know about?”

“If there were, you’d already know about them.”

“Fair enough,” Oliver said with a chuckle. He turned his head around and looked into the crowd. Oliver instantly found the brunette and decided he had done his job as boss. “I’ll let you get back to work. I’m going to mingle.”

“You aren’t going back to your table to enjoy your champagne and three glasses?”

Oliver turned back around and faced Sin. “I’m letting that simmer, and it’ll work better if I’m not there. Besides, I thought you didn’t care?”

“I don’t,” Sin said. She waved him off, “Now leave me alone.”

“Text me if you need anything.” With that Oliver left the bar and made his way around back to the woman he was sure he would spend the night with. Oliver convinced himself the more alone time Barry and Isabel have, the sooner they’d hook up, too.

Once he met up with the brunette again, Oliver came up behind her and his hands went back to her hips. He leaned down to roughly whisper in her ear, “What story of mine intrigued you the most?”

“Hmm,” the woman trailed her fingers up and down his arms. “There is one about you, let’s say enjoying the company of two women in the alley outside Verdant.”

Oliver pushed his hips into her barely-there backside. Guess he couldn’t have everything. The story was partially true. He had fucked a woman against the brick wall of the club once. But it had only been one woman.

It was cold outside, but Oliver had no doubt he’d warm up quickly. “Do you have another woman in mind?”

“I always wanted to share with my friend, Kristen.” The woman pointed over to another, darker brunette. She danced by herself and looked far more dangerous than the almost-wholesome woman in front of him. Kristen glided her hands over her body and rocked her hips back and forth.

The combination of both woman promised to be intriguing as the picture of both of their mouths on him at the same time seized his brain and wouldn’t let go.

Oliver licked his lips. As he moved away from the brunette and grabbed her hand, Oliver said, “Let’s invite her to get some fresh air with us.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Oliver has Christmas Eve dinner with the Diggles and his family. He is looking forward to meeting Sara.

Two Years Ago

A pounding on the door jerked Felicity’s attention from the security analysis she was running for her newest client. With a low sound of protest from the back of her throat, Felicity saved her work. The pounding continued. She spoke to the door, “Geez. I get it. I’m coming.”

Mid-pound, Felicity opened the door with a swoosh. Oliver stood on the opposite side. His face was red and his eyes jumped all over her.

“What, Oliver?” Felicity asked, irritated by Oliver’s incessant knocking. “Your text said to stay here until you got here. I told you I would.”

Releasing a breath Oliver pulled Felicity into a tight hug. It was tighter than he had ever hugged her before. It worried her.

“Oliver, what’s going on? Is it Moira?”

With reluctance, Oliver released Felicity from the hug. He shook his head to her question and massaged his forehead at the two points just above his eyebrows. “She’s fine. Well, she’s the same as when you saw her yesterday.”

“Come in,” Felicity stepped back from the door and waved him in.

Oliver stalked in and looked around at everything in her condo as if he was looking for someone. Felicity didn’t have an inkling who Oliver looked for. He went over and tested that the sliding door was locked. It was. Felicity always kept it locked when she wasn’t using it. And it was way too hot to spend anytime outside willingly. Oliver continued to ignore her and walked through the rest of her condo. Felicity stayed in her living room, confused. She didn’t like not knowing what was happening in her own place.

When Oliver reappeared in the living room, Felicity asked, “What was that about?”

After a moment of hesitation, Oliver sat down in the chair across from her couch and silently asked Felicity to sit down. With little patience left, Felicity sat down and crossed her arms.

“Sorry, I know I’m acting weird.” Under his breath, he asked, “Um, where do I start?”

“The beginning is my preference.”

“Right,” Oliver nodded. “Okay. Do you remember the woman I was seeing? Carrie?”

“The woman you’ve seen for, what, three or four whole dates?” Which was two or three whole dates more than he usually ‘dated’ a woman. Felicity knew Moira’s condition altered Oliver’s world view
and made him do things he had never done before. Like date a woman more than once. “Yeah, I remember. Guess it’s not working out?”

With a humorless chuckle, Oliver answered, “Yeah. You could say that. She went a little crazy and broke into the manor.”

“What?” Felicity uncrossed her arms and leaned toward Oliver. “Is everybody okay?”

“Yeah. Mom is rattled and more afraid for me than herself. She’s making me get bodyguards.” Oliver shook his head at the idea.

“That serious?” Felicity’s voice filled with concern. Her stomach clenched and her shoulders tensed. “Has she done anything else?”

He hesitated. After a moment of his focus on his feet, he looked back at Felicity. Oliver replied in a soft but strained voice, “When she broke in she threatened anyone who got in the way of her and me.”

“That’s scary.”

“It gets worse. For some reason, she singled you out.” His voice became louder and more irritated, “I guess she’s jealous of you despite the many times I promised we are only, and have only, been friends.”

Felicity took a minute to process the information. She hadn’t ever expected to be caught up in Oliver’s love life. She purposefully detached herself from Oliver’s dates. Not that the Carrie situation was his fault. “Do you really think she’d follow through on her threats?”

“Possibly,” Oliver shrugged his shoulders. He looked lost. “I didn’t think she was crazy at all, but clearly I was wrong about that.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I’m sure I’ll be fine. The police are on it, right?”

“Yes, but Felicity,” Oliver said, his voice became aggravated, “I’m not taking any chances. You’re getting bodyguards, too.”

“That’s not necessary, Oliver.”

“She threatened you by name, Felicity.” Oliver stood up, too worked up to stay seated. “She managed to get past the manor’s security and waited for me in my bedroom. Who knows what else she is capable of?”

With deliberate slowness, Felicity stood up. She reached out and squeezed his fists at his sides. Oliver forced his hands to relax and held onto Felicity’s hands. “Are you sure you aren’t having such an extreme reaction due to the stress you are under from Moira’s condition?”

“I’m stressed, for good reason,” Oliver conceded. “But that doesn’t minimize the threat that Carrie is. I won’t allow you to be hurt because of one of my dumb mistakes.”

“Hey,” Felicity tapped him on his chest, “it wasn’t dumb to try to see a woman more than once. It just…didn’t work out this time.” A slight understatement.

“Either way, I won’t be doing it again. And you’re getting a couple bodyguards to protect you 24-7.”

“Fine,” she agreed, “if it will put your mind at ease. Thank you.” Felicity didn’t like he was shutting
the door completely on really connecting with someone. He deserved to love and be loved. She silently cursed Carrie. “Next time—”

“There will not be a next time,” Oliver interrupted. “There will never again be a need for you to be protected because of me.”

“It just would have been nice if you had asked me instead of told me.”

Oliver released Felicity’s hand and ran his hand through his hair. He blew out a breath and sunk back down to the chair he just vacated. “I’m sorry. I just…I can’t have you hurt while everything else in my life is exploding.”

“I understand.” She had never seen him so worked up. With everything that had been going on with Oliver and his family, this was the worst possible timing for him to attain a stalker. Like handing someone who is drowning two one-hundred-pound dumbbells to hold. “Why don’t you stay for a bit and relax?”

“No,” Oliver stood up again. “I have to get your security detail set up and make sure the manor’s security is tighter.” He started to walk toward Felicity’s door without a goodbye. It seemed to Felicity his head was too busy to even realize. Oliver stopped and turned around, “Oh, I’ll be back later today and introduce you to one of your bodyguards. Don’t—I mean, if you don’t mind, will you please not open the door to anyone but me until I come back?” Oliver put his begging-puppy-dog face on. Felicity hated it when he didn’t play fair.

“All right,” Felicity agreed. “Thank you for asking.” She then turned the conversation back to him, as she was more concerned about Oliver than herself. His bedroom was the one Carrie broke into. “When do you get a bodyguard?”

“I’m going to the security firm and meeting the lead guy now. Apparently, he’s former military.”

“Woah, the big guns.”

“Hopefully, it’ll make my mom happy. Though I can’t imagine I’m going to appreciate him beyond that,” Oliver admitted. Off a censoring look from Felicity, he added, “But I’ll try. I’ll see you soon.” With that, Oliver left her condo. Felicity followed and locked her door.

She hoped once Oliver was protected, her heart would stop thudding loud and fast. Felicity was scared. More scared than she let on in front of Oliver. Stupid Carrie and her stupid threats. Felicity didn’t bother going back into her home office. She knew she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on her work. She wasn’t even sure she would be able to sleep until Carrie was taken care of and Oliver was safe again.

**Present Day**

The smell of the crisp cold air enveloped Oliver as he stepped out of the car. It was pleasant and brought a wave of nostalgia from Christmases past, which allowed Oliver to not mind the coldness. Snow hadn’t fallen yet, but it felt like it had. His deep breaths out formed tiny puffs of clouds.

As he asked his driver to stay close, Oliver saw Felicity pull up against the curb in front of the Diggles’ sidewalk in her beat-up Volkswagen. Oliver shook his head.

“When are you going to get a new car?” Oliver asked when she got out of her car. Oliver looked over at Felicity. She wore a long black coat which went to her knees. Her legs were bare and her
black heels showed off her well-defined calf muscles. As she walked towards him he lowered his voice and asked, “For that matter, Felicity, why didn’t you hire a car and driver tonight? Now you have to plan on being sober enough to drive at the end of the night.”

“I’m okay with that, Oliver,” Felicity said. They walked side-by-side towards the Diggles’ front door. “I’d much rather have my reliable car readily available instead of having to call a poor driver, like the one you’re employing, to sit in a car for an undetermined amount of time in an empty lot somewhere.”

“But that’s their job. And it’s a party,” Oliver argued. “What happens if you drink too much and can’t drive yourself home?”

“A glass of wine at dinner is all I want,” Felicity explained as she came to a stop. Oliver faced her. Her cheeks tinged with pink. Oliver wasn’t sure if it was from the cold or her aggravation. “And if that changes I’m sure Digg and Lyla will let me stay here for the night. Or,” Felicity’s voice turned lighter, “I have a friend who hired a car service for the evening. I’m sure he’d be happy to take me home.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Oliver agreed with a smile. In a mumble, he added, “I just want you to be careful.”

The silence that followed was, for Oliver, uneasy. He remembered Felicity was still mad at him regarding Barry, and it was probably why she picked a fight with him over nothing. He put his hands in his pockets, looked down, and scuffed the sole of his shoe on the sidewalk. Felicity being one of the very few people Oliver hated to disappoint, he didn’t know how get them back to normal. Oliver took a deep breath and slowly released it. He pulled his eyes up to Felicity’s face and noticed the space between her brows crinkled.

“I’m sorry, Felicity,” Oliver broke the standoff. “I know you don’t approve of me…meddling in Barry’s life. But I do have the best of intentions.”

Felicity sighed. “I know that. I know you didn’t mean to hurt anybody. I just wish you’d let others live their own lives.”

“That sounds boring.”

Felicity glared at him. Oliver couldn’t help but laugh. He found Felicity’s annoyance at him cute. She tried to glare more when he laughed, but couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped her mouth.

“Can we agree to disagree?” Oliver asked. “And never bring it up again?”

“I can’t promise to keep my opinions to myself, but I can let it go for now,” Felicity responded as she stepped side to side and wrapped her arms around herself. “This way we can have a nice evening without anything shadowing it.”

“Felicity?”

“Yes?” She looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Are you cold?”

“Just a bit,” Felicity admitted. “My dress isn’t that warm, and my coat can only do so much.”

Oliver turned to Felicity’s side and put his arm around her waist to help warm her up. “Let’s go inside then.”
“Oliver!” A voice cried out from behind them on the curb.

Oliver turned to see Isabel walking up to them.

Isabel was not wearing a coat. At that moment, Oliver knew he was becoming more responsible as he wondered about the practicality of not wearing a coat on such a cold night. Her black dress was tight, left little to his imagination, and he could hear his mother say it was inappropriate for a Christmas party.

“Hello, Oliver,” Isabel purred. Her eyes darted to where Oliver’s hand met Felicity’s waist and with a tightness she added, “Felicity.”

“Isabel,” Felicity replied, just as tightly. Felicity turned into Oliver a bit more to face him. “It’s too cold. I’m going inside. I’ll see you in there.”

“We’ll see you in there,” Oliver replied and dropped his arm. He watched Felicity until Isabel grabbed his other arm and pulled. Oliver looked down at Isabel and her pouted lips. He shivered and silently agreed with Felicity with it being too cold to stay outside for any real length of time.

“Didn’t you get my message?” Oliver asked. He was surprised at her appearance at the party.

“Yes,” Isabel answered. “Such a shame. Though I know tonight is going to be great. I’m happy the Diggles invited me.”

“Oh, I asked them to invite both you and Barry.”

“That is so sweet,” Isabel said as she hooked her hands around Oliver’s pocketed arm.

“I am sorry Barry won’t be able to make it.” Oliver continued to prod. “He sounded really sick, and I didn’t think he could survive the train rides to and from Central City, let alone a dinner party.”

“It’s very kind of you to care so much about him. He’s lucky he has you.”

“Maybe you want to call him? Let him know you’re thinking of him.”

“Maybe later,” Isabel said. She then physically steered them towards the door. “For now, I want to say hi to everybody. I hear your sister and her husband are in town.”

Oliver felt confused and disappointed at Isabel’s brushing off the topic of Barry. He thought she should be more worried about Barry than she seemed to be. At least she should call Barry now, instead of her vague intent to call later.

“What? Oh, Thea and Roy?” Oliver asked as he snapped himself out of his misgivings. “They got into town yesterday. Unfortunately, they can only stay for another two days, but at least my mom and I get to see them over Christmas.”

Moira was beside herself with Thea and Roy’s visit. Before they arrived yesterday, all Moira had been able to do was walk by the front door over and over. Occasionally she would look out the windows for them or walk up the stairs to ensure their room was ready. Lately, she hadn’t wanted to go to any social events, but she was eager for the Diggles’ Christmas party. Oliver knew it was because Moira loved showing off Thea. Moira had been so antsy; she, Thea, and Roy had left for the party early.

“That sounds wonderful.” Isabel commented. “I can’t wait to meet them. Are you planning a big day tomorrow?”
“No,” Oliver said as he walked toward the door. “We generally have a quiet Christmas day.”

“That’s really lovely,” Isabel said. Oliver stopped them at the door and rang the doorbell. “I actually don’t have any plans for Christmas.” Oliver made a grunt to which Isabel added, “It’s been awhile since I’ve done a traditional family Christmas day.”

Oliver looked over at Isabel quizzically just as Diggle opened the door. “Oliver!” Digg exclaimed loudly. Oliver suspected Digg may have started drinking a little earlier then when people were invited over. “So glad you could make it, man.”

“So am I. I can’t wait to try your deep-fried turkey.” Oliver shook his hand and smiled back. He really did enjoy Digg’s company and was happy they could celebrate the holiday together. Along with almost everyone else close to him. And Isabel.

Oliver cursed Barry’s flu.

“It’s going to be amazing. You’ll wonder why you’ve never had it before,” Digg said and then looked over at Isabel. “Ms. Rochev.”

“Mr. Diggle,” Isabel responded, more stoic than a second before. “Thank you for having me.”

“Sure,” Digg replied. “Come on in. Give me coats.” Digg looked over at Isabel, clearly confused. “Uh, coat. Get warm. If you’d like a drink, they’re in the kitchen. Everyone is either there or in the living room.”

“Sounds lovely,” She smoothed a couple of imaginary wrinkles out of her dress and made her way back to the kitchen. Once she walked away, Digg took Oliver’s coat.

“So,” Oliver said, his curiosity unable to wait any longer. Digg and Lyla had invited Sara for Christmas, since Sara’s sister and brother-in-law planned to take a vacation during the holiday. Digg had just been worried it might snow and keep her from driving up to Starling City. “Was Sara able to make it?”

Digg grimaced. “No. Sara had her car all packed up, but her sister canceled her trip and gave her a bad time about not being with her family at Christmas and Sara’s birthday. So, Sara stayed.”

“I’m sorry, Digg,” Oliver said. The two friends made their way through the empty dining room toward the kitchen. “I know you looked forward to having her here. Did she say when she’d be up here?”

“Oh, she’s going to try New Years. Apparently, with her sister being an alcoholic, it’s not as big of a holiday for them.”

“That’ll be better though,” Oliver said as they both stepped into the kitchen. “You’ll be able to have more time with her, and she won’t feel guilty about leaving her family during the holidays.”

Digg went to the counter and poured Oliver a glass of wine. Lyla came into the kitchen, with Felicity close behind.

“I think you will enjoy the wine selection we got for tonight.” Lyla said as she went to the counter and filled another glass with the same red wine Digg had just poured. “It seemed like a good time to open a couple of the special wines.”

“They sound amazing,” Felicity responded, a couple feet from Lyla. She wore a figure hugging red dress just past her knees. There were a multitude of straps, which gave Oliver peeks of her upper
chest, bare shoulders and teases of her back.

Oliver’s ears suddenly filled with a buzzing. He had seen Felicity in many dresses over the years. For reasons unknown to him, this one made Oliver unsure how to react.

Digg nudged Oliver in the arm with glass of wine. Oliver pulled out of his haze. “Oh, thanks,” Oliver mumbled. He took a large gulp of the wine and forced his eyes away from Felicity.

“When you two are done,” Lyla said to Digg and Oliver, “why don’t you join everyone in the living room?”

“We still have about fifteen minutes. At least, according to your timer.”

“We’ll see you out there.” Digg leaned over and gave his wife a short kiss. The women left and Oliver felt oxygen return to his lungs. Digg asked, “You okay, man?”

“I’m fine.” Oliver took another gulp of wine and asked, “What were we talking about?”

Digg’s shoulders slumped. “Sara.”

“And I won’t be forced to share you with your other best friend.”

“Aha man,” Digg said, as he slapped Oliver on the back, “Sara isn’t my best friend. Lyla is.”

“That’s cold,” Oliver deadpanned. “It’s the holidays. You couldn’t have lied to me?”

“I can’t lie during Christmas. Santa might not bring me anything,” Digg chuckled. Oliver groaned. Did marriage bring out the dad jokes in men? “Besides, the truth is always kinder.”

“That has not been my experience.”

The mouthwatering smell of turkey filled the dining room. The table was covered with a red tablecloth and green cloth napkins. The plates, silverware, and wine glasses were crowded with all the serving dishes overflowing with food. It would have never met the standards of a formal Queen dinner and Oliver loved it.

Oliver sat in between Digg, who was at the head of the table across from Lyla, and Felicity. His mother sat across from him. Moira doted on Thea the minute they sat down, and Roy soon gave up trying to get his wife’s attention. Instead, Roy was forced to listen to Isabel talk about fancier dinner parties she had attended. When Isabel claimed to sit so close to Beyonce at a charity event Isabel could see some blemishes; Felicity turned her head away from Isabel to face Oliver and flipped her hair in imitation of Isabel. Oliver covered his lips with a napkin to keep him from doing a spit take with the Pinot Noir he drank.

The food was delicious. Roy kept dishing himself seconds and thirds. Isabel barely ate anything and refused to try the deep-fried turkey. Oliver and Felicity found they loved the turkey and had Digg tell
them everything about cooking it.

While Digg and Lyla were in the kitchen cutting the pumpkin pie, Roy finally called bullshit on one of Isabel’s stories. Isabel felt affronted by the accusation. The resulting confrontation dragged Moira’s attention to the other side of the table. In a voice meant to be quiet but heard by everyone, Moira asked Thea who Isabel was. Isabel’s mouth went agape. Oliver, letting Thea handle their mother for once, leaned over to Felicity and whispered, “Did you hear about Sara?”

“That she backed out of coming at the very last minute?” Felicity asked as she leaned toward him too. “Yes.”

“It’s not like that,” Oliver stated, feeling defensive of Sara.

“It seems like a pattern to me. She should have canceled her trip when her sister canceled her vacation.” Felicity’s voice went higher. “It’s not fair to John she keeps promising to visit, but delay after delay keeps her away.”

Oliver tapped a finger on the table repeatedly. “She didn’t know her sister was going to guilt her into staying.”

“Sara has known her sister her whole life.” Felicity let out an exasperated sigh. “It couldn’t have been too difficult to predict.”

He studied Felicity’s face, unsure where her animosity for Sara came from. The two had never met and she knew the same things about Sara as Oliver did. Oliver puzzled over it until he blurted out, “Felicity, you’re jealous of her.”

“Jealous?” Felicity was as confused as Oliver had been fifteen seconds ago. “Why would I be jealous of Sara?”

“She’s always the topic of conversation,” Oliver said as he ticked off a finger. He ticked a second finger as he said, “We all can’t wait for her to arrive.”

“Ha.”

“And,” Oliver ticked another finger, “you’re worried when Sara does arrive, she’ll steal all the attention.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Felicity said, with what sounded like fake laughter. She sat back and crossed her arms. “At this point, I wonder if she’ll ever visit. But not all of us are as narcissistic as you. If she ever does arrive, I’ll be happy for John and Lyla.”

“I’m not narcissistic. I can’t wait for Sara to arrive. She sounds fascinating.”

Felicity rolled her eyes and turned away from Oliver to join Moira and Thea’s gossiping, signaling the end of their conversation. Oliver smirked as he sat up. He knew jealousy when he saw it, and Felicity was jealous. Even though Felicity didn’t have any reason to be jealous of Sara. Felicity wasn’t in danger of anyone forgetting her or preferring Sara over Felicity. But, as Oliver had seen many times with women who threw themselves at him, jealousy was rarely rational.

The Diggles re-entered the dining room with two plates of pumpkin pie in each of their hands. Oliver could barely fit anymore wine in his stomach, let alone food. Yet, Oliver knew that wouldn’t stop him from devouring Digg’s homemade pumpkin pie. There was a reason Digg became a professional baker, and damn if a full stomach was going to stop Oliver from consuming the piece owed to him. He didn’t lose his bodyguard and best friend for nothing.
After dinner, the party moved to the living room with coffee. Oliver headed towards a turkey and wine coma and was glad he had a car and driver waiting for him. Isabel sat next to him and seemed to crowd him, as she pressed her side into his. Oliver would have moved to give her more space, but then he would have been sitting in Roy’s lap. And as much as he approved of and liked Roy, they weren’t that close.

“Oliver,” Isabel said as she placed her hand on his knee. “I’m worried about Barry.”

“Me too,” Oliver replied quickly. He was happy and relieved to hear about her concern for Barry. “Do you want to call him to see how he’s doing?”

“I don’t want to wake the boy up.”

Certain Oliver could convince Isabel, and wanting to encourage the affection the two felt for each other, Oliver assured, “I’m know he wouldn’t mind hearing from you.”

“I’m worried about you,” Isabel said, ignoring what Oliver had said. “You’ve been spending a lot of time with Barry. Have you been feeling sick?”

“No, I’m fine. Barry is pretty miserable though.” Frustration seeped into Oliver’s voice. Why was she ignoring Barry? Isabel had been clear she liked Barry, but now she couldn’t spare two minutes to talk to the poor kid.

“More reason to stay away from him. We can’t have the CEO of QC getting sick. Investors would be concerned, maybe even worried, if you got sick not even a year at your position.”

“I’m not getting sick, thank you for your concern.”

Oliver realized Isabel’s hand was still on his knee, or rather, it had inched up his thigh. He gently, as to not cause offense, took her hand and placed it in her lap. He then turned to the others in the room and saw his mother looking out the window with a ghastly white complexion.

“Mom?” Oliver asked. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s snowing,” Moira said as she turned back to face him.

“And?”

“She’s worried the roads will be too slick to drive on,” Thea answered and gave Oliver a look telling him to fix it.

“It doesn’t look too bad yet,” Roy said. “I’ll go out and check the street.”

Roy stood up and grabbed his coat from the closet in the hallway. When he opened the door a cold gust of wind entered the house and swept across the living room bringing a chill with it. Oliver saw both Thea and Felicity shiver as their dresses didn’t provide much warmth. Isabel glued herself to Oliver’s back. Oliver tried to take a calming breath.

Moira still had a worried look on her face.

“It’ll be alright,” Digg said. “If it comes down to it, everyone can stay here.”

“Johnny,” Lyla said, “we only have the one guest room.”

“Moira can have that,” Digg replied. “Everyone else can camp out on the floor in here.”
Oliver saw Isabel glanced down on the floor with a look of complete disdain.

Real panic set into her features.

“I can’t go to sleep here. I don’t have my pills. I don’t have my pajamas. What if I have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night?” Moira wrung her hands and Thea sat on the arm of the chair and placed an arm around their mother’s shoulders. Thea made shh’ing noise in an attempt to soothe her. It had little effect. If it had been three years ago Moira might have thought about scratchy 200 thread count sheets, compared to her silk sheets, but that was before her stroke. “And Christmas day can’t be spent here. We have to be at the manor. The presents are there. And our food. Who will eat our food? And what if the manor gets broken into while we’re gone?”

Oliver stood up and knelt down by Moira. “Mom, I promise everything will be okay. I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll fix everything?”

If only Oliver could. “Yes.”

“Take Felicity with you.” Moira turned to keep an eye on the falling snow through the Diggles’ picture window.

Oliver patted her knee and stood up. He walked over to the door and looked out the sidelight window. Felicity joined him.

“It doesn’t look too bad,” Felicity said in a hushed tone. “Though we should probably go before it gets worse.”

“I agree,” Oliver replied, his finger and thumb rubbing against each other. Why had he thought it’d be a good idea to bring Moira out on Christmas Eve?

“You should call your driver and tell him he can leave the lonely parking lot he is in,” Felicity suggested with a teasing tone.

“You’re hilarious, Smoak,” Oliver replied, unable to hide a small smile. He took his phone out of his pocket and texted both his and his family’s car’s drivers. Felicity smiled brightly, barely containing her laughter.

“You know how much I love to win an argument, Queen,” Felicity said. She pointed to an object outside, “Oh, look at my car. All ready for me to just hop in and go.”

The glare Oliver tried to give Felicity was ineffective in wiping her smile off her face.

Roy came back in and quickly shut the door behind him. He had a smattering of tiny snowflakes at the top of his head and shoulders.

“The roads are fine,” Roy said. “It’s just a dusting.”

With that pronouncement, everybody else stood and walked to the closet for their coats. The group created a bottleneck around Digg and Lyla, as they passed out coats. Oliver overheated in the middle of all the warm bodies. Isabel pushed into him several times, and he had to restrain himself from asking if she thought that would make everyone move faster.

“Thank you all for coming,” Lyla cried out.
“Thank you for having us,” Felicity said over the bodies in between them. “It was a lovely dinner.”

“Oh yes,” Moira said as was helped into her coat by Digg. “It was a lovely evening. But as you understand, we have to leave before we’re stuck here.”

The crowd thinned as the guests slowly made their way outside. Oliver would have felt bad for Digg and Lyla regarding the mass exodus of their party, but he was more concerned that his mother kept calm.

Once Oliver was outside, he walked fast toward the cars. They lined up on the street. Before he reached his family, he heard, “Oliver?”

He turned around and found Isabel stopped on the steps that lead to the house. He stopped and walked back to her.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m afraid I may have drunk a little too much to drive. Especially with the snow.”

Oliver didn’t think he saw Isabel drink much, but, he admitted to himself, he hadn’t been paying much attention to her. She hadn’t acted like herself. He supposed that could be attributed to too much to drink.

“I could ask Felicity if she minds driving you home?”

“No,” Isabel objected a little too quickly and loudly but then caught herself. “I mean, I’d prefer if I could get a ride from you. Your driver hasn’t been drinking at all.”

Oliver hesitated for a second. But then he thought it’d be a perfect opportunity for Oliver to talk up Barry. With her sudden lack of interest in Barry during the evening, Oliver wanted to smooth away any reservations Isabel might have about Barry. “Sure.”

“Thank you, Oliver.”

“I need to make sure my mother is situated before we go.”

“Of course, I’ll wait in the car.”

Isabel walked passed him, brushing her hand across his chest. Oliver had never seen her this drunk before. He walked over to Moira and Felicity. Felicity rationalized to Moira how safe the drive back to the manor would be.

“Mom,” Oliver said, “it’ll be fine.”

“Yes, Felicity has convinced me of that. I will feel more comfortable when we get back to the house.”

“Of course,” Felicity said. “Besides if we wait any longer we will all turn to icicles. Then John and Lyla will have to explain to their neighbors why they have ice sculptures in their driveway, not to mention having to drive around all of us?”

Oliver groaned at her bad joke but laughed anyway, too. Moira scrunched her brows together. “Why are the Diggles getting ice sculptures in their driveway? That’s not very practical.”

“It was a joke, Mom,” Oliver explained. She was really tired if she couldn’t follow a dumb joke. Oliver realized beyond the stress the snow brought, it was too late for Moira to be out.
“Of course, dear.” Moira waved off her confusion.

“You’re coming over tomorrow, right?” Oliver turned and asked Felicity.

“Yes, I’ll come by early afternoon. Give you guys some time for family.”

“You’re welcome any time, dear,” Moira said.

“Thank you. I appreciate it. Still I planned on sleeping in and Thea mentioned waking early to open presents.”

“It’s tradition,” Thea said as she turned when she heard her name. Thea reached for Moira’s hand, and she and Roy helped Moira into the car. “Who can sleep when there are presents to open?”

Felicity shook her head in amusement at the younger woman. “I’m going to go.” She leaned closer to Oliver and whispered, “What is the modern-day equivalent to coal in your stocking? Because if I was a betting person, I’d bet you’ll wake up to that.” She hit him playfully on the chest.

“Ow,” Oliver said with a twinkle in his eyes. Felicity smiled and walked away.

“Goodnight, everybody,” Felicity said to the group as she waved goodbye. A chorus of goodnights followed her. Oliver watched as she got into her car and pulled away.

“Hey, big brother.”

“What?”

“Did I hear Isabel ask for a ride home with you?” Thea asked as she looped her arms in one of his.

“Yes. She said she had too much to drink.”

“Hmm.”

Oliver knew that sound from his late-teenage years of dating and having a younger sister at the same time. He needed to stop her line of thinking before it began. Otherwise Thea had the potential to make the situation disastrous. “Leave it alone.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Thea denied. As she gripped her hands tighter around Oliver’s arm she said, “Although, if I was to say something, I’d say to be careful with her.”

Oliver looked down to see Thea’s stern face. He knew from experience she wasn’t joking around and if he knew what was good for him, Oliver would heed Thea’s warning.

“You think she’s trouble?”

“With a capital T. And r, o, u, b, l, and e.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Oliver.”

“Thea,” Moira called out from inside the car, “we really need to leave now.” Moira reached for her and Thea allowed herself to be pulled toward the door and into the car.

“I’ll see you when I get back from dropping Isabel off at her place,” Oliver ducked his head into their car and announced to his family.
“Fine, fine. Make sure your driver drives slowly. Tell him to be extra careful.” Moira instructed.
“Thea help me with the…the…the…oh, the clicky thing.”

Taking advantage of Thea’s distraction, Oliver walked to his car. Oliver spoke briefly with the driver about the added destination of Isabel’s place and then entered the back of the car.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Oliver’s plans for Barry explode and Barry takes it hard.

The moment Oliver slid into the car, Isabel slid across the leather seat into his body. She pressed nearly every part of her right side into him. Oliver grew more concerned about the amount of alcohol Isabel consumed, because if it had been any other woman Oliver would assume she thought she was drowning and he was her life preserver.

“Oliver,” Isabel breathed into his face.

Oliver paused for two seconds. He stared at her hand trailing down his arm, then removed it with a little more force than earlier in the Diggles’ living room. The car shifted into gear and the driver eased out of the cul de sac slowly.

“Let’s get you buckled up,” Oliver said as he scooted her across the seat and pulled the belt around her tiny, bony frame and clicked the buckle in place. “Safety first, especially with this snow.”

As Oliver went back to his seat, he ignored the pout on Isabel’s face and looked at the small flakes falling outside.

“Oliver,” Isabel said in what sounded to Oliver a variation of her business voice he was sure he hadn’t heard before. “I think it is time to for us to move your image in a new direction.”

“What do you mean?” Oliver asked as he turned back to face her. He assumed business was the last thing on Isabel’s mind.

“As the owner of a nightclub we’ve had your public image be a fun-loving guy who never gets too attached to any of the women around him. Always has a quick smile and a twinkle of mischief in his eye.”

Oliver nodded. He had never liked that boiled down assessment of him. Sure, in his younger days he had fun and partied, but he had built Verdant from the ground up. And he wasn’t the owner in name only. Oliver made the day-to-day decisions for Verdant, along with Sin. But that’s what business owners were supposed to do. If he didn’t know how to do something, he hired someone to do it. But Oliver owned all the decisions made about the club.

At least, Oliver used to before he became CEO of QC.

His increasing workload at QC, not to mention him overseeing the startup of Applied Sciences, made it difficult for him to do what he loved at Verdant.

“But now that you’re the CEO of Queen Consolidated, there are board members to impress, not to mention investors and Wall Street. They like serious. More traditional.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think it’s time for you to settle down.”
Oliver’s eyebrows shot straight up his forehead so fast, stray strands of hair struggled to keep up.
“You mean, like, what? Marriage?”

“Exactly. Marriage will show everyone, the board, investors, public and private, potential partners, even your mother that you are a grown adult. That you are ready to commit. Not only to your wife but to the company and everything that comes with it.”

“That is beyond ridiculous,” Oliver said. Not only was Isabel’s new idea the complete opposite from all of her previous suggestions, Oliver thought it was ludicrous to marry someone solely for his business image needs. He wasn’t naïve enough to believe it never happened. There were times in his childhood he wondered if his parents had entered a similar arrangement. He was assured countless times that wasn’t the case. It took seeing Moira grieve so completely for Robert to silence any doubts Oliver had left.

Oliver was determined to avoid marriage. He was sure if it ever happened, it’d have been caused by stupid lovestruckness which rendered him so dumb, he’d do the unfathomable.

And now Isabel suggested he do just that. For business reasons. Had she lost her mind?

“Did you get enough to eat at dinner?” Oliver asked. “Alcohol on an empty stomach can be dangerous.”

“Oliver, I’m fine,” Isabel said as she flipped her long hair over her shoulder. “I barely had anything to drink. This is a serious proposition.”

Oliver furrowed his brow. “If you didn’t drink much, why did you need a ride back?”

Isabel shied her head away, hiding a blush that never appeared. “I admit, I wanted some time alone with you to discuss this.”

He turned away from her and shook his head. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Oliver tried to sort out all his jumbled thoughts. Grasping for any more information to have this idea make sense, he asked, “Did you have anyone in mind?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I think I would make the perfect wife for you.”

Oliver gaped at Isabel. Words stopped forming in his mind and his lungs forgot how to process air.

“Y-you?” Oliver stuttered.

“Yes, of course.”

If it was possible, Oliver became even more dumbstruck. His face became blank and he was only able to stare at Isabel. The woman had just essentially proposed to him. In the least romantic way ever.

“Oliver, I have a unique, and complete, understanding of your life. I have the pedigree your social standing would require. I can obviously handle the press and they’re inquiries, and their occasional invasions of your privacy. As a couple, we would have the perfect image, allowing us to do anything we wanted. Our marriage wouldn’t be a surprise to anyone. And, on top of all that, we get along. Which is a bonus.”

A high-pitched alarm blared in Oliver’s head. The thought of jumping out of the moving car to escape passed through his brain. The image of Carrie Cutter flashed before his eyes and Oliver wondered if he would have to hire a new bodyguard.
“I don’t love you,” Oliver said as he blinked at Isabel’s recitation of her qualities as if she were interviewing for a job. He guessed she was in a way.

“Please,” Isabel said with a hint of mocking as she turned her head as to dismiss his objection, “Neither of us is naïve enough to believe in love.” She turned back around and saw his downturned face. “But...I’m sure we will. In time, we could come to love, or at the very least greatly admire, each other.”

Oliver turned to press his head against the cold window. He sighed as the cold helped ease the sudden pain in his head. Were they supposed to vow to have and to hold, to admire and to stand pretty next to each other? Isabel’s plan to convince him to marry her had the opposite effect. Oliver silently recommitted himself to the single bachelor life for the next two lifetimes.

“I’m surprised I have to sell you on this idea,” Isabel’s voice took on an irritated tone. “I thought you would understand the financial and social benefits of a union between us. You don’t really believe in true love and fairytales, do you?”

Fuck.

“What about Barry?” Oliver asked as he turned his gaze back to her.

Placing a pause between each word, Isabel asked back, confused, “What about Barry?”

“You and him? As a couple?” He questioned as if he stated the obvious.

Apparently not to Isabel.

Isabel took a moment to stare at Oliver as she ascertained if he was serious. When she realized Oliver was completely serious, she threw her head back and let out a loud, genuine, and, frankly, mean laugh. She laughed so hard tears spilled from her eyes and she had to hold her sides to ease the pain. Oliver glared at her. Her response kicked his pride.

“Barry? And me? Please. What possible advantage would I gain from dating him? He has absolutely no social standing and he’s a child. I need an adult. I need you, someone who can open doors for me. And, you need me.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You were the one who paid me more attention. It was clearly your subtle way of testing the waters. There is no one else who could give you a more secure foothold in QC than me. If you tried to marry anyone else, the board would think you got her pregnant. I mean, there is no other female more constant in your life than me, besides your family. I make the most sense.”

“Isabel,” Oliver said in a commanding voice. “Getting married was your idea, not mine. I will not be getting married. To you or to anyone else. My attention towards you was for Barry’s sake. That is all.”

Oliver had never seen someone look as indignant as Isabel did. Her smile fell away and was soon replaced with a cold look Oliver recognized from all the photos of her on her company’s website. He had never seen it in person before and Oliver wondered if she had made a particular effort to show him a bright and warm side. As he questioned everything he knew about her, Isabel turned away from him mirroring Felicity’s imitation of her earlier, complete with hair flip.

“You have no idea what you’re missing out on. Without me, you’ll be the laughing stock in the business community. You’ll regret this.”
He thought there was a better chance of Digg becoming a ballerina than Oliver regretting saying no to a business-deal marriage with Isabel. He did regret his matchmaking attempt with Isabel and Barry. Barry would look like a puppy who had his chew toy stolen, when Oliver broke the news.

The thought repeated through Oliver’s head. He would have to break the news to Barry. Barry would take it hard.

After pushing and giving multiple assurances to Barry that Isabel and Barry were the perfect match and stating of course she liked him, Oliver had been completely wrong. Barry had trusted and believed Oliver. Oliver couldn’t have been more wrong if he claimed MySpace made a comeback.

The worst of it was Oliver’s error in judgment wasn’t going to cause Oliver any pain, beside the discomfort of sitting with Isabel in silence for the rest of the ride to her place. No, Barry was the one who will feel all the pain. Barry would be the one to pay for Oliver’s mistake.

Oliver was thankful he had decided to make Barry the director of Applied Sciences. Barry would need work to distract him from the pain and embarrassment. And, at the very least, Oliver had gotten Barry away from that Iris person. She would have only complicated this and made Barry more confused. Isabel was right about creating the perfect image, and Barry dating his foster-sister was the worst possible image.

Now was the time for Barry to focus on work. Barry would need Oliver as a friend and mentor. This debacle with Isabel proved to Oliver he hadn’t been very good at either of those. That was going to change. Oliver would make up for his error in judgment. No matter how long it took.

The car finally came to a stop. She exited the vehicle and stormed into her place without a glance to Oliver.

Oliver had one thought that irked him more than anything. Felicity had been right.

“Well, maybe she was just testing our relationship,” Barry said in a very nasally voice. He grabbed another tissue and blew his nose. If Oliver hadn’t seen Barry do this, he would have thought an angry goose had honked at an innocent bread-tosser. “And maybe Isabel just wants me to woo her more. I could do that. I can be charming.”

Oliver flinched away at the spray of droplets that came from Barry’s sneeze.

“I’m sorry, Barry,” Oliver said. He tried to comfort Barry with a shoulder pat, but it came out more awkward than he had intended. “Isabel is not who I thought she was. At all. It seemed to me she was just like every other woman who wanted me, only looking for my money and to further her social standing. She was just more adept at deceit.”

“Oh,” Barry said as his face fell. Oliver hoped Barry’s eyes watered from his cold and not from any emotion brought on by being rejected. “I definitely don’t have money or, like, any social standing.”

“Isabel isn’t worth your time. We’ll find someone better.”

“Oliver, I’m not sure I’m ready to open my heart up again. I really thought Isabel liked me. A lot. I guess I just don’t know what I did wrong.”
“I told you,” Oliver said. “It wasn’t anything you did. Isabel is the one with messed up priorities.”

“Maybe I should text her, just to let her know I’m thinking of her?”

“No,” Oliver shouted. Barry’s eyes went wide and he gripped his plaid comforter tight. Oliver had to count to ten silently in his head before he continued so he wouldn’t shout. “That’s not a good idea. I think it’d be best if you let her go.”

“But maybe she was just embarrassed and didn’t want to say, in front of you, that she really likes me.”

“Barry, give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Unlock it and give it to me.”

“Okay,” Barry said, uncertain. He slowly took his phone off the table next to the bed, pressed his thumb to the lower button, and handed it to Oliver, all the while watching Oliver wearily. “Why?”

Oliver didn’t bother to answer. He went to Barry’s contacts and deleted Isabel’s contact information from Barry’s phone. “Now you won’t be able to contact her.”

Barry took his phone back from Oliver’s held out hand. After some scrolling, Barry asked, “Why did you delete her number?” He then proceeded to have a coughing fit.

“I’m sorry, Barry,” Oliver said after Barry took a sip of water. “This will be better for you.”

Barry’s face went from blinding hope to crushing heartache in two seconds. Barry nodded and laid back down on the bed.

“Barry don’t be so gloomy. She wasn’t what you needed.”

“You’re right, Oliver. Thank you for telling me yourself. And everything else you have done for me. I mean the job, getting me comfortable in Starling City, introducing me to everybody. You’re a good friend.”

“Barry,” Oliver said as he tried to not let the guilt set in. Though Oliver was usually good at not taking any responsibility for other people’s feelings, it was different this time. He rubbed his thumb and finger together. After clearing his throat, Oliver managed to say, “I’m sorry I ever tried to connect you two in the first place.”

“That was actually really nice of you. Only you would think I had a shot with someone like Isabel,” Barry said as he scooted down further on his bed. “I just don’t know what to do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I…” Barry started and then took a moment to organize his thoughts. “I’m not sure I can go back to Starling City. Everything there would remind me of Isabel.”

Annoyance ran through Oliver. He wasn’t aware how dramatic Barry could be. He stood up to prevent himself from expressing his irritation out loud. Oliver caused this and he had to fix it. “You just have to make new memories there, without her,” Oliver said as he paced the tiny bedroom. “You can’t let her disrupt any plans we have made for you. You can’t give her that much power.”

“Oliver, I appreciate that. But I-I just don’t think I’ll be able to see her and, oh God,” Barry’s eyes
got wide and his voice squeaked louder, “work with her all the time.” He shook his head from side to side on his pillow. “I won’t be able to handle it. How would I be able to look her in the eye and not think of how much I like her and how humiliated I am? And how much I still want to be with her? She must think I’m an idiot.”

Barry blew his nose and his face became redder. Oliver took a breath and stopped at the window that looked out to a tiny yard and alley. Kids yelled and kicked a ball back and forth amongst each other in the alley. Somewhere close by a siren blared.

He had put so much work into Barry. And not just with Isabel. Oliver had hired him for the Director of Applied Sciences. Introduced Barry to his best friends and asked his friends to accept Barry into their group. Oliver got Barry’s name out there to the public. Made connections for Barry. Oliver was making Barry’s life better and Barry was going to throw it all away because of this one setback.

Barry got rejected by one woman and he spiraled. Oliver knew Barry couldn’t give up on everything. Clearly Oliver had way more work to do with Barry than Oliver initially thought if this was Barry’s reaction to one little disappointment. Oliver couldn’t allow it.

“What would you do, if you quit Applied Sciences?” Oliver asked. “I don’t think Harrison Wells will take you back to Star Labs after you quit without notice.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Barry said. “I can find something else though.”

“What? Work a drive-thru at a fast food place?”

“People there work hard.”

“Yes, Barry they do,” Oliver sighed. “But I don’t think many of them are as close as you are to getting their Master’s degree and weren’t just the director of an entire division at a multibillion-dollar company.”

“Probably not.”

“You have more potential than that. Don’t let Isabel force you into a position,” Oliver said, his voice increased in volume and passion the more he spoke, “hell, a life, that’s below you.”

“You think I shouldn’t just stay here in Central City?”

“No. You need to show her you are a catch and how big of a mistake she made. Prove her wrong.”

“Do you think if I stay at Applied Sciences and Starling City, Isabel would reconsider?” Barry asked, his voice meek. “You know, about her and I dating?”

Oliver blew out a breath. Isabel had made it pretty clear she would never entertain the idea of her and Barry as a couple. On the other hand, Barry seemed to need a bit more of a push to not thwart all of Oliver’s plans by giving up on them. Though Oliver had promised himself he wouldn’t interfere in Barry’s love life again.

“Barry,” Oliver started slowly, “I think success is its own reward. But also, the best revenge. Make her sorry she ever thought she was better than you.”

“It still requires seeing her. A lot.”

Why couldn’t Barry just move on? It wasn’t as if there weren’t any other woman to choose from. And they hadn’t even been on one date.
“You shouldn’t have to see her often,” Oliver lied. “Applied Sciences won’t need much PR help.” The new division in QC would absolutely require a mountain of PR work. Isabel was key to getting investors excited about Applied Sciences. “The work will speak for itself.” Barry nearly bit his lip off and he rubbed his dry hands raw. “How about this? You try it out for a couple of weeks. See how it goes. See how much you really will see Isabel, and how bad it is when you do. What do you say?”

Oliver could keep Isabel away from Barry for two weeks. Applied Sciences could hold off planning its public events for a short amount of time. QC, in general, didn’t have anything that needed marketing in the near future. If Isabel was needed, Oliver would be there to keep her and Barry apart. And worst case scenario, any interactions between Barry and Isabel could be intervened by Oliver and kept short.

Barry sneezed three times in succession. He reached for a tissue and blew his nose loudly. The tissues clearly didn’t have any lotion in them, given the redness and peeling of Barry’s nose.

Finally, Barry took a deep breath and said, “Okay. Two weeks. But I’m not making any promises.”

“Great,” Oliver said. He felt glad he had more time to persuade Barry to stay. “You’re not going to regret this, Barry. In fact, I think you’re going to look back and see this is the best decision of your life.”

“There you are,” Felicity says as she entered the Queen’s sitting room. “I’ve been texting you for a day and a half and you haven’t responded.”

“Sorry,” Oliver said. For once he told the truth when he protested, “I was working.”

“QC work or Verdant work?” Felicity asked as she sat across from him.

“Uh, both,” Oliver responded, not looking at her. It was noon and the breakfast tray remained out. Oliver wondered when the staff would take it into the kitchen when he remembered the staff was bare bones because of the holidays. Oliver should probably do it himself, but then thought better of it. He wouldn’t want to offend the staff by doing their work for them. They may think their jobs were in danger.

“Oliver, I don’t believe you.”

“I was actually working.”

“Yes, you may very well have been working,” Felicity said, conceding the point. Or so Oliver thought. “But you have not been working so much that you couldn’t have responded to one of my texts. You aren’t known for working long hours, especially around the holidays. I mean you aren’t in either of your offices now. I know you can work from home, but we both know you hate that. And you’re never productive when you try it. I mean, you once had a pool party with a couple models while you ‘worked’ on the QC annual report. Not surprisingly, Moira made Walter drag you back to the QC offices to get the report completed before the board started looking for a new heir to the kingdom. Or Queendom.”

“Felicity,” Oliver interrupted her babble. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to hear what her point was, but Oliver knew Felicity would eventually find where she was headed. And if Oliver didn’t stop her, she was likely to insult him even more. Though Felicity would say it wasn’t insulting him if it was the truth.

“Right. So I’m guessing the thing you’re hiding from me is the real reason why Isabel went on
sudden and unplanned vacation. Right before New Year’s. Which is one of her busiest holidays as a publicist. Or so she has told me. Numerous times. When she has tried to tell me the importance of her job.”

“I don’t know why Isabel left.” Oliver worked to keep his tone neutral.

“Really?” Felicity narrowed her eyes and studied his face; her skepticism showed clearly.

Oliver nodded and hoped his anxiousness didn’t show. The key to lying, especially to Felicity, was to keep the lie simple. If he didn’t go into details, Felicity couldn’t surprise him with one more nugget of information she had that contradicted his lie.

“You’ve never been able to lie to me successfully. You know that, right?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

Felicity shook her head in irritation and let out a loud sigh. Oliver crossed his legs then did his best not to fidget in his seat anymore. Being cross-examined by Felicity Smoak was one of the most uncomfortable positions to be in, and Oliver actively avoided it. Though, occasionally, he accidentally stumbled onto the witness stand staring her down. Oliver had learned the hard way Felicity never blinked.

“Oliver, I think Isabel left because of you. Specifically, I think she left because of your scheme involving her and Barry Allen.”

“I just got an email from her saying she was taking a spontaneous vacation,” Oliver said, which wasn’t a lie. He received Isabel’s email last night. He was relieved as it did his job keeping Isabel and Barry apart for him. Oliver determined not to back down from Felicity. He did not want to be embarrassed by his actions, or let Felicity know she was right. She would add the moment to her rolodex of moments she would dig out sometime in the future to prove a point. “That’s all I know.”

Felicity stared hard at Oliver. The instinct to squirm came back with an intensity he never felt before. Oliver was sure he was sweating from the effort to not scoot around on his seat, rub his finger and thumb together, or bite his lip.

“Fine,” Felicity said and took a breath and looked away. “I’ll drop it.”

Felicity’s tone told Oliver she didn’t believe him. He should be worried she saw through him so completely, but he was relieved to escape the harsh light of her interrogation. Oliver settled more comfortably in his chair and breathed normally again.

Felicity looked back at him and Oliver saw the questions still forming in her head. She bit her lip to keep the questions from tumbling out. Oliver knew in the battle between Felicity and her babbling, her babbling usually won. He didn’t want to give up his reprieve from her theories so he jumped to the first topic in his head to distract her.

“Did you hear Sara had to postpone her trip here?”

Felicity blinked at the abrupt subject change. “Again?” Felicity asked. Her lips turned down and the crease between her eyebrows formed.

“She’s unpredictable,” Oliver defended with a shrug of his shoulders.

Oliver heard Felicity mutter, “Or unreliable.”
“You know her sister.”

“I’ve only heard stories about Laurel. I’ve never actually met her.”

“I haven’t either,” Oliver said. “From what I heard her marriage is anything but happy.” Whenever Oliver thought of any married man in a circumstance like Tommy Merlyn’s, Oliver became more secure in his decision to never marry. Oliver knew any long-term relationship would suffocate him, just like it probably did to Tommy. “The state of their marriage and Laurel’s addiction keeps Sara at her sister’s side. I thought you’d appreciate Sara’s devotion to her sister.”

“That’s not what I take issue with,” Felicity said as she crossed her arms across her chest.

“What is then?” Oliver asked, a smirk crossing his face as he crossed his own arms. Felicity rarely disliked people, especially those she hadn’t met. She constantly lectured Oliver about ‘giving everybody a chance’ and ‘not judging a book by its cover.’

“You know I don’t think it’s kind to keep promising John to visit and then never showing up.”

“She’s not doing it on purpose. Her sister needs her, Felicity.”

“I know. But she couldn’t even show up to John and Lyla’s wedding? You know that would have meant the world to them to have her there. And the longer it takes her to visit, the more hurt they are.”

Oliver couldn’t deny Digg’s looks of hurt and disappointment at Sara’s continued delayed visit. The look of hurt on Digg’s face when he told Oliver Sara hadn’t made it to the wedding flashed in Oliver’s head. Another flash of Digg’s pained face when he told Oliver Sara wasn’t making it for Christmas. Oliver didn’t have to understand the depth of the bond the army caused between Digg, Lyla, and Sara to know it was there. He just hoped the bond was as strong for Sara as it was for the Diggles.

“I’m sure Sara is doing all she can to get here,” Oliver said. “My guess is she’ll be here before the end of the month.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I will be. And she’s going to liven up the place and finally make things interesting. I can’t wait to meet her.”

Felicity groaned. She never did approve of Oliver’s more extreme antics. She had told him when he got bored, she was certain he went searching in dark alleyways and people’s secret closets for a bit of excitement. Only Felicity described it as a bit of fun that always turned into a big barbed wire ball of trouble. But no harm had ever come to anyone, so Oliver knew his fun was never anything too dangerous. He just needed something to chase away the stillness that occasionally seeped into his life.

Oliver couldn’t help but smile at the thought of when Sara did come into town. There wouldn’t be any stillness. By the frown on Felicity’s face, Oliver could see she thought the same thing.
Oliver took a large sip of his black coffee. He looked back down at his watch for the tenth time that morning, 9:28. Barry was officially late for their 9:00 meeting. Again.

Having chronic tardiness syndrome himself, Oliver gave others more time to arrive to meetings than others usually did. But a half-hour, for the usually punctual director, meant Barry wasn’t showing up.

They had been going over resumes of scientists, chemical engineers, physicists, mechanical engineers, tech experts, and lab assistants to determine who QC should hire for Applied Sciences. The last three days they had been weeding out the impostors, inexperienced, and, in two cases, the white-collared criminals from their application pool. But the process went very slow. Or, rather, Barry was very slow. He had difficulty concentrating and making decisions.

Oliver blamed Isabel.

Ever since Isabel had so ruthlessly broken Barry’s heart, Barry hadn’t been himself. He was mopey, depressed, and lacked any kind of focus. The chipper, excited, and determined-to-prove-himself kid had disappeared. Barry also developed a tendency to forget meetings. In fact, Barry had forgotten every meeting with Oliver this week regarding hiring more staff for Applied Sciences.

Calling Barry after he had forgotten a meeting hadn’t proven to help Barry’s memory for future meetings. Today Oliver decided to go down to Barry’s temporary office. Oliver hoped that would jolt Barry enough, having the CEO search for him.

Oliver took long strides once out of the elevator towards Barry’s temporary office. He considered knocking for half a second, but then realized he was the CEO and owned a large percent of the company, with proxy power of his mother’s percent. Plus Oliver’s goal was to surprise Barry.

As he turned around the hallway, Oliver found Barry’s office door open. Peeking in, Oliver saw the barren wasteland masquerading as Barry’s office. Barry had empty book shelves, no photos up, no art QC provided to mid and higher level management, not even a plant. Oliver hoped it was because it was a temporary office, but the Applied Sciences building still had five months remaining to its projected complete date.

In the corner, with his back to the door, Barry was on his phone. His hair stood up in all directions, and Oliver could tell from the door his clothes were wrinkled.

So much for the hard worker Oliver hired.

Oliver admonished himself when he realized that was unfair. Barry was just in a funk. And Barry wouldn’t be in a funk if it weren’t for Oliver’s plan to get Barry and Isabel together. Though Oliver still didn’t get Barry’s extended depression.

Oliver had never been this out of it because of a woman.
And, God willing, he never would be. Oliver admitted he thought this degree of reaction from Barry was extreme. Isabel and Barry hadn’t even kissed. Sure they shared some “intense conversations,” per Barry, but that wasn’t enough for Barry to start writing Blues songs.

But Oliver had caused this. He had to deal with it.

“Barry,” Oliver said in a booming voice when he stood across the desk from Barry. It had the desired effect. Barry jumped out of his chair and dropped his phone.

“Shit,” Barry said as he put a hand over his heart and bent to pick up the phone. Barry looked over his phone and pushed some buttons. Once he was satisfied it wasn’t broken, Barry looked up at Oliver. “Oliver. What-what are you doing here?”

“Because you’re not in my office.”

“Why would I be in your office?” Barry asked with a furrowed brow.

“We still have resumes to go over, Barry.” Oliver couldn’t help his exasperation.

“Oh, right,” Barry said as he sat back down. His voice went back to his now normal mopey tone.

“Is there a reason why you don’t like going through them, besides it being extremely boring?”

“No, it’s not boring. I just…well…um,” Barry stumbled, rubbing his neck, which flushed along with his face.

“What?” Oliver asked, annoyed.

“I…I read some, well most, of those resumes, and they are…they’re so much more qualified than me.” Barry kept his eyes down and picked at a hole in his keyboard’s wrist guard with his thumb.

“So? You have the position, Barry. I’m not looking to replace you.”

“Tha-that’s nice to hear. But,” Barry took a deep breath, “how am I supposed to manage them when they know so much more than I do?”

“A good manager learns as much from his employees as they learn from him. And you’ll delegate most of the boring science work anyway. You’ll do fantastic.”

“You think?”

“Of course,” Oliver said. “Now, let’s go upstairs to my office and narrow down the resumes to people we want to interview.”

“Oh…okay,” Barry said.

Oliver turned to walk out of the office but stopped when he noticed Barry still sat back to a hunched position. Apparently, Oliver’s pep talk hadn’t been sufficient.

Oliver took a breath to try to gain more patience. It seemed Barry wasn’t ready for boring paperwork. On the other hand, candidates need to be selected. And soon. Oliver didn’t have one iota of a clue if the applicants were qualified or not. That’s why he needed Barry. But maybe there was someone else that could help them and provide a distraction for Barry. Oliver just wondered if he was desperate enough. Looking back at Barry, Oliver realized, yes, he was just that desperate.

“I have an idea,” Oliver said, almost instantly regretting his decision. “How about I run up and grab
the resumes and meet you in Cisco’s office. It’s be good to get his opinion too.”

“Cisco’s office?”

“Yeah, I don’t think we’ll get him up to mine and away from his toys,” Oliver lied. Oliver wasn’t sure he would ever be able to get Cisco to stop talking long enough to get Cisco out of Oliver’s office. This way Oliver could just leave when the job was done and Cisco rambled on.

“That sounds good,” Barry said, looking a sliver better. He nodded and stood up.

“Great, I’ll meet in two minutes.”

Oliver hoped Barry appreciated all Oliver was doing for Barry. Voluntarily meeting with Cisco was top on Oliver’s list of things Oliver thought he’d never do; followed by getting married and swimming with blood-thirsty Great White sharks. Oliver lamented his obligation to be CEO.

Once inside Cisco’s office, he could hear Cisco going on about some thing’s radioactive properties in Cisco’s normal rapid speech. Oliver could feel the headache coming on from what Oliver knew would be a long day.

Attempting to take control of the meeting, Oliver spoke out, “Barry, Cisco, are you ready to look these resumes over?”

Cisco’s head popped out from behind the metal shelf that shielded his desk, “Hey, Mr. Queen. We’re back here.”

Oliver walked back to Cisco’s desk and saw Barry sitting down. Oliver was thankful Barry looked more animated than earlier. He grudgingly admitted spending time with Cisco might be worth it.

“I’m thrilled to be asked my advice for the Applied Sciences positions. I’ve never helped hire anyone. This is going to be fun. Though, maybe not so much when we have to give no’s. Maybe we could write thank you notes for applying and say what we liked about them?”

“We have hundreds of applicants for each position, meaning we have thousands of applicants.”

“So, no to the thank you notes?” Cisco said.

Oliver sighed. “If we contacted each applicant, we would never be done with this process because we will be constantly receiving new resumes.”

“Sure, that makes sense,” Cisco said. “I just hated when I applied for a position and never heard anything back. What if we generated a generic thanks for applying, better luck next time form letter that automatically emailed the losing candidates once we clicked in the job search database we were no longer considering them?”

“If you want to write the form letter, get it approved by legal and HR, consult with Felicity for adding the algorithm to the job database program, and not fall behind on your day-to-day tasks and special projects, sure.” Oliver sighed with impatience. He was not enthused by the idea and hoped to dissuade Cisco from it.

“Great!” Cisco said. “Now all I have to think about is how I would like to be let down gently after not being hired.”
“Later,” Oliver said, his annoyance leaking out in his curt tone. “Right now, we have to go through all these.” He plopped down several folders filled with hundreds of resumes. The thunk they made against the desk satisfied Oliver. It seemed like a very busy boss type thing to do. Something he did as a kid when he played pretend.

“Wow that is a lot. Why are these printed? It would save a lot of paper if we just looked at the electronic copy. The world isn’t going to save itself.”

“It makes it easier for me to look at them and share them. With you two,” Oliver said, in a stern enough voice that would make Cisco stop questioning him.

“Oh, good thing recycling is a thing, right?” Cisco elbowed Barry and laughed at his own joke. Barry gave Cisco a closed smile.

Oliver rubbed his eyes and prayed for an earthquake to take him away.

After three hours and thirteen minutes of looking over the resumes. Cisco giving some surprising insight, Barry just agreeing with Cisco, and Oliver deciding if QC could afford the approved candidates; Oliver’s eyes watered and the papers became blurry. Despite the information Cisco provided, that didn’t stop him from going on tangents. Though they had gotten through the remaining resumes, which Oliver hadn’t foreseen given the pace he and Barry had in the previous days.

“Yeah, this one is a hard no,” Cisco said. “He thinks he can just get by on his family’s money and his Ivy League education. But look at his grades. I bet he hardly went to class. Does he really think that works for people?”

“It worked for me,” Oliver deadpanned.

“Right,” Cisco said, “but you actually know what you’re doing. This guy probably doesn’t even know which solutions should be kept separate to avoid an explosive reaction.”

“Okay,” Oliver said. He didn’t know what to do with Cisco’s compliment, so he just ignored it. It wasn’t true and though Oliver usually didn’t mind people sucking up to him at the club, at QC it annoyed him. If he wasn’t faking his way through the CEO position, and praying he wasn’t screwing the entire company over, Oliver might think he deserved the praise.

Oliver sat back and stretched his arms over his head, which gave Cisco a pause in conversation to bring up a new topic.

“Did you two hear the news about Isabel?” Cisco said.

Oliver almost hit his own head against the wall. Fucking Cisco! This was supposed to distract Barry’s thoughts away from Isabel. He didn’t need any reminders. Any good Cisco had done was now completely erased.

“What?” Barry asked. Barry was a dog perking its ears up when the word treat was said.

“Have you been following her Instagram feed?”

“I only follow family and close friends,” Oliver said.

“So, like four or five people?” Cisco asked. “Mrs. Queen doesn’t have an account. Your sister and her husband do. Then there’s Felicity and Mr. Diggle and possibly Mrs. Diggle.”
“Lyla didn’t change her last name and as far as I know she doesn’t have Instagram,” Oliver responded gruffly. “Barry and I should go.”

Oliver leaned forward in his chair and about to stand up when Cisco protested, “But I didn’t tell you about Isabel. I’m surprised you don’t already know. The whole office is talking about it. At least in the break room on the thirty-third floor, where all the good candy is. Isabel is all they are talking about. Everyone seemed jealous.

“Sherry from Accounts Receivable didn’t have very flattering things to say about her, but she wasn’t as bad as what--you know what? I probably shouldn’t say who was worse. I mean the guy is a grade-A jerk, but I don’t want to talk bad about my coworkers, especially if it could be considered slander.”

“Cisco,” Oliver shouted.

“Right, to the point, sorry,” Cisco replied as he swiped the air in front of him with his hand as if he was clearing his brain. He leaned towards Barry and Oliver and whispered, “Isabel is on vacation.”

“I know,” Oliver mockingly whispered back, “she requested the time off.” She hadn’t technically requested the time off. Her text was a demand. And she hadn’t responded to his text asking how long she planned to take off. Technically she was an independent contractor and didn’t need to ask for vacations, but she should have given more notice. Oliver would be looking for a new PR consultant if he wasn’t busy helping Barry hire his entire team. Plus, he wasn’t sure if he fired Isabel she would honor her confidentiality agreement and keep the Queen family secrets she knew to herself. The money she could get might be too much for Isabel to resist.

“Well,” Cisco continued, undeterred by Oliver’s sarcasm, “her Instagram feed is filled with pictures of her on the beach. She doesn’t say where she is, but I’m reasonably sure she’s in the Caribbean.”

“Oh,” Barry managed to say.

“Here, take a look,” Cisco said. He pulled out his phone from his back pocket and quickly opened up Instagram and Isabel’s feed. Cisco stepped up to Oliver’s side and Barry drifted over to Oliver’s other side. Cisco held the phone out so all three could see, and scrolled through the pictures.

“Here are her feet with the beach in the background. Typical and cliché type shot, but whatever, she’s on vacation, right? Here’s a shot of her in a bikini. Her, in a bikini, with someone, whom I call Mr. Tiny Nipples. A shot of her fruity drink. Boring sunset. Isabel with, let’s say Mr. My-Speedo-Is-Two-Sizes-Too-Small-So-As-To-Impress-The-Ladies. Swimming with a Mr. Patchy Stubble. Her feet and the beach again. Another one with her and Mr. Big Boobs.”

Barry leaned on Oliver’s arm to get a better look and his face fell. Oliver felt claustrophobic with the two guys squeezing in around him. Oliver looked up to the ceiling, not interested in seeing Isabel’s obvious attempt to flaunt her single life.

“I do wonder if she can rent all these different men from her hotel. There sure seems to be an abundance of them.”

“There’s so many, you can’t help but think some of them are gay?” Barry asked in a timid voice.

“Mr. Hairy-Chest isn’t,” Cisco said with a laugh. “Not with the way he’s looking at her ass.”

“It’s time for us to go,” Oliver said as he pulled out of the huddle. Barry didn’t need to be exposed to nearly naked images of Isabel with men who had at least fifty pounds of muscle on Barry.
“Oh! I can’t believe I didn’t tell you,” Cisco said as he practically jumped in the air. “I have news about Nyssa!”

Oliver was so sick of hearing about Nyssa from him. Didn’t he have anyone or anything else to talk about? And on top of everything Cisco said, the last thing Oliver wanted to do was pretend he was interested in the latest adventures, or non-adventures as they were, Nyssa had been on.

“She’s in town!”

“In Starling City?” Oliver asked.

“Yes!”

“Is the rest of her family with her?” Oliver asked. “Her father, sister, and what’s his name?”

“Bruce. Wayne. Talia, Nyssa’s sister, is married to Bruce Wayne. I’m surprised you forgot his name, you two have so much in common.”

Oliver grunted.

“And no. Ra’s, Nyssa’s father, is on an extended visit to see Talia and Bruce.”

That was interesting. Was Nyssa’s idyllic life not so idyllic? “Nyssa didn’t go with him?”

“No. She and her sister don’t get along well. Especially since Talia got married. Apparently, it’s better for all involved if they don’t see each other much. So, she’s staying with me.”

The situation seemed far more complicated than it needed to be. Oliver wasn’t sure if Cisco played the situation up for dramatic effect or if Nyssa had become interesting. “Why doesn’t she just stay at her father’s house by herself?”

“She doesn’t do well when she’s alone. Since she came back from the war, it’s difficult for her to cope. But I think the change in scenery will help her. And since we’ve become friends, I like to think I can help her, too.”

Oliver was curious about what happened between Nyssa and Talia. There had to be a rift between Nyssa and her sister. But what caused it?

“Doesn’t Nyssa like Bruce?” Oliver asked, trying to dissect the Ratko family dynamic.

“Actually,” Cisco said, thrilled to have an engaged audience member, “Nyssa and Bruce get along just fine. He’s the one person Nyssa likes in her family. He actually saved her once.”

“Really? How?”

“Yeah, but Nyssa didn’t give me any details. Just said Bruce had been brave when he saved her life.”

Oliver’s mind wondered for all of two seconds and then jumped to the conclusion Nyssa and Bruce had an affair and Talia had caught them. It would have to be after the wedding or Talia wouldn’t have married him. Unless Talia wanted to make sure Bruce would never completely be Nyssa’s. Bruce saving Nyssa would have only deepened their bond to one another. Nyssa’s perfect image cracked and Oliver smiled.

He shook his head to clear it of thoughts of Nyssa and what secrets she may be keeping. Oliver noticed Barry was sitting down and looking mournfully at the floor. Right, Oliver was back at square
one of cheering up Barry. Thanks, Cisco.

“Cisco, thanks for your help,” Oliver said as sincerely as he could manage. “We need to get going now.”

“Really?” Cisco said. “Mr. Steele sent me an email saying I should update you on Project Zata? And Project C3C5? And I had another idea for a project. I’m thinking of calling it Project Zoom.”

Didn’t this guy ever sleep? “It’ll have to be later. Barry and I have other meetings we have to attend.”

“Of course. I can just email you about those projects.”

“Great,” Oliver responded as he nudged Barry up and out of the chair. Barry didn’t make a move towards the door, so Oliver steered him that way.

“Bye, I’ll talk to you guys later,” Cisco said to their retreating backs.

Once they were out of Cisco’s office and into the brighter hallway, Oliver said, “Come on. Let’s go somewhere to drown your sorrows.”

“It’s lunch time.”

“Apparently, the universe doesn’t care what time it is. You need a drink.”

They walked to the elevator in silence, both processing all the information Cisco had given them. As they waited for one of the elevators, Barry’s phone chirped. He took it out and read a text that flashed on his phone’s screen. A small smile tugged at Barry’s lips. Oliver’s curiosity piqued.

“What’s up?” Oliver asked.

“Oh…um,” Barry said. “It’s just a text from Joe.”

“Your foster dad?” Barry’s foster sister’s dad. Iris’ dad. Oliver withheld the groan he wanted to make.

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?” Oliver leaned towards Barry’s phone. He was torn. He couldn’t decide if communication from the foster dad was a good thing or not. Barry smiled but it could ultimately lead to public humiliation for the kid. And Oliver.

“He wants to have dinner tonight.” Barry bounced on his feet and the tone of his voice was lighter than it had been for days.

“Sounds like you want to go.”

“I do.”

“Won’t it be awkward with Iris there?” Oliver asked as he attempted to throw a tiny wrench in the plans. He put his hand on Barry’s upper arm.

“Um…she probably won’t be there,” Barry answered. “She has her own apartment now and busy with work.”

“In that case,” Oliver said as he straightened up, “I think you should go.”
“You do?”

“You clearly want to go. Joe obviously means a lot to you.”

“He does. You don’t mind?” Barry asked. “I know we were going to get drinks. And it’s the middle of the work day, but I’d have to leave now if I want to make it to Central City in time for a late dinner.”

“Go,” Oliver said as the elevator doors opened. “Work will keep. You seem like you need it.”

“Thank you, Oliver. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

Barry ran into the elevator and nearly crashed as he slipped on the floor. He caught himself on the bar, and turned back to Oliver and smiled.

“Have a great time, Barry. Say hi to this Joe person,” Oliver said and put his hand up in a wave goodbye.

“I will. Thank you so much. You’re the best.”

The elevator doors closed and Oliver smiled to himself, relieved he finally made Barry happy. He pushed the up button as he would take a detour to his office before leaving. He had worked a full half-day, had gone through several Applied Sciences candidates, and had worked hard to cheer up Barry. He deserved to take the rest of the day off.

Gladys would give Oliver one of her disapproving looks, but that wouldn’t stop him.

A bell jingled, and a blast of warm air that smelled of bread and sugar greeted Oliver as he opened the door to Kick Ass Bakery. He stomped off the snow built up on his shoes and brushed his hair and shoulders of snowflakes.

“Hey, man,” Digg greeted Oliver.

“Hey,” Oliver held his hand up.

Oliver nodded at the customer at the counter in the corner of an “L” the display cases made. He stood back to allow Digg to complete her transaction. She was tall with dark long hair. There was something familiar about her and Oliver tried to place her. Oliver figured she reminded him of an actress or model. Hopefully not an actress or model he had slept with because those encounters were awkward and he didn’t want to have to endure that with Digg watching. Again.

“Oliver, come on over,” Digg said and beckoned him over with his arm, his bicep on full display in a short sleeve tee shirt and an apron, which only protected half of Digg’s shirt.

“Did your house survive all of your guests?” Oliver asked.

“I just now got all the Christmas decorations down,” Diggle said. “I’m sorry everyone had to leave early.”

“Me too. You know how my mother can get though.” Oliver kept his response vague as he glanced over at the woman.
“I do,” Digg said and then gave Oliver a stern look. “Felicity told me something happened with you and Isabel and Barry?”

Oliver sighed. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“How’s Barry?”

“He’s not sick anymore.”

“Heartbroken?”

“A bit,” Oliver conceded because it was Digg asking and not Felicity. “I’m sure he’ll be over it soon.”

“Anything I can do?”

“If you have any ideas for distractions, let me know.”

“Sure.”

Oliver looked over at the woman who stared at them and not the bakery cases. She wasn’t even attempting to appear as if she wasn’t listening to their conversation.

“Sorry. Where are my manners?” Digg asked. “Let me introduce you to Nyssa Ratko.”

Oliver’s eyebrows shot up and he quickly turned his head to look at Nyssa again. He saw it then. She looked familiar because of the thousands, well hundreds—at least dozens—of pictures Cisco had shown Oliver of Nyssa. He hadn’t expected to meet Nyssa, at least not this soon. He schooled his surprise and assessed her critically. He didn’t see any visible scars, but she was bundled up for the cold front Starling City was experiencing. When she turned to him, she refused to smile, so she was impolite. Her gaze ran up and down him and she seemed bored with him. So far, Oliver couldn’t say he was impressed with her.

It seemed the perfect Nyssa was a snob.

He stepped closer to her. “Nyssa, it’s nice to meet you,” Oliver said and couldn’t help but be proud of the smile he put on. He held his hand out. “Oliver Queen.”

“I know who you are,” Nyssa said. She eyed his hand warily as if she thought Oliver had a bomb strapped to it. After a moment, she shook his hand but dropped it quickly.

“Nyssa is here for a visit,” Digg explained.

“Cisco told me earlier today,” Oliver replied to Digg. He turned to Nyssa and said, “He’s told me a lot about you.”

“Hmm,” Nyssa said.

The phone rang and Digg gave an apology as he ran in the back to answer it.

“So,” Oliver said to fill the silence followed by Digg’s departure.

Nyssa turned away from him and looked at the cakes in the display case behind her. Oliver turned away to face the cookies in another display case. Digg had just a few of his chocolate chip cookies left. Oliver would have to take a couple with him when he left. One indulgence wouldn’t hurt and he’d save the other for Gladys.
Oliver turned back to see Nyssa still faced away from him. He tapped his foot and pulled his phone out to look at the time. There were no new messages or emails. No new Instagram comments. Oliver put his phone back in his coat pocket and looked around again to confirm Nyssa was still in the same spot. He never pictured Nyssa so anti-social.

Finally, Oliver could not bear the silence anymore. “Cisco told me all about how you saved his brother’s life in Afghanistan.”

“I was just doing my job.”

“I think Cisco would disagree with you,” Oliver said with a laugh. “I think I heard him talking once about writing to the State Department to request you get a medal of valor or something like that.”

Nyssa turned back to Oliver with her brow furrowed and said, “Medal of Valors are for public safety officers in the US.”

“Yeah, sure,” Oliver replied. “Cisco talked about whatever medal you get for saving soldiers.”

“I was a combat medic,” Nyssa said. “Like I said, I was just doing my job.”

“Right,” Oliver replied. Nyssa didn’t do anything to help Oliver’s opinion of her. “How do you know Digg?”

Digg walked back to the front of the store and had heard Oliver’s question.

“Nyssa and I ran into each other a few times in Afghanistan,” Digg responded. “Stitched me up a couple of times.”

“Well then, I should thank you for making sure my best friend came back in one piece,” Oliver said, knowing he wasn’t actually thanking her.

“It’s not necessary,” Nyssa said through clenched teeth.

Oliver clearly picked up on the fact she didn’t like to talk about her time in the army, which, he was sure, made conversations with Cisco difficult.

“Once Sara gets here, us soldiers will have to go out for a meal,” Digg offered.

“Oh, Sara rescheduled?”

“Yes,” Digg answered.

Before Digg could give any more details, Nyssa said, “Dinner will be nice.” Her face was more animated than it had been since Oliver walked into the bakery. “Do you expect her soon?”

“Yes, next week,” Digg said. “Well she has had to keep postponing, but I’m sure her next plan to come up will work out.”

“Yes, next week,” Oliver added. “I can’t wait to meet her. All her cancellations just increase my anticipation. I think she does it on purpose.”

“She is very dedicated to her family,” Nyssa said, still facing Digg. She then paused, stood straighter, and added, “Or so I would assume from what you have said, Captain.”

“I thought I told you to call me Digg.”
“Sorry, Captain.”

Nyssa managed a small smile while Digg laughed. Oliver gave a courtesy laugh. The phone rang again, breaking the tension Oliver felt as an outsider.


“Of course,” Nyssa said as she waved off Digg’s apology and Digg went into the back again.

“Cisco said something about your father visiting your sister?”

“Yes,” Nyssa said as she walked across the store to the window to look outside. Since it was the middle of winter, the sun set early and there wasn’t much anyone could see outside.

She did not make the conversation easy and Oliver was running out of small talk. Oliver would appreciate her trying as much as he was. She could at least ask him a question, instead of making Oliver do all the heavy lifting.

“She’s married to Bruce Wayne, right?”

“What?” Nyssa turned to him and looked confused.

“Bruce Wayne is your sister’s husband?” Oliver asked again, slower.

“Yes.”

“You must miss them?”

Nyssa turned back but didn’t reply.

He scrambled for anything else to say to Nyssa. Oliver wasn’t going to let them go back to silence. “Any plans while you’re in Starling City?”

“No really.”

Oliver gave up making conversation but that caused him to rub his thumb and forefinger together. Oliver had never done anything to Nyssa; hell, he had only just met her. But he had the distinct impression she had pre-judged him and nothing would change her mind. It pissed Oliver off. He didn’t deserve to be so harshly criticized by only a few minutes in each other’s company, and perhaps a few stories told by mutual friends. Sure, tabloids put his face on their covers from time to time, but everyone who knew how to Google knew they made up all their stories. Except for the peeing on the cop car story, but Oliver had been young and drunk so that didn’t count.

This assessment of him ensured Oliver he was right about Nyssa from the beginning. She had a holier-than-thou air about her. Oliver knew he would have to avoid her during her trip, which wouldn’t be difficult. She’d be with Cisco most of the time, and Oliver hardly ever talked with Cisco outside of work, let alone socialized.

“You know Sara Lance?” Oliver asked. He figured he might try to get more information on the elusive, and more interesting, friend of Digg’s.

Nyssa turned abruptly around to face him.

“Yes,” Nyssa said, weary.

“You met her in the army?”
“Yes.”

“What’s she like?”

Nyssa was silent as she studied Oliver’s face critically. After an uncomfortable moment, she replied, “She was proficient at the duties assigned to her.”

“Okay, that’s good, especially in a war,” Oliver said. “But what’s she like? Her personality?”

Nyssa opened her mouth but promptly closed it.

“Was she nice to you?”

Nyssa turned back around to face away from Oliver.

Oliver let out a harsh sigh. He had never met someone so rude and he didn’t have to deal with it. He was Oliver Queen. People clamored for his attention.

“Tell Digg I had to go,” Oliver said in an irritated voice. Oliver was sure Felicity would call her a Borg. Lying, Oliver stated robotically, “It was nice meeting you, Nyssa.”

Not expecting a reply, Oliver almost jumped when he heard Nyssa respond, “You too.”

He walked out the door and the bell rang again. The cold attacked him. Oliver wrapped his coat tighter around him, hurried to his car, and nodded to his driver who held the car door open for him.

Oliver would have to text Digg so he would know Oliver couldn’t stay. He wasn’t sure Nyssa could deliver any message as that would require saying more than two words. Oliver didn’t trust her. She was on edge during their entire one-sided conversation as if she had something to hide. He was convinced losing his toes to frostbite would be less painful than talking to Nyssa again. Oliver resolved to do everything in his power to avoid any more conversations with her.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Oliver gets a shock regarding Isabel. Sara may cancel her plans again.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for your kind comments! Enjoy an extra chapter this week.

Oliver nodded at Gladys as he took his itinerary for the day and a cup of coffee from her. She made eye contact with him and walked back to her desk without a word. Oliver wondered if she ever looked happy. This was his newish routine and he preferred the no talking.

That was why Oliver assumed Gladys didn’t tell him Felicity sat in his office, in his chair. Not that Gladys often announced Felicity’s arrival. Oliver didn’t care. He glanced down at his watch and wondered how long Felicity had waited for him.

Hearing his approach, the blonde spun around in his chair and faced Oliver. He walked around the desk to claim his chair. Felicity looked up at him with a faux innocent smile. Oliver raised his eyebrows in response, placed a hand on the back of the chair, and spun it to the side to aide in her exit. Felicity laughed at his antics and stood up. Oliver sat down quickly and dumped his crinkled itinerary off to the side of his desk. Her perfume lingered in his spot.

“You do know it’s 10:19, right?”

Felicity sat down and leaned back in the chair across from him. Oliver had noticed Felicity never leaned back while in business attire and in an office setting, unless the two of them were alone. He considered teasing her about it, but he liked how relaxed she was with him and didn’t want to discourage it.

“What can I help you with, Ms. Smoak?”

Felicity’s face became serious.

“I didn’t do it,” Oliver proclaimed.

She shook her head and said, “I talked with Beth in your IT department about the firewall upgrade.”

“Oh, this is QC related?” Oliver relaxed. Things had a way of working out for QC, especially if it was tech related and Felicity knew about it. There was a benefit of hiring your beyond-tech-genius best friend to consult for your company’s cyber security.

“No,” Felicity answered. “It’s about-”

“Mr. Queen, Felicity,” Cisco interrupted as he jogged into the office. Gladys staggered behind him with a scowl and threw her arms up in defeat. The promise of revenge on her face gave Oliver a
feeling Cisco’s administrative requests would be delayed in the foreseeable future. Felicity and
Oliver both sat up. “Did you get the email I sent you?”

“Email?” Oliver asked.

“The email you asked me for, or rather Mr. Steele asked me to send to you, regarding my update for
the projects I’m working on.”

“Right,” Oliver said as he pretended to remember what Cisco was talking about. “When did you
send it?”

“Just now. Mr. Steele said I had to get your approval on it so I can keep working on them. A couple
of them are at a critical time. Basically, it would be better to decide now if QC is going to spend the
money on them or if it’s time to dump them.”

Oliver hated making these types of decisions. The board had final say on everything, but they
expected Oliver to make recommendations. And the board usually agreed with the CEO. He knew
he didn’t have the knowledge to even make an educated guess. Felicity had helped him a couple
times, but she had said she wouldn’t always be able to help. Oliver was supposed to be aware of
market trends and recognize the cost versus benefit of every possible product.

“Cisco,” Felicity said. “I know most of your projects are perfect for Applied Sciences. Why aren’t
you waiting for them to open?”

“Um-well,” Cisco faltered. “I’m just not good at waiting.”

“What use is it to have an Applied Science then,” Oliver asked in a frustrated tone, “if you’re going
to bypass them and do all the work?”

“So I should just wait until Applied Sciences opens?”

“Yes!”

“Or,” Felicity said in a warning tone. She was the only one calm in the room as Cisco’s eyes had
gone huge and took a step back after Oliver yelled. “Cisco, you can create digital packets that will
get the new staff at Applied Sciences easily caught up on what you’ve been doing.”

“Oh, I could do that. I could make sections of why each project is needed, what was done, what
needs to be done, needed supplies, etcetera.”

“That sounds like an excellent format.”

Even Oliver could tell Felicity humored Cisco. There was a hidden tone in her voice that suggested
the answer was obvious.

“Ooh, ooh,” Cisco bounced and moved his hands everywhere as he talked, “and I can make a
section of what areas of Applied Sciences would be best for what project.”

“And once you’ve discussed it with the new team,” Felicity added, “it should make it easier for you
to make your recommendations to Oliver on what projects QC proceeds with.”

Oliver didn’t thank Felicity enough for all she did for him. He’d have to get her flowers or take her
out to dinner. He would even agree to take her to her favorite tech store and have her talk about all
the gadgets as fast as the Road Runner ran away from Wylie E. Coyote. Oliver would spend a few
hours there pretending to know what she talked about and get her whatever she wanted. Hopefully
that would be enough of a thank you for Felicity.

“Yes, I can do that.” Cisco backed out of Oliver’s office as he looked up and seemed to be counting on his fingers. “Oh, Mr. Queen, you can disregard my email.”

“Already forgotten,” Oliver replied, happy to tell the truth.

Thankful Felicity had gotten Cisco to leave quickly, Oliver relaxed in his chair again.

Cisco stopped so abrupt his tennis shoes squeaked against the tile floor. Oliver looked up, disappointed Cisco’s exit stopped.

“I forgot to tell you!”

“What?”

“Did you hear the latest office gossip?”

“Cisco,” Oliver said in a fatigued voice. “I don’t listen to water cooler talk.” Cisco pulled out his phone out of his back pocket. Oliver quickly pointed his finger at Cisco. “No! No more of your phone. I’m sick of your phone.”

“Okay, I can just tell you.”

“Cisco—” Felicity tried to jump in.

“Yesterday Isabel posted a picture of her hand.”

“So?” Oliver asked as he tried to appear unconcerned though he was curious.

“Oliver—” Felicity tried to interrupt again.

“It was her left hand,” Cisco said.

“I don’t want to see another damn picture of her manicure,” Oliver said. Why the hell was Cisco so excited for painted fingernails?

Felicity tried to halt Cisco talking with a wave of her hand. Cisco seemed oblivious.

“It was what was on her left hand that was interesting,” Cisco said as if trying to telepathically give Oliver the answer. After two seconds, unable to hold it in any longer, Cisco shouted out, “It was a ring. An engagement ring. A big expensive engagement ring by the look of it.”

“That was what I was going to tell you,” Felicity said in a quiet voice with a look of sympathy on her face. Oliver rubbed his forehead on the spot a sharp pain shot out.

“I was shocked too,” Cisco rambled on. “I didn’t even think she was seeing anyone.”

But she was looking for a rich husband, Oliver thought. At least he was her first choice. It gave Oliver a little pleasure knowing he turned her down and she had to resort to a second choice.

Barry.

What the hell was Oliver going to tell Barry?

Fuck! Was it too late to fake his own death?
Oliver glanced up and saw Cisco still standing near his desk. “Cisco, go back to work,” his voice exhausted from the never-ending drama. Oliver’s gaze went back to desk, not seeing anything, his thoughts flooding his senses. Thoughts of Barry moping in the corner of his office, refusing to do anything, while Isabel and Mr. Tiny Nipples laughed at him.

“Uh, sure,” Cisco said as he backed out again, slowly this time. “I just thought you’d be interested in Isabel’s latest relationship status.”

“He’s just shocked,” Felicity said.

“Gotcha,” Cisco replied.

“Have a good day, Cisco.”

“You too, Felicity. And you too, Mr. Queen.”

“What?” Oliver asked, looking up again, “Yeah.”

Cisco tiptoed out and Oliver sighed.

After a minute of silence, Felicity softly asked, “You okay?”

“I don’t know what to do, Felicity?” Oliver threw his hands up in the air. His plan for Barry didn’t have a contingency for whatever the hell just happened.

Without missing a beat, as if she had all the answers in the world, Felicity answered, “You have to tell Barry. Before he hears the news from someone else.”

“I don’t even know what to say to him.”

“The truth.”

The truth. As if it were that simple. Oliver gave Felicity a deadpan look that softened when she gave him a kind smile in return. She stood up and placed her hand over Oliver’s.

“Just be a good friend. I know you know how to do that. Don’t hem and haw. That will only cause Barry worry and foreboding, on top of the pain you know he’ll be in.”

“I don’t hem or haw.”

Felicity gave Oliver a tilted smile and left his office.

With Felicity gone, Oliver didn’t have any more distractions to keep him from calling Barry. Oliver ran a hand through his hair and let out a sigh. Despite what Felicity thought, he was not good at dealing with emotions. Oliver ran away from emotions and when he couldn’t, Felicity was his feelings interpreter. Oliver was certain he was not ready to deal with all of Barry’s sadness. Hadn’t Oliver proved that since the events at Christmas? A realization struck Oliver that made him want to hide under his desk, or at least in a couple shots of vodka.

Barry would be Mopey Barry forever.

Oliver grumbled to himself as he pulled out his phone. As the phone rang, Oliver hoped Barry wouldn’t answer.

“Hey, Oliver.”
Fuck.

“Barry. Glad I caught you. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Yeah. I just got done having brunch with Joe and Iris.”

Her again?

“How did that go?” Oliver asked. He rationalized he wasn’t putting off the news as he accessed the situation. It’d be better for Oliver to understand how Barry felt before Oliver broke the news. It had nothing to do with how relieved Oliver was for the short reprieve he had been granted of telling Barry about Isabel. That is what Oliver told himself.

“Really well,” Barry answered. Oliver could almost hear Barry’s smile. He wasn’t sure if it was better or worse that Barry was happy. “All three of us had a great conversation. Iris was great. She didn’t seem to blame me at all for saying no to her. I mean I expected it to be awkward between the two of us, but it wasn’t. It was just as easy to be and talk with her as usual.”

“That’s…good.”

“And Joe was awesome. I couldn’t ask for anyone better who is in my corner. Oh, except for you, Oliver.”

“Thanks.” Oliver didn’t need to be placated. Especially at that moment.

“I actually have a question for you. Great timing on your call.” Oliver doubted that. The happy bubble Barry finally managed to find himself in was about to pop. “I was wondering if, in your opinion having a lot of experience with woman, do you think Iris and I can be friends?”

“Uh…I don’t know, Barry,” Oliver said. He didn’t want Barry running back to his past for comfort. “Because I’d really like to try. She is so great. And she understands me like no one else does. So, do you think men and women can be friends?”

“No.” It was so rare, it would be better not to give Barry hope.

“Oh,” Barry said, his voice deflated. “It’s just you and Felicity are friends.”

“That’s true. But we’re one of the rare exceptions and it really depended on how we met. There was nothing sexual going on then and it formed how we interact with each other now.”

“Huh,” Barry responded. “Felicity said when she first met you, you were naked.”

“She told you that?” Oliver asked. “Yes, but the girl I was with locked me out of our hotel room so I wasn’t flirting with Felicity.”

“That’s not what Felicity said,” Barry chuckled.

Oliver righted himself, realizing he had gotten sidetracked. Though a large part of him wondered what Felicity had told Barry. What she possibly told a whole bunch of people. “Telling you my side of how I met Felicity isn’t why I called you.”

“Oh right, sorry. Go ahead.”

“Okay…so-”
“Wait, did I tell you how pretty Iris looked today?”

“That is why men and women can’t be friends.”

Silence greeted Oliver. The truth was better for Barry. Now was his time to tell Barry. He had caused a leak in Barry’s happy bubble; might as well pop it all together. Oliver tapped his fingers and took a deep breath, “Isabel is engaged.”

“Wh-uh-what?”

“Cisco saw a picture she posted on Instagram. Apparently, I pay him to look at everyone’s social media pages.”

“Isabel is just on vacation? On the beach? With a revolving door of muscle-ly men?” Barry’s sped through the series of questions and his voice had taken on a desperate tone.

“The picture was of a hand. No, sorry, of an engagement ring on her hand.”

“That doesn’t mean she’s engaged. She could just be trying on one?”

“Nobody does that on vacation unless they get engaged.”

“Just a minute.”

“Barry?” Oliver called out. “Barry? What are you doing?”

“I’m going to her Instagram.”

“No, don’t do that to yourself.” Oliver groaned. This kid was really into masochism.

“I’m almost there.”

“This is a bad idea. You should stop. You see the picture, then what?”

“I’ll read the caption she wrote.”

“Barry-”

“Found it,” Barry said. “She says, ‘He put a ring on it’.”

As he read his voice deflated. It was the same voice Oliver had used as a kid when his dad missed all his little league games.

“I’m sorry-”

“It could still be a joke. All the comments say congratulations and stuff like that, but she hasn’t responded to any of them.”

“Because she’s on vacation, on the beach, engaged.”

“I’m going to check her Facebook and Twitter.”

“No! Barry stop!” Oliver put on his boss voice. “Seeing the proof in front of your eyes won’t change anything. She’s engaged. You need to accept it.”

“But…how did this happen?” Barry asked, his voice timid.
“What?”

“How did she get engaged, when she just asked you to marry her? How does that happen?”

“She was looking for a husband.”

“Well then why didn’t she want to go out with me? I mean, I’m not ready for marriage or anything. But she has to know me better than whoever she is engaged to.”

“I don’t know, Barry. I’m sorry. You know that, right? I’m really very sorry.”

Oliver heard a long sigh followed by silence. Oliver tried to patiently let Barry deal with whatever he felt.

“Barry?”

“I don’t blame you, Oliver. It was obviously my fault for thinking I was anyway in her league.”

“Barry, no. What have I said before? You are much too good for her.”

“She’s engaged, Oliver. She can obviously have any guy she wants. Isabel can snap her fingers and a guy proposes to her in less than a month. She didn’t want me. So, she certainly thinks she’s better than me.”

“Barry, please don’t put how she’s choosing to live her life, or ruin her life, on you. She will be the one who regrets this.”

“I—I don’t want her marriage to be bad.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re too nice for your own good. I promise everything is going to be all right. It’s just a little bumpy at the moment. But you’re going to come out of this stronger for it.”

Oliver hoped he said the right things. Barry really was too good for Isabel. Oliver was sure, in the long run, Barry would be happier for managing to avoid Isabel being in his life. Barry just had to see it, too.

“I just don’t understand this. At all. Engaged is just so final. How is she engaged already?”

“Barry, I’m sorry,” Oliver said again. There wasn’t anything else Oliver could say. If Oliver had just kept his ideas to himself, Barry would be happy. “Come back to Starling City. We’ll figure out everything when you get back.”

“Okay,” Barry mumbled. Oliver was sure he heard Mopey Barry again. Great. “I just have to say goodbye to Joe and Iris first. Then I’ll get on the next train back.”

“Sounds good.” Oliver consoled himself he at least kept Barry away from Iris. That relationship would have only landed him in jail. “I’ll see you tonight. We’ll get drinks.”

“Look, Sin…Sin…SIN,” Oliver yelled into the phone to get his manager to shut up for three seconds while he explained how he would fix Verdant’s latest problem as they, technically she, spoke. As she paused for a breath, Oliver quickly filled the silence, “I’m emailing the beer distributor right now. I’m putting you on the account to be able to sign and order from them.”

“That doesn’t take care-“
“I know, I know,” Oliver interrupted. “It doesn’t take care of being very nearly out of beer for tonight. Just call them after you hang up with me and get them back there. Pay whatever you need to, just make sure they come back before tonight.”

“They aren’t going to want to do that,” Sin said in a voice angrier than she normally sounded.

“If you pay enough, they’ll do it. Trust me.”

“Verdant wouldn’t be out any money if you had just come in this morning. Like I texted you.” Oliver could hear her gritting her teeth.

“I’m sorry. I had an early morning meeting here at QC with the board. I forgot about your text.”

“You seem to be forgetting about Verdant a lot these days.”

“Don’t push it, Sin.” Oliver said as he gave a short sigh. “Everything will be fixed for tonight and you keep Verdant running so well, you don’t need me.”

“I actually need your signature on a few things. Which I planned to ask you to do today when you signed for the beer. The renewal contract for the liquor distributor and the contract for the DJ scheduled for tomorrow. And there are other things I need your approval on.”

The thought of being responsible for approving more business decisions had Oliver running a hand through his hair. He knew he had been slacking with Verdant lately. It wasn’t his fault Applied Sciences and his other pet project (i.e. Barry) kept him busy. Oliver had planned to sign everything the other night when he had taken Barry out, but Barry hadn’t wanted to go anywhere he had memories of him and Isabel. So, they had gone to a little dive bar near Barry’s apartment.

“Sin, I will stop by Verdant tonight. I promise.”

“Fine. But don’t think I’m holding my breath.”

“I’ll be there.”

“If not, I’m going to find you at your big office and make a big scene.”

“Consider me duly warned. Thank you for all your help.”

“Yeah, well, someone has to do it,” Sin muttered. The line went dead and Oliver sighed loudly.

Didn’t she know Oliver was much happier when he had been at Verdant than at QC? Sin never did quite understand the family obligation Oliver had to the company. She always seemed to think of it as a nuisance. Which, to be fair, Oliver had at times thought as well. Despite his family wishes, Oliver had never wanted to fill the role as CEO of QC. He had always known he’d take the mantel one day, but Oliver never planned on one parent being killed and the other parent’s health deteriorating past the point of competency. Verdant was just responsibility enough for a young Oliver to get used to managing a company. The plan was for Oliver to own Verdant and get a taste of business ownership, but still be able to live a mostly carefree life. Then, later, he was supposed to learn the ins and outs of QC, slowly taking on more responsibility until finally, when Oliver was around 50, or so he thought, he’d take over the CEO position.

But then Oliver’s father was killed.

When building QC’s foundry, a city council member had approached Robert Queen looking for a bribe to speed up permits and the like. Robert had vehemently refused and a fight ensued. Robert’s
body was found the next day at the foundry with four bullets buried in his chest.

Amidst the grief Oliver had felt over his father’s death and the exhausting trial of the city council member, in the back of Oliver’s mind there was dread of what his immediate future held. He was lost. All Oliver wanted was to ask his father what he should do. His mother had been consumed with sadness. His sister had retreated to Roy, whom she married three-and-a-half months after their father’s death.

Oliver jumped at the sound of the loud shrill of his office’s telephone.

“Hello,” Oliver said into the receiver as he told his heart to calm down.

“Oliver, it’s Digg.”

“Hey, Digg. What’s going on?”

“I’m just checking on you. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye before you left the bakery a few days ago.”

“Ah. No, everything’s fine,” Oliver said. He had forgotten about the awkward encounter and his speedy exit. Oliver knew he should have called Digg, but he didn’t have an excuse for his abrupt exit. He couldn’t tell his best friend one of his army buddies had the social skills of a rattlesnake. “Something just came up at work.”

“Hmm,” Digg responded. “Nyssa seemed to think you left because of her.”

Crap.

Of course, Nyssa Ratko ratted him out.

“No, no, no,” Oliver protested. He didn’t want to alienate his best friend’s army buddies. Nyssa may only talk when it was an absolute emergency, but Sara sounded cool. Oliver was sure she and him would get along great. “I just had work stuff.”

“Oliver, you’ve never had work stuff.”

“I’ve had work stuff. I had work stuff this morning.” Oliver was almost offended. “And with Applied Sciences, I’m having tons more work stuff. Mountain high. We’re talking Mt. Everest levels of high.”

“Oliver.”

“Fine.” Oliver paused. Yet he couldn’t come up with a believable lie. “I couldn’t talk to Nyssa. She refused to answer my most basic questions, and she didn’t even try to engage me. At all. What was I supposed to do, just let the unbearable silence suffocate us?”

“You should give her a break,” Digg admonished. “She has had some trouble socializing since she’s come back.”

“Are you sure it’s just recently? You didn’t know her before Afghanistan, maybe she’s never been good with people?” There was no way Nyssa’s inability to talk was a new development. She may have been better at holding a conversation before her tour, but Oliver would bet his beloved fire engine red Lamborghini, which he refused to drive for fear it would get a scratch, Nyssa had been shy and only spoke when spoken to.
“Be nice.”

“I was nice. She’s the one who made it awkward. Me leaving made both of us so much more comfortable. She should thank me, not tattle.”

“Okay, okay,” Digg conceded. “Next time you’ll know what to expect, and won’t try to push her so much. Right?”

“Yes,” Oliver promised grudgingly. Then, in a defeated tone, Oliver said, “I really do have work stuff now.”

“I know.” Sympathy coated Digg’s words.

“And this crisis with Barry is taking up a lot of my time. I’m a very busy person now.”

“How is Barry?”

Oliver sighed and leaned back in his chair. “He’s…a sad clown at an opera. Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“What do you mean?” Digg said through his chuckling.

“He still doesn’t quite fit in with anyone at QC and he’s blatantly sad. I’m working on it though. Just a few more days and he’ll forget Isabel even existed. And then maybe the QC employees will be more likely to strike up conversations with him. He’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure he will. He’s lucky you’re on his side.”

“Thanks.” Digg always had a way of making Oliver feel better about himself. “Do you want to do lunch today?”

“I can’t. I have to cover the bakery and lunch is a busy time of day for us. Besides, I’m waiting for a phone call.”

“You need employees.”

“I need to make a profit so I can afford employees.”

“Hey, if you need money—"

“No, I’m good, man. It just takes a while to have a positive cash flow coming in for a new business.”

“Okay. If you change your mind, don’t feel embarrassed to come to me. I want to be able to help you out.” Oliver said. Digg gave a grunt of agreement, but Oliver could tell Digg hated the idea. If Digg really needed the help though, Digg would have to get over it. Oliver wasn’t going to let his friend fail. Deciding it’d be better to drop the subject, Oliver asked, “Who are you waiting for to call you?”

“Sara. I’m waiting to hear if she has to postpone her trip again.”

“No, she has to come! We’ve all been waiting for her to get here.”

“I know, but her sister is so insecure when Sara isn’t there. Apparently Laurel fears she’ll jump off the wagon and her husband will leave her if Sara isn’t around to moderate Laurel’s behavior. Sara is just doing what she has to do to make Laurel happy.”

“Shouldn’t Laurel figure out how to be sober without Sara?”
“Yes. That’s what I think,” Digg answered in a conspiratorial whisper very unlike Digg. “I’ve told Sara, Laurel is using her as a crutch. Which will only cause both of them to feel like failures when Laurel slips up again.”

“How’d Sara take that?”

“Not well,” Digg admitted. “She wants to be able to help her sister. What she doesn’t realize is Laurel needs to help herself if she’s going to have any long-term success.”

“It’s hard to see clearly when it’s family,” Oliver replied, as his earlier musings of his father’s death came to mind. Then the image of Moira unable to leave the manor due to her grief and Oliver making excuses for her long after he should have.

“Yeah,” Digg responded, half-heartedly.

“How about dinner on Friday? I’ll invite Barry and Felicity.”

“Sounds good. I’ll invite Nyssa and Cisco.”

“Cisco?” Oliver heard the whine in his voice. He didn’t care.

“Nyssa will be more comfortable if Cisco is with her.”

Oliver didn’t want to spend time with Nyssa either. But it was important to Digg and he wanted Oliver to get to know the other people in Digg’s life. And with both Cisco and Nyssa there, they may section off and leave Oliver alone. If that didn’t work, Oliver had three other people at the dinner he could hide behind to avoid them.

“Okay, yeah. Let’s do it.”


“See you. Don’t work too hard.” Oliver hoped he wouldn’t regret attending dinner.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Oliver has dinner with his friends, and Cisco and Nyssa who make it uncomfortable for Oliver. Sara promises to visit again.

A tap on his glass door made Oliver look up from his computer, open to a financial projection report. He blinked a few times to make his vision less blurry. Once his vision cleared he saw Felicity enter his office. The dress she wore had cutouts and Oliver thought it was a little too cold outside for a dress like that. At least in the office where Gladys always complained about the cold.

“Hey,” Oliver greeted her. “Come on in. Have a seat. Save me from this tedious work.” He gestured to his laptop and gave a teasing smile.

Felicity smiled back. “I heard you made the early morning meeting.”

“Yes. It made Walter, in Australia, and the board happy. I’m not sure about Mr. Dennis. He might be actively rooting for my failure,” Oliver replied. He leaned back in his chair and Felicity followed suit. “Though I have a feeling my mother would have hired guards to pull me out of bed and drag me to the meeting in my pajamas if I refused.”

“We probably shouldn’t tell the investors your mother made you go.” Felicity’s eyes twinkled and Oliver knew she wasn’t censoring him.

“The investors love me.”

“The investors love money.”

“Are you saying they love me just for my money?” Oliver put his hands up to his heart in mock pain.

Felicity shrugged her shoulders. “The truth hurts.” They smiled at each other and Oliver was thankful for the break her visit caused. Felicity looked over to his laptop. Her view showed her just enough for Felicity to know Oliver looked at spreadsheets. “You actually were working and not playing video golf?”

“First of all,” Oliver sat up, leaning forward on his arms, “of course I’m working. I resent the implication I’m a slacker. Two, Applied Sciences is my only way to keep QC in the family and I will sacrifice whatever is necessary for it to succeed. That includes my time and brainpower. Third, I do not, nor will I ever, play video golf. The sport is boring enough live.”

“I apologize for the perceived slight. Though I have caught you playing video games in here before.”

“You did not catch me, Felicity. That implies I did something wrong.”

“You weren’t doing anything wrong?”

“No,” Oliver said with more confidence then he felt, which was normal when he debated Felicity. It never mattered if the subject matter was serious or not. “Studies have proven giving your brain a break from work, which would include video games, is actually better for productivity.”
“You didn’t get enough work done for a part-time unpaid intern, Oliver. For over a month.”

“Imagine what would have happened if I hadn’t taken those breaks. A negative amount of work would have been done. Thank goodness I took that extended break. And look at me now. A productive member of the QC team.”

Felicity rolled her eyes but the smile remained on her face.

“So, was there a reason for this visit or were you just making sure I wasn’t napping after having to wake up far earlier than I’m used to?”

The smile fell from Felicity’s face. “I talked to Cisco about Applied Sciences’ system needs—“

“There’s a conversation I would only understand a quarter of the words,” Oliver interrupted. “Why didn’t you talk to Barry?”

“Barry was busy with some homework,” Felicity replied. Oliver inwardly groused at the revelation. A break or two or three were fine, but Barry blatantly doing homework all day instead of working, while getting paid was too much. Oliver would worry about having his own sudden boss-like thought later. “Anyway, the subject of Isabel was brought up.”

Oliver groaned.

“How’s Barry taking it?” Felicity asked.

“Not well. Everything reminds him of Isabel. If I wasn’t, in part, responsible for his heart break, I’d be annoyed.”

“In part responsible?” Felicity asked with a skeptical tone.

“Fine,” Oliver said. “It was all my fault. I shouldn’t have tried to make two people, who I still think would have been great together if they had listened to me, happy.” Oliver planned on holding onto that grudge for a while. If Isabel had not been determined to get her name on the Queen checking account, she would have been more aware of Oliver’s intentions. “Do me a favor, Felicity? Remind me to never try to do that again.”

“With pleasure.”

“I’m sure it will be.” Oliver said with warm affection. “Oh, before I forget, we’re having dinner with Digg on Friday.”

“Was that an invitation or a command?” Felicity asked and gave Oliver a smirk.

“Ha,” Oliver replied, knowing she didn’t require an answer. “Also, Barry will be there.”

“Good, he needs a night out with friends.”

“I’ve been trying.” Oliver complained.

“I don’t mean drinking. I mean seeing what Starling City has to offer,” Felicity said and off of his look added, “Other than QC, his apartment, and Verdant.”

“As a matter of fact, we went to a different bar the other night,” Oliver said in a smug voice. Before Felicity could question him further on the divey-ness of said bar, Oliver added, “Also, Nyssa and Cisco will be at dinner, too.”
As soon as Oliver said it, he heard the annoyance in his voice. And by the look on Felicity’s face, she heard it too.

“What was that tone?” Felicity asked as leaned forward.

“Nothing.”

“That was not nothing. Cisco isn’t that bad. You need to give him a break.”

“He is that bad,” Oliver said. But to avoid an argument, he admitted, “He’s not the only one I don’t want there.”

“Who? Nyssa?”

“Yes.”

“Be nice.” Felicity admonished with a point of her finger. “She’s been through a lot.”

“Have you tried having a conversation with her?”

“She can be a little on the quiet side,” Felicity admitted. “I don’t know if you’ve met me or not, but I can keep a conversation going.”

“It’s so much work with her. And it’s not like she’s nice about it or meets you halfway. She just stands there, judging you.”

“Oliver, you don’t have any evidence she is judging you. Also, you have to realize she needs some time to adjust.”

“Hasn’t she been back for a while now?”

“I know you can help her. You were great with John.”

“Digg talked,” Oliver responded, exasperated by Felicity not understanding him. “And he wasn’t… like her.”

Felicity leveled him with a disappointed look. The look always made Oliver cower. She hadn’t used it much during their friendship, but when Felicity did, Oliver knew she was serious and refused to back down. It usually was given when Felicity felt like Oliver could be a better person. Oliver hated that look.

“Fine. I’ll be nice,” Oliver conceded. “Don’t blame me though if she continues to not talk to me. It won’t be my fault.”

“Thank you.” Felicity offered Oliver a little smile, and the thought of being nice to Nyssa didn’t seem quite so tortuous anymore.

“Digg also mentioned Sara would probably have to postpone her trip here again.”

“Of course, she will,” Felicity said with a heavy sigh. “The only way I’ll believe she is actually coming is if she is standing right here next to me. And even then, I would double check to make sure she’s not a hologram.”

“Now who’s criticizing someone they don’t know?” Oliver tried to give Felicity the same look she just gave him. He knew he wasn’t successful because Felicity wasn’t affected by it in the least. Though maybe Felicity was nicer about Sara than Oliver was with Nyssa. Felicity was a far better
person than he was.

Oliver had every intention of being on time for the Friday dinner. He was on the phone to QC’s Tokyo director, but Oliver had managed to get off the phone in time to make dinner if he hurried. He jogged to his car in QC’s underground garage when Oliver remembered he had to drive Barry to the restaurant.

By the time Oliver and Barry were walked back to a private area of the restaurant, everyone else had arrived, and Oliver had furthered secured his reputation of always being late. Felicity and Diggle sat next to each other, and across the table were Nyssa and Cisco.

“Hello everyone,” Oliver greeted. He gave Felicity a side hug. “Sorry we’re late.” Felicity made a show of checking the time on her phone as Oliver sat down next to her. Barry squeezed his way around Diggle and sat next to Cisco.

“What was it this time?” Felicity asked. Her eyes were wide and she had difficulty not smiling. “Was there a supermodel who needed help finding her tonsils? Or did a giraffe escape the zoo and block your way here? Maybe you escorted nuns across the street?”

“Teleconference with QC’s Tokyo branch actually,” Oliver replied, a little smug. He rarely had a legitimate business reason for his lateness. Oliver loved when he could catch Felicity off guard. Her eyes widened with surprise and, Oliver didn’t think he imagined it, pride. Oliver smiled.

“But,” Barry added at the other end of the table, “if you hadn’t forgotten you were giving me a ride, you would have been on time.”

“You forgot Barry?” Felicity asked in mocked indignation. She held back a gleeful smile as she directed all her attention squarely on him. She was moderately successful as her lips only up ticked into a half smile.

Damn! Oliver scrunched his nose as he replied, “I was distracted from work.”

“Don’t blame him, Felicity,” Barry said. “Oliver has been really busy.”

Before the night turned into a ‘let’s recount all the times Oliver was late’ storytime, Oliver asked, “Digg. Lyla couldn’t make it?”

“Smooth,” Felicity whispered to Oliver. Oliver remained steadfast in his eye contact with Digg as he refused to acknowledge Felicity’s correct assumption about his abrupt topic change.

“No,” Digg replied. “She had to work.”

“The bank likes to monopolize her time, doesn’t it?” Oliver commented. “Is she traveling?”

“Yeah,” Diggle said. “Rome.”

“Really,” Cisco said, his eyes wide. “I’d love to go to Rome. Go to that church. Drink some wine. Eat some Italian food.”

“Unfortunately, Lyla’s trips are never long enough to do any sightseeing,” Diggle said.

“What bank does she work for?” Nyssa asked.

“Credit Dauphine.”
“Hmm,” Nyssa responded. She was quiet for a moment as she shared a look with Digg, then added, “They are known internationally for their privacy practices. My father does a lot of business with them.”

“Has he met Lyla?” Oliver asked.

“I don’t believe so. But my father tells me very little about his business.”

“That must be difficult for you,” Oliver said. His father had constantly talked about QC to Oliver. It was one guaranteed way Oliver could get Robert’s attention.

Nyssa took a moment to study him and asked, “Why would he discuss his business with me?”

“I apologize. I thought it was a family business?”

“It is,” Nyssa replied.

Oliver and the rest of the table waited for Nyssa to elaborate. When she didn’t, Oliver raised his eyebrows in question at Felicity. Felicity shrugged her shoulders. Cisco jumped into the conversation, overpowering it. Cisco’s puffed up chest made Oliver believe Cisco imagined himself a knight rescuing a damsel in distress.

“Is anyone aware a bolt of lightning is six times hotter than the sun?”

“That can’t be true,” Digg said with intense skepticism.

“Actually,” Barry answered, “it is true.”

Felicity jumped in, “Antarctica is the only continent with no owls.” Oliver chuckled.

The conversation of unbelievable random facts continued. Cisco did most of the talking, but Felicity chimed in with some amusing facts and occasionally Barry added a, usually mundane, fact. Digg seemed amused by Cisco’s ramblings, and Nyssa looked, as usual, bored. Oliver got a headache with all the scientific terms and pop culture references mixed in together.

The food was good; the wine better. Oliver suppressed a happy dance when the check came and he happily handed over his credit card. The group tried to protest, some more than others, but Oliver insisted. It had earned him a stern look and reluctant growled thank you from Felicity, which made it even better. Rarely did Felicity allow Oliver to pay for her. It made success that much sweeter.

As they all stood up from the table, Oliver helped Nyssa with her coat. She relented when the others were all in their jackets. She inched towards him and held her arms straight out behind her.

“I’m glad you were able to join us this evening,” Oliver said. Felicity wanted him to be nicer to Nyssa.

Nyssa looked over her shoulder and peered at Oliver as if she saw into his soul. Oliver managed to hold still, he didn’t want to let her intimidate him. Finally, she said, “Thank you.” She walked away from the group quickly and waited for Cisco outside. Her quick getaway forced Cisco to stop mid-sentence and say his goodbyes.

Oliver did not understand Nyssa at all.

Once outside on the sidewalk, Barry said his apartment was close so he would walk home. Digg got a phone call from Lyla and stepped away but not before asking Oliver to wait for him.
Felicity hoisted her purse back on her shoulder from where it dropped to her elbow, and stood in front of Oliver. She gave him a smile.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Felicity said. “I’m just really glad you were nice to Nyssa. That’s all.”

Oliver scoffed. “Didn’t do any good, did it? She was still deathly quiet. Unfriendly. Refused to answer even the simplest of questions. And when she did talk it took her forever to get the words out.”

Felicity sighed. Her smile disappeared.

“What? All of that is true.”

“Oliver,” Felicity replied. “You know what she’s been through. What she’s dealing with now.”

“Yeah. And I’m not discounting her PTSD or whatever. But does that allow her to sit in judgment over us?”

Felicity tilted her head to the side and furrowed her brow.

“What else is she doing sitting there, if she’s not talking? She’s judging us.”

“You are paranoid. She just doesn’t have anything to add to the conversation. Neither did you, I might add.”

Oliver stared at Felicity. “There is a difference between refusing to talk and not completely understanding the conversation.”

Felicity laughed.

“Don’t laugh at me, Felicity. You know how I barely got through Harvard.”

“Oliver,” Felicity’s face became serious again. After a moment of contemplation and talking herself into disclosing what she knew of Nyssa, Felicity confided, “It’s not just that Nyssa has PTSD. Her family is a daytime talk show’s dream. Her father has groomed her sister to take over the family business, and flat-out refused to let Nyssa even work in the mail room. Though he also doesn’t approve of any other job she wants, and is not sympathetic to her condition.

“You complain about being forced into the family business, but don’t you think it’d be worse if you were overlooked?”

“How do you know all this?” Oliver asked.

“Cisco talks.”

“Yes. Yes he does,” Oliver replied loudly. After a sudden realization, he added in a softer voice, “And that can’t be easy for her. She gets a break from her father but stays with Cisco. I can’t imagine how much he talks in his own place. I’d go crazy if I were her.”

“I’m glad you’re beginning to understand her. She needs all the friends she can get.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Goodnight, Oliver.” Felicity squeezed his arm. “I’ll see you later.”
“Goodnight, Felicity.”

Oliver watched as she walked away. He was gratified Felicity was pleased with him. Even if she gave Oliver more credit than he deserved. He did feel a bit sorry for Nyssa’s situation, but he couldn’t do anything. And Nyssa still annoyed the hell out of Oliver. He didn’t think he deserved her critical judgment, especially given her PTSD and messed up family.

“Hey, man,” Digg called out to Oliver.

“Hey. What did you want to talk to me about?”

“I didn’t want to announce it to everyone at dinner because I’m starting to feel like the boy who cried wolf. But Sara is coming tomorrow.”

“Really?” Oliver’s smile stretched to his ears.

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. She is on the road now. She is staying for a week,” Digg had his own matching smile. “Not a lot of time, but enough to show her around and introduce her to everyone.”

“Will Lyla be back in time?”

“That was what I just talked to Lyla about. Her flight gets in early tomorrow morning, and no upcoming business trips this next week.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way,” Oliver said. “Sara’s sister isn’t going to get all clingy and call Sara back, is she?”

“I hope not. I’m crossing my fingers,” Digg replied. “Are you going to be around tomorrow? I’d like you to stop by, introduce you both.”

“That’d be great. I can’t wait to meet her,” Oliver said. He was happy for his friend and curious to meet this woman he and Lyla had bonded with so much in Afghanistan. “I’ll be around until eight or nine tomorrow night. I have to make an appearance at the club. Make it seem like I actually own the place.”

Digg laughed. “Sara will be in way before that. She’s thinking four.”

“Okay. Text me when you want me to come over.”

“Thanks, Oliver.”

“Of course. I have to meet your other best friend. Scope out the competition.”

“I already told you, Oliver. Lyla is my best friend.”

Oliver laughed. “I’m talking about after your wife. Because I’ve been vying for second place for a while. I need to see exactly how I have to up my game.”


“See you tomorrow, Digg.” Oliver said as he walked by Digg and clapped him on his shoulder.
As Oliver drove home, his excitement over tomorrow steadily increased. He was certain Sara would become a close friend who wouldn’t object to any of Oliver’s crazier antics. Finally.

Oliver knocked on the door of the Diggle’s. Diggle texted him twenty minutes ago. Sara was here. Finally. While waiting for someone to answer the door, Oliver rocked on the balls of his feet. He was a little worried after all the anticipation of Sara’s visit, she wouldn’t live up to the hype. What if Sara was as dull as Nyssa? With as much as Digg was excited for Oliver and Sara to get along, there wouldn’t be a way Oliver could avoid them this week. What would Oliver say to Digg if Oliver couldn’t stand her?

“Hey, man,” Digg said as he opened the door. His smile was huge and he held his hand out to shake Oliver’s. Oliver shook Digg’s hand, not able to match Digg’s enthusiastic grip. “Glad you’re here.”

“Me, too,” Oliver responded. “I can’t wait to meet her.” Except with Sara actually there, Oliver wondered if it was such a good idea. Maybe it was best if Sara remained her mythic self. That possible crazy friend of his if they ever had the chance to meet. “Sara escaped her sister’s place, huh?”

“Yeah,” Digg said as he ushered Oliver in and closed the door. “It’s great having her here.”

Oliver laughed. “She’s been here, what, an hour? You don’t know for sure what kind of house guest she is. I’m guessing base camp is different than a suburban home.”

“It’s going to be great,” Digg replied, smile still wide. “Come on.” He waved Oliver further into the house.

“I’m an excellent house guest, FYI,” Oliver whispered. “If you’re keeping score.”

“I’m not.”

When they stepped in the living room, Lyla sat on the couch with a woman Oliver recognized from several pictures, minus the fatigues and sand. Though some would describe Sara as tiny, Oliver knew she was compact. He had heard enough stories to know how tough she was, and how it wouldn’t take any effort on her part to kick his ass. Sara was pretty, and if Oliver had met her at Verdant, and she had no ties to Digg, Oliver was sure he’d hit on her. Though Oliver wasn’t sure Sara would have responded positively to his interest.

“Sara,” Digg said, getting her attention, “this is Oliver Queen. Oliver, Sara Lance.”

“The Oliver Queen,” Sara said as she stood up to shake Oliver’s hand. “I feel like I’ve known you my whole life, with as much as Digg talks about you.”

“Really?” Oliver asked with a teasing smile toward Digg. “I feel the same way about you. He never shuts up about you.”

“Unless he’s talking about you, apparently,” Sara replied with a laugh.

“That makes sense,” Oliver sat down next to Sara on the other couch. “Me being his best friend, second only to Lyla, who else would he talk about?”

“You’re Digg’s best friend?” Sara asked, her eyebrows up and a smirk on her lips. “Because he gave
me a friendship bracelet.”

“Exactly, friendship bracelet not a best friend bracelet. He gave me the best friend necklace that is cut in half, and he carries the other half everywhere.”

Sara laughed loudly.

Thank God!

Sara was so easy to get along with, Oliver thought the two of them could be like pancakes and maple syrup. Burger and fries. Rum and Coke. It was also possible Oliver was just hungry.

Oliver turned toward Digg and Lyla and saw a look pass between them as if their secret plans were exactly on schedule. Oliver shook his head. Subtlety was never their specialty.

“I’m not giving in, Queen,” Sara said. “I could still win the best friend title.”

“Says the person who didn’t show for their wedding.”

“Hey,” Sara cried, indignation clear in her tone, “I went to the first one. How many am I expected to go to?” Oliver chuckled. Lyla looked down at the floor and Digg placed his hand on Lyla’s knee. “Besides I didn’t see you at their first wedding.”

“Hey,” an indignant Oliver cried. “To be fair, I didn’t know either of them then.”

Sara leaned closer to Oliver with a cat-who-just-ate-the-canary smile and said, “What you’re saying is I’ve known Digg longer and therefore better.”

“Sorry to break it to you,” Oliver argued, “but quantity does not mean quality. Especially in friendship.”

“Yeah?” Sara challenged. She sat back up and crossed her arms.

“Yeah. I met Carter Bowen in kindergarten but he knows just as much about me as the average tabloid reader.”

“Hmm. Maybe. But this isn’t over,” Sara said, as she stood up abruptly. “It was nice to meet you Oliver.” She turned to Digg and Lyla. “I said I would go and visit Nyssa.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you knew Nyssa,” Oliver said. He felt disappointed she had to leave so soon. But he didn’t want to be clingy to someone he just met. Even if he was sure he and Sara should become each other’s wing person. Not that he needed one.

“Um, yeah,” Sara responded as she talked with her hands. “We met with everyone else.”

Oliver impulsively asked, with derision, “Do you like her?” He couldn’t understand how someone who was as seemingly cool as Sara would like, and want to spend time with, someone so boring like Nyssa.

“Oliver,” Lyla reprimanded.

“Do I need to have a talk with you?” Digg asked.

Oliver held his hands up in surrender. “Sorry. It’s just, she’s so quiet and difficult to get to know.” Oliver hoped that explanation would satisfy them. He knew better than to insult a fellow soldier to them.
“Oh, she definitely is quiet,” Sara agreed. “But I feel obligated to go see her.”

“Soldier obligation?” Oliver understood.

“Yeah. I’d much rather stay and catch up with you guys. And get to know you better, Oliver.”

“You should stop by Verdant tonight,” Oliver suggested to the group.

Lyla shook her head. “I’m way too tired.”


“If Sara wants to go, I’ll go with her. I haven’t been to Verdant in a while. I should make sure you haven’t burned it down to the ground yet.”

“Ha, ha, Digg.”

“That sounds like fun. Digg, I’ll meet you there?”

“Yeah.”

Sara waved goodbye and left. Oliver felt relieved to find he liked her. There wouldn’t be any awkward get-togethers while she visited. It was clear she had good taste in friends, with Lyla and Digg so close to her. Oliver knew Sara didn’t like Nyssa. It was clear Sara didn’t want to say anything in front of Digg. Sara was just doing what she thought was her duty. Once a soldier, always a soldier.

“So, what do you think?” Lyla asked.

“She’s nice,” Oliver answered. “I’m glad she made it this time.”

“Me too,” Digg said. He continued to prod, “You really like her?”

“Yes. She seems like fun.” After meeting Sara, Oliver was no longer jealous of her relationship with Digg. He could see, in person, that Digg had room in his life for both of them.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Oliver spends some time with Sara. Felicity needles Oliver in accepting an invitation.

The music pounded in Oliver’s ears. The air conditioner couldn’t keep up with the amount of heat the dancing, sweaty bodies produced. Barry still sipped on his first beer. Oliver decided not to squeeze by everyone to mingle with his customers. He and Barry stayed up in the VIP area, where Oliver could occasionally feel a gust of air. There wasn’t much point in talking, as it was too loud as the music played and the people talked over the music.

Oliver was bored.

He’d never admit it out loud. Oliver barely admitted it to himself. But Oliver didn’t want to be here. Where he really wanted to be was at home with his mother, Felicity, Digg, and Barry. He must be getting old.

Digg and Sara hadn’t shown up yet and Oliver doubted they’d make an appearance. The only reason why Oliver, and therefore Barry, stayed at Verdant was because Oliver was sure Digg wouldn’t flake out on him.

Reaching for his beer, he gulped the rest down and signaled for another.

Just as Oliver thought of excuses to leave early, he spotted Digg at the VIP rope. Next to him was Sara. Any thoughts of an escape left Oliver’s thoughts.

Standing up from the booth, he smiled at the two newcomers.

“Hey guys,” Oliver greeted, yelling over the noise. “Glad you could make it.”

“This looks like the place to be,” Digg said. “Is it free drink night?”

“Nope, just a typical Saturday night.”

Digg smiled and clapped Oliver on the back. Oliver was happy his friends were proud of his success. There was a time Oliver coasted on his family name and family money. Verdant may have started successful for those two reasons, but it stayed a success because of Oliver’s hard work. Though now he had a lot more help since Oliver’s time at Verdant was limited.

“Sara,” Oliver said, “it’s good to see you again. Glad you could come by and see the place.”

“This place is amazing,” Sara gushed. “I can’t believe you own this.”

“Thanks. Sara, this is my friend and colleague Barry. Barry, this is Sara, Digg’s army friend.”

“Nice to meet you, Barry.” Sara’s smile was wide and excitement showed through the tone of her voice. It was contagious.

“You too,” Barry said, and smiled back. “How long are you here for?”
Sara and Digg slid into the booth, Oliver followed, after he flagged the waitress down again.

“A week. I’d love to stay longer, but my sister needs me.”

“Oh, well it’s nice you and your sister are so close,” Barry responded.

“Yeah, it is,” Sara replied absently. Everyone at the table, and perhaps even the bouncer outside, could tell Sara was saddened by that fact.

“Umm,” Barry started awkwardly. He looked down at his watch. “I know this is going to sound lame, but I have a test on Monday and I’m so behind on studying.”

“No, that’s cute,” Sara said. “Good for you. Go study. Get all A’s. Shoot for the moon, and all that.”

Barry smiled and Oliver was thankful Sara made Barry feel better about leaving early. Digg stood up so Barry could scoot out of the booth. Barry gratefully said to Sara, “Thanks. Oliver, I’ll see you Monday afternoon?”

“Yep.” Oliver dismissed the notion of QC work, as it was the weekend.

“Digg, good to see you again.”

“You too, Barry. Good luck on your test.”

“Thank you. Well, bye.” Barry waved as he left and somehow went the route, which made him squeeze by everyone in the place twice to get out the door.

“He’s adorable,” Sara said. The waitress came back with beers for all three of them.

“Yeah, Barry is a good guy,” Oliver replied. Oliver felt a sense of achievement at Sara’s praise of Barry. It hadn’t been long ago when Barry would have blushed and hid under the table at the presence of a beautiful woman like Sara.

“He should keep you out of trouble,” Digg teased.

“What trouble?” Oliver asked. “I’ve been a perfect role model for the kid. A pillar in the community. Starling City’s favorite son. The-”

“I seem to remember seeing some other titles the media has dubbed you with,” Sara laughed. “I think Digg might be right about needing someone to make sure trouble doesn’t follow you.”

“That is in the past. Digg, you know that. I assure you, Sara, everybody loves me now.” Oliver gave his more charming smile. Sara laughed. Digg pointedly looked away and took a sip of his beer. Digg hadn’t been in Oliver’s life during the real memorable moments the media captured and exposed. But Felicity had. And Felicity loved to share stories with Digg. And Digg loved to hear them. Oliver didn’t want Sara to have the impression of him. What was the point of cleaning up his image if everyone knew how he used to be? “So, Sara, how do you like Starling City? The bit you’ve seen so far, anyway?”

“It’s actually pretty cool,” Sara said as she nodded her head.

“Oh,” Oliver said as he narrowed his eyes and smiled. “You weren’t expecting to like it here, were you? You thought this was just a crime-ridden, rat-infested dump.”

“No?”
“I will have you know the rat population is on average for any city our size. And crime has gone down the past year.”

“Are you the city’s spokesperson? Do you get a commission for every tourist who stops here?”

Digg laughed. “No, Oliver does not work for the city. All his promotional work for Starling City is pro-bono.”

“This is my city. I was born here and I love it. And if it needs to be defended, rhetorically speaking because I’m no good in a fight, I’m your guy.”

“That is very sweet,” Sara said.

“Thank you, I am a very sweet guy.” Oliver claimed. Digg snorted. “I might also know some things about the city from a report for QC’s Applied Sciences.”

“And suddenly the truth appears,” Digg teased.

Sara was thoughtful when she added, “One of the biggest draws of Starling City, at least for me, is the wonderful people who are here.”

“Now you’re just trying to make me blush,” Digg joked. Sara threw a rolled-up napkin at him. Digg and Oliver laughed.

Oliver got a couple war stories, specifically of Digg, he hadn’t heard before. Sara was happy to aid in the embarrassment of Digg. To even out the playing field, Digg felt it necessary to share a couple of Oliver’s arrest stories from when he was a teenager with too much money and time. Sara laughed quick, and often threw her head back in laughter. Oliver found her laugh contagious and laughed easier than he normally did. Time passed quickly. It felt to Oliver as if they had only talked for an hour, when Sin, from the bar, announced it was closing time to the straggling crowd.

“That is my cue,” Digg said as he stood up and yawned. “I’m not as young as I used to be. I need my bed.”

“Okay, old man,” Sara patted his large arm after she and Oliver followed Digg out of the booth. “I’ll see you back home.”

“Did you two drive separately?” Oliver asked.

“Yeah, I was at Cisco’s forever,” Sara answered. “That boy can talk. I only got out of there in time to meet Digg here.”

Finally, there was someone who found Cisco’s incessant need to talk all the time annoying, not endearing.

Digg held his hand up in goodbye. “Goodnight, Oliver.”

“Goodnight.”

“Since I know the owner,” Sara said, “do I have to leave now?”

Oliver stretched. “No, we can stay. I can’t serve you though. I don’t think.”

“That’s okay. I’m fascinated in seeing places after they close down. I love seeing how empty it is, how quiet.”
“Well, here is my empty business,” Oliver said and swept his arm out, displaying it as if he were a Price is Right model. Sin had turned on the overhead florescent lights, chasing away the club’s ambiance. The tables were littered with half-filled glasses, bottles, and napkins. Oliver always felt Verdant lost a bit of the magic immediately after it closed. Sara walked over to the bar and sat on a stool.

“Boss,” Sin cried out. “I’ll be in the back.”

“Don’t feel like we’re kicking you out. You should stay if you have work to do.” Oliver gestured to the mess before them.

“I, like you, have learned to delegate.” Sin motioned to the wait staff who milled around and cleaned off the tables. “I have work to do in the office, if you need me.”

“Thanks, Sin. You’re the best manager ever,” Oliver said as he sat down next to Sara.

“Is it time to discuss my raise?”

Oliver smiled tightly. “Goodnight, Sin.”

“Night, Boss.”

“Oliver, this place really is great,” Sara said. “Do you ever rent it out for private functions?”

“I haven’t before. Why? You just got here today, what private functions are you planning already?”

“For a while I’ve been wanting to plan a fundraiser for Paws and Stripes, do you know that charity?”

Oliver furrowed his brow. “It sounds familiar. I think Lyla mentioned it. Doesn’t it pair dogs with veterans?”

“Veterans with PTSD. The organization is great. And I’ve wanted to do something to help them.”

“And you want to rent Verdant? I thought you were only here for a week.” Oliver admitted to himself he was tired and he wasn’t sure if he followed the conversation. He didn’t understand why she would plan something for Starling City. Sara barely got away for this one week. Her visit took months and multiple cancellations to happen. Why would she dedicate her time to planning an event when she was here to see Digg and Lyla?

“I’m coming back. I have to. As the self-titled Starling City defender, you should be thrilled I see how great your city is.”

That was better, though Oliver hoped she reserved some time for Digg. And he wasn’t sold on the idea. “You want to invite the rich people of Starling City to a club in the Glades? I can’t say I can see most of them dancing to our set lists.”

“Well, I’m more interested in the space than the club aspect of it. Though I do need a music system, so that’s good.”

“What are you planning?”

“A sock-hop!” Sara’s eyes widened along with her smile. She bounced her legs up and down, barely containing her excitement.

“A sock-hop?” Oliver tried to hold back the judgment in his voice but he couldn’t quite believe Sara, the cool person’s cool person, was excited about a corny dance.
“Yes!”

“Like a junior-high dance where the girls where poodle skirts and boys try to look like Danny Zuko? And everyone slides around in their socks?”

“Isn’t it awesome! Adults love excuses to dress up, and they also like feeling they are helping. And who doesn’t love music from the ‘60s?”

“Aren’t sock-hops associated with the ‘50s?” Oliver asked. This was not a good idea. No one would want to go to a junior-high dance as an adult. No one wanted to go when they were in junior-high. But maybe he underestimated Sara. Maybe she had the coolness to pull it off.

Sara paused and her eye line went up to the ceiling for the answer. Less than five seconds later she shrugged her shoulders. “No one will care if the details aren’t entirely accurate. So, what do you think? Can we use Verdant?”

“Why not?” Oliver replied. “If you have it on a Monday or Tuesday I won’t charge you.”

“We would need your staff.”

“That’s fine. I’ll pay them. Better to keep your overhead low so more money goes to the charity.”

“Thank you!” Sara hopped off the stool and hugged Oliver. As she pulled away she asked, “You’ll save a dance for me?”

“I don’t dance,” Oliver answered. Sara made a mopey face with her bottom lip jutted out from her frown. “Maybe I’ll make an exception for you.”

“Yes!” Sara climbed back on the stool and swung her legs back and forth. “We’ll talk details later. That okay?”

“I’m not sure I’d remember any details anyway,” Oliver really needed sleep. He couldn’t remember the last time he was as excited for something as Sara was for her charity event. Especially at 2:30 in the morning. Sara was one of the most open people he had ever met. Maybe that was why she wasn’t bothered by being obligated to visit the other veteran in the area. “Oh, I wanted to ask how your visit with Nyssa went.”

“Oh,” Sara said. Her legs stopped swinging her legs. “Um, it was fine.”

Oliver chuckled. “It’s okay if you don’t like her. I won’t tell anybody.”

“Um,” Sara bit down on her thumb nail.

“She was too reserved, wasn’t she?”

She took her hand away from her mouth slowly. “Now that you say it, I did have a hard time getting her to open up to me. Reserved is a good word for Nyssa.”

“Yes,” Oliver agreed readily. “Way too quiet. It’d be easier to get a Russian operative during the Cold War to give up state secrets than to have Nyssa tell you what her favorite color is.”

“That’s probably true,” Sara said, smiling.

“I actually have a theory about her,” Oliver leaned in and whispered. More for dramatic effect than trying to keep anybody from overhearing them. The servers weren’t even paying attention to them. And even if they were, they had no interest in Nyssa Ratko. Though it was probably best if Oliver
kept his speculation to just the two of them.

“You do?” Sara turned her head quickly to Oliver.

Oliver could finally get some information about Nyssa instead of her just staring dead ahead and acting as if she hadn’t heard him. He would prove she wasn’t better than him. “But I need more information. You knew her from Afghanistan?”

“Yes.”

“But you’ve seen her stateside, right? Before today I mean.”

“Yes,” Sara answered. Her finger tapped against her leg. “I did a security consult for her family’s estate.”

“Perfect! Do you know anything about her sister and brother-in-law?” Oliver asked. Oliver wanted to fill in some holes of the puzzle that Nyssa was. The prospect of proving his theory correct satisfied his righteous annoyance of Nyssa.

“I just worked with them,” Sara answered slowly.

“You have? Great!” Oliver exclaimed. “What Nyssa’s relationships with them like?”

After a moment of thinking, Sara said, “Her and Talia don’t get along. I know that much.”

“Do you know why?”

“No,” Sara’s finger tapped faster. “I didn’t ask. I assumed it started in their childhood.Sibling rivalry.”

“Hmm,” Oliver replied. That didn’t prove anything. “What about her brother-in-law?”

“Bruce Wayne?”

“Is that his name?” Oliver’s tone went dark and Sara’s questioning look told Oliver he wasn’t fooling her in his fake ignorance. But he refused to acknowledge that asshole.

“Yes. From what I could tell they get along well enough.”

“Even though Talia doesn’t get along with Nyssa?”

“I guess.”

“Didn’t he save her? Do you know anything about that?” Oliver couldn’t be happier to meet someone who could, and would, answer questions about Nyssa. He realized if Nyssa had just answered his basic questions, he wouldn’t be nearly this curious about her. A little part of him told Oliver he could have gone to Cisco, but Oliver couldn’t imagine a circumstance where he was that curious.

“He did save her. I was actually there when it happened.”

“You were?” Oliver leaned closer to Sara. He was about to be proved right. He knew it. “What happened?”

“Um, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this,” Sara stated, then leaned closer in as well, “but I know you’ll keep it to yourself. We were out getting ice cream.”
“We?”

“The four of us, Talia, Bruce, Nyssa, and me. Their father was being an ass and we decided to get some air. Once we got the ice cream, Nyssa walked off by herself. A guy came out and held her at gunpoint. Bruce tackled the guy and restrained him.”

“Nyssa didn’t do anything?”

Sara sighed and looked down. “I think she had a flashback to Afghanistan.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Oliver said. He hesitated before he continued. “So, the two of them are close?”

“They get along when they see each other. Which, I don’t think, is that often,” Sara replied. “Are you going to tell me your theory?”

Oliver considered for a second. “No laughing at me. You’ve been able to actually observe them. But I wondered if maybe Nyssa and Bruce are closer than anyone else would think.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think they may be having an affair.”

“Hmm,” Sara replied as she bit her lip. “I hadn’t thought that before.” After a moment, her smile returned. “But I could see it. It’d explain a lot. But, gah, that would be messy. Married to one sister, having an affair with the other sister.”

“That sounds about right. Bruce isn’t the nicest person out there.”

“You have met him before?” Sara asked with a smirk.

Oliver ignored her. Now that Sara agreed his theory was possible, Oliver was sure he was right. If someone who has witnessed them together thought it a possibility, it had to be true. It was probably why Nyssa was so quiet. She’s afraid if she talked more, she’d let her betrayal escape. And it was a deplorable thing to do your sister, even if they never got along. It had to be the real reason why she wasn’t with her family in Gotham. Oliver guessed Talia had her own suspicions and did what she could to keep her husband and her sister apart.

“Well, this has been fun,” Sara said. She hopped off her stool and pushed her tight pants down that had ridden up on her legs.

“Yes, it has. We should meet up again.”

“We should. That’d be great,” Sara replied. “How about tomorrow? And we can go over details of the sock-hop.”

“You don’t waste any time. Okay. Text me tomorrow when you want to meet.”

“Cool. See ya tomorrow,” Sara said as she walked backwards away from Oliver and waved her fingers in goodbye.

Oliver was going to like having Sara around.

The best part about Sundays, to Oliver, was the chance to sleep in. Once he was up he did some
work for QC and sent an email for Verdant. It was a lazy Sunday. Oliver had turned on a baseball
game and dozed in and out while watching. Sometime during the game, he got a text from Sara. He
texted back and zoned back out.

“Oliver,” Moira called out from the door. “Lunch is ready.”

Oliver stretched his arms over his head and released a sigh. When he got to the dining room, his
mother and Felicity were already sitting down and talking. Oliver didn’t understand that with how
many rooms the house had, they didn’t have an informal dining room. The three of them didn’t need
this big of a table for lunch. He sat down and the women started eating.

“Oliver,” Moira said. “I didn’t hear you come in last night. Did you come home?”

Oliver gave his mother a small smile. “Yes, Mom. I came home, but it was late. Sara Lance and I
talked a bit after closing.”

“You must like her then?” Moira asked.

Oliver nodded. “She’s fun. Felicity, I’m sure you’ll like her too.”

Felicity looked up from her plate. “Hmm.”

“What were you doing awake so late, Mom?” Oliver asked.

“I had a nightmare. At least I think it was a nightmare. It seemed so real. But what’s-his-name told
me it was a nightmare.”

“I’m sorry, Moira,” Felicity empathized.

“I went back to sleep even though I didn’t want to.” Moira then suggested, “Anyway, you should
bring her and Mr. Diggle over one night for dinner. Ms. Michaels too, of course.”

“I will extend the invitation.” Oliver replied and Moira focused back on her food. He questioned if
Sara would enjoy such a formal dinner. Sara might think the dinner was a bit stuffy.

The biggest issue would be how Sara dealt with Moira. Oliver wasn't sure how Moira would handle
Sara; new people were sometimes a challenge for Moira. It’d be nice if Sara was patient enough with
his mother.

“Where is your new best friend now?” Felicity asked.

“We were going to meet up today and discuss a charity event she wants to do, actually. But she had
to do something else.”

“What?” Felicity asked.

“Just a thing.” Oliver replied vaguely. He became engrossed in his chicken.

“Oliver, what are you hiding?”

“Nothing.”

“I can call John if you don’t answer.”

A sigh escaped Oliver and he looked up to Felicity’s face. In a voice barely above a whisper, Oliver
answered, “She had to go out of town.”
“She just got here yesterday,” Felicity exclaimed. “Didn’t she?” Her eyebrows were as high as they could go. Oliver could tell she tried not to judge Sara.

“She did, but she’s closer to something here, than in Blue Valley.”

“What was so important she had to leave the place she just got to, and postpone a meeting with you about some charity event?”

“She wants to have a dance to raise funds for a charity that helps vets who have PTSD.”

“That sounds like a great cause, Oliver,” Felicity responded, “but it wasn’t what I asked you. I have to wonder about her having a fundraiser when she’s only here a week.”

“She’s going to come back and have it then.”

“Great. Where is she now?”

Oliver took a bite of his food. He didn’t want to answer Felicity because she would think Sara was silly. In fact, Oliver thought Sara’s reason for leaving was silly. But who were they to judge.

Felicity set her fork down and waited for Oliver to finish his bite. Her head tilted to the side and a small smile formed Oliver had seen many times. Felicity was exasperated with him, but also humored by his behavior. She had learned over the years the best way to deal with Oliver during these times was with insistence and patience. Felicity was getting better at it, which wasn’t good news for Oliver. She would, more often than not, get what she wanted from him now, and he didn’t have the pleasure of watching Felicity lose her patience. It was one of Oliver’s favorite things.

But it didn’t seem as if Oliver was going to get to see that today.

“She went to Coast City,” Oliver finally answered.

“Why?” Felicity was confused.

Oliver sighed. “She wanted pizza from there.”

“Did you say pizza?” Felicity asked. He knew she thought she misheard him.

“Yes, pizza. She loves the pizza from this one place in Coast City. It’s too far for her to go when she was in Blue Valley, but it’s a more manageable drive from here.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s still a couple hundred miles away.”

“I’m guessing it’s really good pizza. And she must have been craving it for a while.”

“Did John or Lyla go with her?”

“Uh, no. They didn’t,” Oliver said. This was his biggest reason why Oliver didn’t like the idea.

“She came here to visit them,” Felicity said, “and she can’t even stay here 24 hours before leaving again. That is rude. And the traveling some 250 miles for pizza is ridiculous. How does she know she wouldn’t like the pizza here? She didn’t even give any of ours a chance. I hope John and Lyla aren’t too hurt by this.”

“I’m sure they’re fine. They’ve known her a long time, and have to know how spontaneous she is.” Oliver really hoped that was true.
“She doesn’t sound very responsible,” Moira said. “I don’t think you should hire her.”

“I’m not considering her for a job, Mom. She has her own security company,” Oliver responded with a low voice.

“Well then I hope she doesn’t lead you to be irresponsible again,” Moira said. “You’ve been doing so well lately. I don’t want to..do the thing….” Moira struggled for the word. She knew what she wanted to say but her brain didn’t know how to say it. Moira set her fork down as her frustration built. Usually Oliver or Felicity could help and supply the word for her, but neither knew what she was trying to say. “You know…do you know?”

“I don’t know, Mom,” Oliver replied, his voice soft. “It’s fine though. Don’t worry about it.”

“No. I know the word,” Moira insisted. Her voice raised and her agitation mounted.

“Okay, Moira,” Felicity’s voice soothed. “Can you tell us more about the word?”

“It is…floor?” Moira asked, uncertain. “No, not floor. But like floor.”


“No, that’s not it! It…I…stay. Make you stay.” Moira looked to both Oliver and Felicity, hoping they knew the word she searched for. Oliver had no idea what the word could be.

After a while, what felt like hours, Felicity tentatively asked, “Ground?”

“Yes,” Moira shouted in triumph. “Ground!”

Oliver paused to connect the word ground to what they were talking about before and bit his lip. Hesitantly, he said, “Mom, I’m an adult now. You can’t ground me anymore.”

“I know that,” Moira responded quickly. She picked up her fork and continued eating.

Oliver knew Moira lied. She had thought, for a little bit, Oliver was a teenager again and she could ground him for his reckless behavior. Dementia was an asshole.

Felicity caught his eye and smiled warmly. Her smile somehow kept his tears at bay.

“Did you hear about Kohl’s amusement tent party on Saturday? Their investors and consultants here in Starling City get in an hour early.” Felicity asked, changing the subject before a detailed account of Oliver’s past exploits could be given.

Oliver snorted. “Will it be hot dogs and bring your own beer?”

“You, mister, are such a snob,” Felicity said. “Kohl’s is a very successful business, that you invest in. Yet, you still turn your nose at them. So what if caviar with gold flakes isn’t served? Nobody likes that anyway. It’s okay to not always be surrounded by opulence. You know that, right? There’s nothing wrong with having a little less.”

“Felicity,” Oliver softly interrupted. As much as he loved hearing her babbles, his mother was less fond of them. Especially when Felicity went off about their rich lifestyle.

“What?”

“I don’t need you to convince me. You’re right. I’m sure the Kohl’s whatever-party will be great.”
“Okay,” Felicity eyed him wearily, looking for a trap. “Good.”

“I haven’t heard of it actually,” Oliver said, thinking back to Gladys’ correspondence meetings Oliver hated. “Why wouldn’t they invite us? We’re investors. We should be invited.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go,” Felicity smirked.

“That’s beside the point. It’s rude for them to not invite us. Also, tacky.”

“Oh,” Moira spoke up. “They did invite us. I got the invitation, but I didn’t think you’d want to go. I don’t remember where I put the invitation, though. Your office? My bedroom? I don’t know. Ask James where I put it.”

“I’ll find it. Did you respond, Mom?” Oliver asked.

“I thought you were too good for their parties?” Felicity teased.

Oliver looked at Felicity. He knew if he didn’t go, she would hound him relentlessly about it. And it was what Felicity expected. Smiling to himself, Oliver thought it was always amusing to surprise Felicity.

“I think I will go,” Oliver said. “It’d be good to mingle with the peasants.”

Felicity rolled her eyes then smiled her sweet, yet shy smile, and her proud look returned. Oliver smiled in return.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Oliver has fun at the carnival, despite his apprehensions.

4 Years Ago

Felicity pushed her hair out of her eyes as she stood up to survey her progress in packing. There were boxes everywhere but it seemed as if Felicity hadn’t made a dent. Her mother owned way too much crap. Felicity wasn’t sure how she would get rid of it all.

Guilt struck her heart at that thought. What a selfish, uncaring daughter she was. Donna’s things should carry sentiment for Felicity. It should be impossible to even consider getting rid of them. Yet Felicity had 23 boxes filled to donate and not one box of stuff to keep for herself. Donna deserved a better daughter, especially after all the sacrifices she made for Felicity.

Swallowing down her tears and sadness, Felicity bent back down to continue packing. Thinking would only lead her to recall all her regrets regarding her mother and how Felicity was never there for Donna. How ungrateful Felicity was. How Felicity never once thanked her mother for all she did.

A knock on the apartment door brought Felicity out of her spiral. With a staggered breath, she pushed down her feelings and walked to the door.

“Oliver!” Felicity blinked a few times to make sure she wasn’t imagining him.

“Hey, Felicity,” Oliver greeted and pulled her into a hug. After a couple awkward pats on his back, Felicity escaped Oliver’s arms.

“What are you doing here?” She asked as she gestured him inside. When he rolled a suitcase in with him, Felicity wondered how long Oliver planned to stay.

“I’m here to help. You said you were having trouble doing everything on your own, so I decided to fly down.”

Felicity narrowed her eyebrows at him.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“You are voluntarily down here to help me do manual labor? You? Billionaire who literally moved out of his apartment instead of cleaning it.”

After a dramatic hurt look, Oliver said, “First of all, that was in college and I’ve grown since then. Second, you need help. I’m here.”

“I can do this on my own. I know I complained,” Felicity walked around him and picked up her notepad, “but I got it under control now.” She didn’t need anyone’s help. She didn’t deserve it.

“You just said last night you were overwhelmed.”
“I…just needed some sleep.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Smoak. Put me to work.”

She tapped her fingers against her leg and bit her lip. Felicity looked down at her notepad and felt lost. “I have a system and I can’t integrate another person into it.” When she looked back up at Oliver, after no response from him, Felicity found him trying to peer into her soul. She jerked her head back down and went back to biting her lip.

“Felicity,” Oliver whispered. He stepped forward and took her notepad out of her hands. After he set it down, Oliver grabbed Felicity’s hand and steered them around several towers of boxes to reach the couch. Felicity followed in short steps, unable to free her hand. She allowed Oliver to pull her down on the couch next to him; he kept a hold of her hand. “Talk to me. The truth please.”

Keeping her eyes away from his, Felicity picked at a string across a rip in her jeans. She did not want to talk. She did not want to feel. She just wanted everything to go back to normal. But that seemed impossible without her mother in the world.

With his free hand, Oliver lifted her chin to look Felicity in the eye. She tried to swallow back the tears, but she felt her eyes brimming over with traitorous tears. Without a word, Oliver pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her. Felicity sunk into him.

Somehow she wasn’t able to keep her “in-control” facade around Oliver for more than three minutes. Felicity wrapped one arm around him and put her head down on his shoulder. Oliver’s cheek went down against the top of her head. The comfort he provided was apparently a signal for her tears to come pouring out. Her hand gripped his t-shirt in front of her in an attempt to stifle her emotions.

But the tears continued and Felicity gave up trying to stop them.

After a half-hour of her blubering and Oliver running his hand up and down her back and placing small kisses on the top of her forehead, Felicity began to calm down. Hiccups began as she wiped her tears away.

“Are you okay?” Oliver asked after Felicity pushed herself up and out of the warmth of his arms.

“Yeah.” Hiccup.

“Really?”

“I’m…better.” With a sigh, she admitted, “I’m feeling guilty for not being there for my mom. I didn’t even know how sick she was.”

“Felicity, look at this apartment,” Oliver gestured around them. “You helped her afford this place. And your mother was the one who kept her illness to herself.”

“Exactly,” Felicity said. “She didn’t even trust me enough to tell me the truth.”

“Or,” Oliver added in a low voice, “she wanted to protect you. I’m told that’s what parents do.”

“I guess,” Felicity conceded. Logically, she knew Oliver was right. But as much as she was fluent in computer systems, her heart wouldn’t allow her to see her mother’s death impartially. In an attempt to lighten the mood, Felicity admitted, “I did however make your t-shirt wet with tears and snot.”

“I’m a billionaire,” Oliver shrugged. “I can buy 100 more.”
Felicity snorted at his weak joke.

“How about I make you dinner and then you can clue me in on your packing system?”

“My mom was a worse cook than I am, I don’t think there is anything in the kitchen to cook anything.” Felicity played with his fingers, happy to have him there with her.

Oliver sighed in mock indignation. “I guess I could order pizza tonight and then I’ll go grocery shopping tomorrow.”

“How long are you staying?”

“I took a week off, but I can stay longer if you need me to.”

She bit her lip again and then barrelled into Oliver with a hug. After a grunt, he hugged her back.

“What else did you expect? I owe you one after you were there for me after my dad passed. And, this is what best friends do.” Felicity swallowed back more tears. She thanked whatever god or creator in the universe for bringing Oliver into her life. Felicity knew somehow she could get through anything as long as Oliver had her back.

Present Day

Oliver didn’t have a clue how to dress for the carnival. There’d be other investors, though Oliver wasn’t sure he’d see them. Yet, if they were there Oliver needed to impress them. But there would also be Kohl’s customers there. Customers Oliver knew would dress for comfort. Oliver wanted to blend in, but still look like a CEO.

He opted for jeans and a dark blue button down with rolled-up sleeves. He hoped he walked the middle ground successfully. Oliver still didn’t know why he had agreed to come to the carnival. Though he knew it was somehow Felicity’s fault. QC didn't have the public as customers. Not directly. QC sold to manufacturers and had the occasional military contract. Customer service and retail stores were not something QC had to deal with.

Since alcohol was going to be mandatory for him to make it through the night, he had a driver take him. Oliver had a rule if children were going to be present, alcohol was a must. The last kid he had to deal with was Thea. And she worshiped the ground he walked on, or stumbled on as the case was in his rebellious teen years. Thea was easy to please. Strange kids were not. And they yelled and got sticky and cried and vomited and generally they were like dealing with emotional cats. One minute they snuggled on top of you, the next minute they clawed your face for no discernible reason.

Just as Oliver planned his multi-reasoned explanation for having the driver, he saw Felicity get out of her own hired car with her own driver.

“Good evening, Felicity,” Oliver greeted with a wide smile. Felicity turned towards him as he crossed the street to her. Her outfit stood out to Oliver as she rarely wore jeans. Felicity’s long brown boots dressed up the dark blue skinny jeans. Oliver couldn’t help but stare a little longer at the jean and boot combo.

“Oliver, why do you have your I’m-about-to-get-you-in-trouble smile on your face?”

“I think you are misinformed about my smiles. This is my I’m-so-proud-you-finally-listened-to-me
“With you, those smiles are identical. But I’m not sure that smile is warranted.”

His smile became wider. “Yes, it is. You used a car service.” Felicity half turned away from him. “Now you can have a proper night’s worth of fun and not worry about drinking so much you can’t drive home.”

Felicity turned back and swatted Oliver’s shoulder with her wallet looped around her wrist. “You are…nonsensical.”

Oliver laughed and soon Felicity smiled with a head shake. He offered her his arm and they walked through the gates.

The evening had a chance at being moderately fun.

The smell of sugar and grease permeated the air. Multi-colored lights assaulted their eyes. Sounds exploded all around them. People walked into whatever pockets of space they could find.

Basically, Oliver’s nightmare.

Just as Oliver and Felicity had found an empty picnic table, Oliver saw Felicity wave at someone. He looked over to see who it was as she grabbed a hold of Oliver’s sleeve and dragged him along with her. Oliver let out a whine as he shuffled his feet to follow her. He had wanted to sit and, more importantly, he wanted to maintain a good distance from the sweaty, sticky bodies who kept knocking into him.

His whine turned into a short-lived groan when he realized Felicity pulled him toward Cisco and Nyssa. Felicity gave a censuring look silencing him and Oliver put on a happy face.

“Fancy seeing you two here,” Cisco said with a big smile and a tuck of his hair behind his ear. “I was just telling Nyssa we would see you two here. She didn’t believe me. Did you? You said you doubted Mr. Queen would show up. But I told you he’d be here.” More to himself, Cisco added, “Damn! I should have placed money on it.”

Oliver was fairly certain this event would only have beer and no hard liquor. Maybe he should have brought a flask.

Nyssa had looked down at her feet during Cisco’s ramble. She peeked up and quietly responded, “I just assumed you,” she looked over to Oliver with a blush, “would be busy with work.”

“Technically,” Oliver explained, “this is work. Or so I’ve been told.”

“It is work,” Felicity said at Oliver’s directed look to her. “One, it helps the Kohl’s board to put a face with one of their biggest investors. Two, it gives you a more approachable and friendly appearance to everyone else.”

“My PR person advised me to have the opposite appearance.” Though Oliver couldn’t say if Isabel was still his PR person. It’d been over a couple months since she left. If there was a just god, Isabel would be stuck rowing herself around in circles in the Bermuda Triangle.

“And how’d that work out for you?” escaped Felicity’s mouth underneath her breath. Cisco and Nyssa didn’t seem to hear her, but Oliver did. Felicity grimaced at the hurt look Oliver flashed at her unintentionally. She mouthed, ‘Sorry,’ and Oliver nodded. He wasn’t blind to how much Felicity and Isabel didn’t get along and knew Felicity hadn’t meant to show any judgment towards him.
“We’re lucky we’re having a warm March,” Cisco commented. “I would not want to go on the tall rides if it was too cold. What do you advise? Eat then ride the rides or ride then eat?”

“Eat something that isn’t too bad first. Nothing fried and nothing too sugary,” Felicity answered. “Then ride anything you want. Follow up with eating whatever you want that is bad for you. That is my nearly fool-proof plan to not get sick at carnivals.”

“Nearly?” Oliver asked as he quirked his eyebrow up.

“I can’t account for everybody’s physiology,” Felicity said with an uptick of her lips. Oliver let out a laugh and looked over to Nyssa and Cisco. Nyssa held a water with her left hand.

And on her left hand was a ring.

On her third finger.

Oliver’s mind flashed to the last time a woman’s left hand was pointed out to him. It had been Isabel’s Instagram photo and Cisco had been the one to clue Oliver in.

“That’s a unique ring, Nyssa,” Oliver said as he pointed to her ring. Who could she be engaged to? She and Bruce wouldn’t get engaged while he was still married to Nyssa’s sister, would they? “What metal is it?”

Nyssa switched her water to her right hand and tried to cover the ring. “Oh, it’s black zirconium.”

“May I see?” Felicity asked. Nyssa’s cheeks colored as she reluctantly held her left hand out. “Pretty. Are those rubies?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations,” Oliver said as he watched Nyssa closely. She pulled her hand away from Felicity’s with impressive speed. “I didn’t know you were engaged.”

“I’m not,” Nyssa said quickly. “It’s…it’s the only finger the ring will fit on.”

“Well, it’s gorgeous,” Felicity complimented. “And I wouldn’t worry about people thinking you’re engaged. Who cares, right?”

Nyssa made a sound that could have been agreement and extracted her hand from Felicity’s.

Oliver decided to poke the bear, as she were, one more time. “Whoever gave it to you has exquisite taste.”

Another noise of agreement came from Nyssa.

“Who did give it to you?”

Nyssa looked Oliver in the eyes and squinted. Oliver kept his demeanor open and worked to play innocent. He didn’t want her to get defensive. “Just curious.”

After a moment of study on her part, Nyssa replied coldly, “I’d rather not say.”

He knew it! Oliver bit his cheek to keep from smirking. He was 90 percent certain the ring was from her brother-in-law. Her poor sister. Oliver wondered if Talia had a clue of what was going on between her husband and her sister.
“I didn’t mean to pry,” Oliver said.

“I told her people would be curious,” Cisco interjected as if there was not tension in the air. “But if she doesn’t want anyone to know, just tell them that. It’s not really anybody’s business. I don’t even know. Not that I’m angling for you to tell me,” Cisco assured Nyssa.

“I know,” Nyssa said. She gave Cisco a small smile.

Silence claimed the group and managed to make everyone more uneasy. Oliver tapped his fingers against his thumb as he watched Felicity’s fingers tap her arm. Finally, Felicity asked, “Do we want to try to find everybody else?”

“That’s a great idea,” Oliver said, relieved.

“I think we’re going to grab some hotdogs,” Cisco said. “But we’ll meet up with you after. At the picnic tables?”

“Yes, if anyone was able to grab one,” Felicity answered loudly as the two pairs walked away from each other.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Felicity whispered after the other two were out of earshot.

“What?” Oliver asked as he stepped back to avoid the sticky hands of a child who ran across their path.

“The thing you insinuated about Nyssa and her ring.”

“I will keep my mouth shut when you’re around.” Oliver wasn’t surprised Felicity didn’t want to know what Oliver thought.

“Somehow that doesn’t ease my mind,” Felicity said.

She squished into Oliver’s side as a family of six barreled through the crowd. Oliver wrapped his arm around her shoulder to keep them together and hopefully avoid either of them getting trampled. After being collided into by a group of teenagers, Oliver finally complained, “The running of the bulls would be safer than this.”

Felicity laughed. Oliver had covered Felicity so she wasn’t hit by the youths, but her laughter assured him she hadn’t been hurt.

“There are John and Lyla,” Felicity said, pointing at them sitting on a picnic table.

“Thank God,” Oliver said, happy to step out of the ever moving crowd. “Oh good, Sara’s here.”

Felicity’s pace slowed. Oliver’s arm dropped from around her. He paused and grabbed her hand to pull her with him. Oliver walked quicker to their group. He also noticed Barry was there. Oliver was glad he was able to take a night off studying and join them. He and Sara would help make this event more bearable.

“Hey,” Oliver greeted as he put on a happy face. "It's good to see everyone."

“Hey,” Diggle replied. Oliver and Diggle shook hands and patted each other on the backs. "I'm surprised to see you."

"And miss all this," Oliver said and swept his arm out over the crowded carnival landscape, "with all of you? Never."
Oliver and Diggle shared a chuckle. Barry nodded in agreement, but Oliver doubted if Barry knew why Oliver and Diggle laughed. Oliver knew it was kinder not to mention it. Barry was just trying to fit in. And soon Oliver and Barry would have their own shorthand and inside jokes so Barry wouldn’t have to fake fitting in with the group.

"Barry, glad you could make it," Oliver said. He put his arm around the younger man's shoulders and playfully shook him back and forth. Barry laughed and his cheeks glowed pink.

"Was that Nyssa and Cisco you two were talking to?" Sara asked. "I didn't know they were coming."

"Really?" Felicity asked. "I had Cisco mention it to me at least three times yesterday."

"I've only met Cisco a couple of times," Sara responded.

"Lucky," Oliver muttered under his breath. Sara glanced over at him and smirked. Oliver shrugged his shoulders. He knew he should be nicer and felt guilty he spoke out at all, but he had a feeling Sara would be on his side. Besides Sara was the only one who heard him.

"Are they coming over?" Lyla asked.

"I think so," Felicity responded. "They were just getting some food."

"Hey, you look like you could use one of these," Sara whispered to Oliver as she walked to his side and handed him a cup of beer. They looked back at the group and took a couple steps back. It was obvious they were the two that had to be harangued into coming.

"What gave me away?" Oliver asked as he thankfully took the cup and took a healthy swallow from it.

"I have difficulty seeing Oliver Queen enjoying elbowing his way through and crowds and eating crap food."

"I happen to love crap food, thank you very much," Oliver protested. "Big Belly Burger happens to be my favorite place to eat."

Sara let out a loud laugh. "Big Belly is going to seem like five-star cuisine compared to what you're going to find here."

"Wonderful," Oliver said with a sarcastic tone Chandler Bing would have been proud of. "I thought you would have left Starling City by now."

"I’ve managed to prolong my visit for a bit longer," Sara answered. "And you seemed thrilled to spend your free time with Cisco."

"Oh, God. Him and Nyssa."

"Nyssa too?" Sara raised her eyebrows. She seemed surprised by his admission, though Oliver knew he had shared his complaints about Nyssa to Sara before.

“She stalls every conversation she’s a part of. Even ones with Cisco, which I didn’t think was possible.”

“Maybe she’s just shy?” Sara offered. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

Oliver sighed and looked up at the tree line to find the words to explain his dislike for Nyssa. “No, I
think it’s more like she’s secretive. She thinks the rest of us aren’t worth her time or friendship. So we’re just supposed to be honored by her presence as she judges us in silence. She allows no way to get to know her.”

“Hmm, I hadn’t thought about it like that. I can see your point though.”

“Take her ring for instance?”

Sara dribbled some beer down her chin. She wiped her chin as she asked, “Her ring?”

“Have you seen it? Black metal with rubies?” Oliver gestured to his left hand and made a circular motion.

“I have. Yesterday. Digg wanted me to check Cisco’s place out, security wise. I think he wanted to give Nyssa some peace of mind. Anyway, I saw it then. Didn’t think too much of it.”

“I wouldn’t have either,” Oliver admitted. “But she won’t tell anyone who gave it to her.”

“I just assumed she bought it herself,” Sara said with a shrug.

Oliver gave a grunt, which stated he disagreed. “Well…” Oliver stopped himself. He wasn’t sure if he should share his tiny bit of suspicion regarding Nyssa. Nyssa had never hurt him and he didn’t want to be unkind to her, no matter what he thought of her behavior towards him.

“Well what?” Sara asked. She gently hit his arm and let out a laugh. “You can’t stop there. I can tell you’re almost at the good part.”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone,” Oliver said. He decided Sara was safe to tell. He had shared his initial theory about Nyssa and Bruce to Sara and Sara had taken it well. Sara didn’t know anyone here well, except Digg and Lyla, and most of his information was from them anyway.

Sara crossed her heart with her free hand. In a mock serious tone, she said, “I promise.” She laughed and Oliver swore her eyes twinkled. Sara took a swig of her beer and motioned him to get on with it.

“Cisco told me Nyssa’s father, Ra’s,” Oliver said. Sara nodded. Of course she knew him, she worked for him. Oliver continued in a low voice. He didn’t want anyone to overhear him. “He keeps her on a short leash and only gives her a very small amount of spending money.”

“And?”

“And,” Oliver continued, “I don’t think she could afford a ring like that. Or any ring that didn’t come out of a plastic egg in a vending machine.”

“So?” Sara asked. “Her father must have given it to her?”

“Probably,” Oliver said.

He took a drink from his cup and the warm beer coated his throat. Oliver looked over at Barry who fumbled over some change in his hand. Felicity stood next to Barry and caught the change he dropped. After watching for a few seconds, Oliver realized she hid her annoyance when Felicity finally took her wallet out and handed Barry several bills. Barry didn’t want to accept, but Felicity almost always got her way. Barry seemed to be thanking Felicity quite profusely, but Oliver could tell they both felt embarrassed. Barry for not having cash, which Oliver should have thought of, and Felicity for being thanked for her generosity. She hated that.
“Probably?” Sara asked, redirecting Oliver back to their conversation.

“It’s just this idea I had about Nyssa. I don’t have any evidence. Just a hunch.”

“You have to share now,” Sara exclaimed. “I mean, you’ve shared this much, a little more isn’t going to hurt anybody.”

“Fine,” Oliver said. He found himself happy he had a confidant in his musings. He stood a little closer to Sara and whispered even softer than before, “So you know how I think it’s possible there is more going on with Nyssa and her brother-in-law?”

“Yes,” Sara replied. She tried to hold in the giggles that escaped her.

“Don’t laugh. Sure, my imagination may have ran a bit wild. But now there’s this ring. This ring Nyssa doesn’t want to say who it’s from. Why not just say instead of leaving us to conjecture? Unless the truth is worse than any fiction we could come up with?”

“You do have a point,” Sara said. She looked down at the hard dirt below their feet and nibbled her lip. After a moment, Sara released her lip and looked up to Oliver. Oliver considered her smile and determined it was three-parts gleeful and one-part mischievous. “I can’t think of any other explanation. She must be involved with Bruce. Poor Nyssa. Stuck here when all she wants is to be near her brother-in-law.”

“I feel sorrier for the sister,” Oliver responded.

“Hmm,” Sara muttered in agreement as her eyebrows went up and she took a long swig of her beer. “Don’t look now, but your favorite person just arrived.”

Oliver looked despite the warning. Nyssa and Cisco joined the group. “I think you mean my favorite people. There’s two of them.”

“Are you afraid they are going to gang up on you?” Sara teased.

“Yes, one of them tries to kill me with silence and the other with non-stop words. There’s no defense for that.”

“I might have an idea that would make tonight more bearable for us,” Sara said. Oliver looked over to her and saw her smile was one hundred percent mischief now. Oliver found he looked forward to whatever trouble Sara had in mind. “How about we see how drunk we can get that is socially acceptable.”

“I imagine the level of acceptance is fairly high at a carnival.”

“That just makes it more challenging.”

“For whom? Us or our livers?”

Sara let out a loud laugh, which made the rest of the group turn to look at them with varying levels of amusement to annoyance. Oliver laughed along with her, enjoying their friends’ reactions to them.

“Okay, Miss Lance,” Oliver said in stiff voice he usually only spoke in conference rooms, “let’s see what we can do.”

A night where he was not constantly worried about his image as CEO sounded like the wish he’d make if the Make-A-Wish Foundation said they’d grant him anything he wanted.
The duo made their way through the crowd to wait in line. After what felt like several hours, they purchased several pitchers of beer and gracefully navigated back to their group’s claimed picnic table.

Oliver was no stranger to alcohol. When he was younger it had gotten him in all sorts of trouble. Both legally and tabloidy. But it had been a while since Oliver drank to get drunk.

That was where Oliver placed the blame for ending up on a karaoke stage with a microphone in hand. He knew the chorus of the Beatles’ song, but he had trouble keeping up with the verses. The audience cheered and the lights glared down on him.

“Da da da da da da,” Oliver sang to fill in the holes. “da da da you can do da da da da da da da time. Da da.” The audience didn’t seem to mind his inability to sing the verses as they kept cheering. Once it got to the chorus, Oliver sang loudly, “All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love. Al-Love is all you need.”

Oliver hummed the loves that followed. They were boring. He heard a thud and saw Sara trying to climb the stairs to the stage. He walked over, almost in a straight line, and helped her up. She laughed and pointed at him, at the same time as she leaned against him.

“You are terrible at karaoke,” Sara yelled. “You’re supposed to follow the words, idiot.”

“There’s too many of them,” Oliver complained. He wasn’t sure he liked her teasing. It was her fault he was so bad at this. Oliver knew if he was sober he would nail the song. If he overlooked the fact if he were sober he wouldn’t be on the stage in the first place.

Sara tried to take the mic from Oliver, but he held onto it with both of his hands. Sara finally covered her hands over his and they shared the mic. Oliver realized Sara wasn’t any better on the verses than he was, and her voice was so off key he worried dogs would howl back anytime. They were technically still outdoors, even if a tent covered their heads.

Finally the song was over and the crowd cheered louder. Sara tried to keep Oliver on stage, but he managed to stay out of her grasp and quickly sat next to Felicity. Sara pouted for half a second and Oliver smiled at Felicity. Felicity shook her head and turned her head back to the stage.

“Didn’t you like my singing?” Oliver asked over the sound of the screeching, yelling, and the occasional ‘yee-haw.’

Felicity slowly turned his head towards him and studied him. She sighed and said, “Your singing was fine when you knew the words. Your duet partner, however, is a little tone deaf.”

Oliver laughed. “She is, isn’t she? She was bad. But she knew the words.”

“Did she?” Felicity asked.

“She knew more than me,” Oliver replied.

“True enough,” Felicity conceded.

Another karaoke performer took the stage. He had a cowboy hat, a bushy beard, and a beer belly. Oliver knew he would sing a country song. And the cowboy didn’t disappoint with a song about friends, whiskey, and beer. Oliver thought it might be by Garth Brooks. The cowboy’s idea of singing included screeching and yelling.
Oliver shut his eyes at the sounds assaulting his ears. He peeked through squinting eyes for any sort of relief. He reached across Felicity for an abandoned red solo cup on the chair next to her, but she quickly grabbed it and kept it out of his reach. Felicity said right against his ear, “I think maybe you’ve had enough. Or you should at least slow down.”

Oliver sat back up and shouted, “But Sara and I are getting drunk.”

“You’ve clearly achieved that,” Felicity leaned in close to his face. She still had to raise her voice to be heard. Her floral perfume intoxicated Oliver more than he already was. “And Sara isn’t the one you’ll complain to about your hangover tomorrow.”

“If I promise to only complain to you once tomorrow about my hangover, can I have my cup back?”

“Fine,” Felicity said with a small smile. She held her finger up at him and continued, “But I’m texting your promise to you right now so you remember it.”

“You’re the best,” Oliver said as he grabbed the cup from Felicity while she typed into her phone. He took a huge gulp of warm beer and grimaced. He really should have brought a flask.

Felicity set her phone down on her lap and gave Oliver a big smile. Oliver smiled back. His phone vibrated in his pant pocket. He knew it was Felicity’s text so he didn’t pull it out.

“I sent something else to help you remember another detail about tonight,” Felicity said. Her smile reached up to her eyes and Oliver was sure he had never seen her eyes sparkle as much as they were now.

After a moment of staring at her sparkly eyes, Oliver pulled out his phone and tapped to see Felicity’s text. “Ahh!” Oliver exclaimed and his smile stretched across his whole face. “You filmed part of my performance. This is great!”

“I have a feeling,” Felicity said, suppressing a laugh, “tomorrow morning you will not be so happy about it.”

“No, I will love it even more then.”

“Or I have blackmail material on you now.” Felicity winked at him, one eye closing completely and the other closing half way. Oliver loved her winks. Most of the time he was the only one who knew she winked and not blinked.

“I’m not worried about it,” Oliver replied. His voice carried through the tent as the cowboy’s song had ended. He huddled closer to Felicity and whispered, “Oops. That was a little loud.”

“I don’t think anyone cares.”

Just as Oliver was about to respond, a voice filled the tent. Oliver looked up and saw Sara on stage. Her cheeks were flushed and she had a cup in her hand.

“Hey everyone, hi group,” Sara said and pointed to Oliver, Felicity, etc, who sat in several rows just left of the stage. “I want to introduce our next singer. She’s a little shy so you’re going to have to clap real loud for her to get up here.” People clapped politely. “No! That’s not near loud enough. Really get into it.” The applause amped up and Oliver couldn’t help but get swept into it and hit his hands together hard. “Much better. Okay, please welcome Nyssa!”

Oliver stopped clapping and furrowed his brow. An elbow in his rib from Felicity made him look over to her. Her head gestured toward her clapping, which had him clapping again, but not as hard.
Oliver didn’t know why Sara brought up Nyssa. Nyssa who, Oliver was sure, would not want to sing in public. He couldn’t help but think his hands stung for nothing.

To his surprise, Nyssa went up on stage. After Sara climbed down to Nyssa and dragged her up. Oliver couldn’t tell if she was happy about that fact or not, though he assumed Nyssa was at least as drunk as he was. He thought he saw some accusation on her face towards Sara. Sara beamed. She was clearly happy she got her way. Sara got out of the spotlight, but still stood on stage near the stairs.

“At least she’s going to embarrass herself, just like the rest of us,” Oliver whispered to Felicity.

“Shh,” Felicity responded and slapped his arm.

“Ow.”

Slow, melodic music filled the tent. Oliver rolled his eyes practically into his brain. Of course Nyssa would completely change the tone of the tent from upbeat and fun to depressing and slow. He finished the beer in his cup and consoled himself that with a slower song, it would be more difficult for her to hide a bad voice.

“I heard that you settled down, that you found a girl and you’re married now,” Nyssa’s warm voice settled the audience. Oliver couldn’t help but take a deep breath and feel her singing caress his skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Nyssa’s voice made it impossible for Oliver to feel annoyed with the fact her singing was beautiful. “Never mind, I’ll find someone like you, I wish nothing but the best for you.”

Felicity leaned over to put her mouth near Oliver’s ear and whispered, “I want Nyssa to follow me around all day every day and sing.” She sat up and smiled at him.

Oliver wrinkled his nose. He leaned in to Felicity’s ear to whisper, “It would get old after a while.”

“Not for a long while,” Felicity replied after turning her head.

“The people around you would find it very irritating.” He shook his head at the thought.

“People?” Felicity asked then added, “Or you?”

“People and me,” Oliver said. “But I can see why she isn’t too shy to take the stage.”

“I guess I’m not singing tonight. There is no way I can follow that,” Felicity shook her head.

“I like your voice,” Oliver protested a bit too loud.

“Thanks,” Felicity said after she shh’d him. “But I am not drunk enough to attempt to sing after Nyssa.”

“You’re not drunk,” Oliver argued.

“I’m not plastered like you, but I got a buzz.”

Oliver looked Felicity over but couldn’t tell the difference between sober Felicity and buzzed Felicity. He had only seen her drunk a handful of times and usually enjoyed seeing her uninhibited. But he was too drunk to tell the difference now. Oliver looked back up at the stage and realized Nyssa’s song was almost over.

“Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead.” Nyssa bowed her head and stepped away
from the mic. The crowd stood and cheered for her. Her face got red and she scrambled to get off the stage. Sara blocked her exit and made Nyssa take in the cheers. Nyssa’s face got redder and Oliver saw her talk to Sara, probably trying to convince Sara to let her by. Finally Sara relented and they both left the stage.

“This has been fun. Hasn’t it been fun, Ollie?” Sara asked as she shook his arm she hung on.

“I had fun,” Oliver admitted. Both he and Sara talked loudly, but Oliver found he didn’t care. He actually had a good time at the carnival and most of it was due to Sara’s presence. And despite Nyssa’s stuck up attitude.

“Sara, you’re going home with John and Lyla?” Felicity asked.

“Yes,” Lyla responded. “I’m the sober driver.”

“And I thank you for your sacrifice,” Sara said with a wave of her arm and a bow. She stumbled and almost fell on her face, but Oliver grabbed her arm and pulled her up. The group laughed.

“Good.” Pointing at Oliver, Felicity said, “And you have your car and driver taking both you and Barry?”

“Yes,” Oliver nodded with exaggeration.

“Thanks so much for that. Again, that’s just really really nice of you,” Barry gushed to Oliver. Oliver patted the younger man’s shoulder. If Barry didn’t stop thanking him for every little thing, Oliver might stop doing nice things for him. The movement from the pat made Oliver’s vision spin, so he kept his hand there.

“And you two are riding with me and my driver,” Felicity finished listing everybody’s way home as she looked towards Cisco and Nyssa.

“That is really cool of you, Felicity,” Cisco said. “I owe you one.”

Felicity shrugged off Cisco’s favor and continued walking towards the exit. The crowd had thinned by that time of the early morning.

Oliver felt like an idiot for not realizing Felicity had used a car service more for Cisco and Nyssa’s benefit than hers. Felicity would have been fine not drinking but probably didn’t want it to be seen as a burden to Cisco and Nyssa. And Oliver still didn’t see how the beer affected Felicity, and he wouldn’t be surprised to discover she was sober enough to drive. The thought of just how much of a better person she was floated in his head again.

The group said their goodnights and climbed into their cars. Oliver fell asleep after a minute of driving and only woke when Barry shook him hard when they arrived at the manor.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Sara gets Oliver to agree to hold her fundraiser at Verdant, but later Sara may have to cancel.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your comments! I appreciate them so much. Enjoy!

Oliver was sure he would be the first person to die from a hangover. He kept checking to make sure his head hadn’t actually exploded.

He had made it to his office. After a censoring look from Gladys about canceling his meetings for the morning, Oliver sat at his desk and tried to look at reports. However, his computer screen was too bright, so Oliver shuffled his way to one of his office couches. He laid down facing away from the windows and took a nap.

It was a little after one when Oliver felt certain he could handle eating some food. And there was the possibility food might make him feel better. Oliver called Barry to invite him down to the café just outside QC. Barry sounded better than Oliver did, and Oliver cursed Barry’s youth.

Barry waited for Oliver in the lobby. Barry looked like he felt fine and talked just as much as he usually did. It made Oliver suspect it was only he and Sara who had drank too much the night before.

Walking into the café a few feet ahead of them were Cisco, Nyssa, and Sara. Sara had on big dark sunglasses, which covered nearly half her face. That and her tattered jeans and oversized t-shirt told Oliver he wasn’t the only one suffering today.

“Oh, hello,” Cisco greeted Oliver and Barry with wide eyes and a smile. “Fancy seeing you two here for a late lunch. Nyssa dragged Sara out and met me here. We were going to get a table, but if you two join us we should get a booth. Are you going to join us?”

“Yes, join us,” Sara murmured to Oliver in a low scratchy voice. “We can both get filled in on what we did last night.”

“Felicity texted me a short video of me from last night. Which was unnerving,” Oliver admitted. He held the door for everyone and then let himself in. The place was dark and quiet, exactly why Oliver choose it. The lunch crowd had thinned, so the group was able to snag a booth.

As the group sat and Oliver passed Sara he said, “I blame you for all my poor drunken decisions.”

Sara replied with a grunt.

Oliver slid in next to Barry and across from Sara.
“Wasn’t last night amazing?” Cisco asked from a chair he pulled up to the booth. “I had so much fun. Who knew we had such talented singers in our group, right? Barry, you were great. Mr. Queen, you were surprisingly on pitch.”

“Surprisingly?” Oliver asked. Sara snickered and then pursed her lips together as the waitress set down a water glass for each of them. The waitress quickly tucked the dark strands of hair that escaped her ponytail behind her ears, took everyone’s order, then ran off.

“Where was I?” Cisco asked. “Right, singers! Nyssa, you were amazing! You should go on one of those singing competition reality shows.”

“No,” Nyssa immediately replied. “I’m not even sure how I got on stage.”

“Alcohol,” Sara answered and turned to Nyssa with a smile.

“I didn’t have that much,” Nyssa said. Sara turned to Oliver and raised her eyebrows. Oliver tried to pretend he didn’t notice but a small smile crept onto his face anyway.

Sara put her hands under the table in her lap, looked down at them, and smiled to herself. Nyssa, probably on edge, looked down for a moment too. Oliver was glad Sara looked away because if she had maintained eye contact, Oliver would have laughed loudly at Nyssa’s expense. And Oliver didn’t need the reprimand that would come from that action.

“It’s a shame Felicity didn’t get on stage. I bet she would have been great,” Cisco said. He turned to Oliver and asked, “Is she?”

“You missed out,” Oliver replied. “Felicity is a great singer. But there were too many people there to get her to sing last night.”

“Isn’t that a coincidence? Look who’s here?” Cisco said. Without waiting for an answer from anyone, he yelled, “Felicity. Felicity over here. Come join us. Mr. Queen was just talking about you.”

Felicity walked up to the booth, smiling at Oliver. Oliver sat up straighter and smiled back, happy for the opportunity to rebuke her for taking advantage of his drunken state to record him singing. “Okay, but I don’t have much time. I have a meeting in thirty minutes. Do I need to defend my honor?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Cisco assured Felicity. “He just stated you’re a great singer. Sit. Sit. You can sit while you wait for your food, at least.”

Felicity looked around the booth, her eyes halted a half second more at Sara. She looked over at Oliver and bit her lip. “No. I really need to get going. I have a meeting and I need to prepare for it.”

Oliver felt disappointed but knew he’d see her later, probably tonight at dinner.

“You can’t sit for five minutes?” Cisco asked. “We’d love to have another person tease those who can’t remember what they did last night.”

“Oh, I’ve already sent a text that did that. My food is here. I have to go. It was nice seeing you all.” Felicity stepped away and walked to grab her take out.

“Felicity,” Oliver called out. Once she stopped and turned back towards him, Oliver said, “My head really hurts and I haven’t been able to eat all day.”

She looked at Oliver with confusion and then slowly a smile smoothed her worry lines. “That is the
“Fine, Smoak. But next time I’d appreciate it if you kept me from drinking enough to where I think karaoke is a good idea.”

“You’ve clearly never had to say no to drunk Oliver before,” Felicity responded with a laugh. She turned back to the counter and grabbed her food. She waved goodbye to Oliver and he returned it. He watched her leave and turned his attention back to the group.

Cisco and Barry discussed individual body chemistry and the different effects alcohol can have on people. Nyssa listened with a soft smile which threw Oliver. Sara made eye contact with him then closed her eyes and lobbed her head to the side. Oliver nodded, also wishing he could go back to his nap.

The waitress’s forehead shined from the sweat. Oliver assumed it was caused by running around the whole place. She set down their food with a bang in front of them and threw a wad of napkins in the middle of the table.

“So, Ollie,” Sara said when a silence fell over the booth when everyone ate. “You know that favor I asked of you? About using Verdant?”

“For the fundraiser,” Oliver filled in the blanks. “Yes.”

“When can I have it?”

Oliver sighed as he tried to remember Verdant’s schedule. “It would have to be on a Monday or a Tuesday, our slowest nights of the week.” Sara nodded. Her smile was on full force. “And sock-hop is just a figure of speech, right? People are going to keep their shoes on.”

“Yes, everyone will wear shoes for the whole event,” Sara promised, crossing her heart.

“Good,” Oliver said. “Let me know what date works for you and I’ll let Sin know.”

“I already know when I want it,” Sara answered. “Next Tuesday?”

“That’s not even a week away.”

“I know. But I’m going back to my sister’s soon, so I’m up against the clock. Please.”

“You’re the one who is going to have to do all the last-minute planning,” Oliver said. He wondered if she spent any time with Digg and Lyla. “If it means that much to you, I’ll talk to Sin and tell her to give you anything you need. I’ll throw in my wait and bar staff for the night in my donation as well.”

“Thank you, Ollie. This is going to be so much fun. I promise.”

“I’m sure it will be. I’m actually looking forward to seeing what you are able to pull off in so little time.”

“It won’t be hard. Especially if you throw free drinks into your donation too?”

Oliver laughed. Sara had gumption, he’d give her that. “I’ll give every guest two drink coupons. The rest they have to pay for.”

“I can live with that, I guess. Aren’t you guys excited?”

“You promise I won’t be given any swirlies or have to go as some mascot?” Cisco asked. “Or have
the punch bowl spilled all over me?”

“You really had a hard time at school, didn’t you?” Nyssa asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Don’t worry,” Barry spoke up. “You’re not alone.”

“I promise, this dance will not cause any long-lasting trauma,” Sara stated as she held up her right hand.

Cisco replied, “I’ll go, but I will be watching my back.”

“Oh,” Sara said. She looked over at Oliver and both had to hold in their laughter.

“It sounds like fun,” Nyssa said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Oliver was surprised to find he believed Nyssa. She smiled, first at Sara and then to everyone at the table. Oliver thought this fundraiser might already be doing good things if it caused Nyssa to lighten up.

“I hate to be the boss,” Oliver said as he slid out of the booth. “But us QC employees need to get back to work. I will call Sin on the way, Sara, so you can go straight to Verdant.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

As Cisco, Barry, and Oliver walked back to QC, Oliver was happy to find he felt much better. And he was actually excited about a charity event. That was an odd feeling.

Dinner didn’t come too soon for Oliver, who sat at his usual spot at the Queens’ dining table. Moira was talkative and their chef’s homemade chicken pot pie was delicious. Oliver had forgone the wine in lieu of water since he had just started to feel like himself. Felicity sat in her usual spot and Barry finally joined them. Oliver hoped Barry would become a regular around the Queen dining table, like Felicity had years ago. With dinner, Oliver allowed himself to press pause on the QC concerns nagging him.

“Keep next Tuesday free,” Oliver instructed, telling Felicity and Moira about the latest on Sara’s plans. “And get your dancing shoes out.”

“And, since it’s a ‘50s theme,” Barry added with a broad smile, “everyone will wear costumes. Mine is going to be inspired by Danny Zuko. Though I don’t think I’ll be able to get a leather jacket with the Thunderbirds logo on it, but I’ll make due.”

Oliver laughed. He wondered how many people would show up like Danny Zuko or Sandy Dee. “Felicity, are you going to be a Pink Lady?”

Felicity pursed her lips and stabbed her broccoli with more force than necessary. In a tight, quiet voice, she stated, “I hate that movie.”


Felicity sighed and said, “Think about it. It tells women, if a man doesn’t like who you are then you should completely change everything about yourself. Mold yourself to be your guy’s perfect girlfriend. It’s disgusting.”
“Felicity,” Oliver said with a chuckle, “you don’t have to subscribe to the film’s message to wear a poodle skirt.”

She huffed and turned back to her food. Oliver’s brow creased as Felicity was usually happy to debate a point with Oliver. He looked forward to their discussions, especially around the dining table. Ever since he was a kid, it was what the Queens did at dinner. When Felicity first dined with him and Moira, Felicity fit right in.

“Well,” Moira said from her end of the table. “I don’t think it was polite or advised to have this event with no notice. People needed more time to check their schedules and, if Mr. Allen is anything to go by,” she gestured to Barry, “get a…mustache, no…disguise.”

“Costume?” Felicity suggested.

“Yes. Thank you, Felicity.”

Oliver looked over to study his mother. He wasn’t sure if he misheard her or if she was confused. “Mom?”

“Also, I don’t know how she expected a good turnout with so little warning. If I were the charity she helped I would not have been pleased. The event could have raised much more than it did if everyone was given the proper amount of time to plan for it.”

“Mom, you know the event hasn’t happened yet, right? It’s a week away.”

“It hasn’t?” Moira paused as she examined her thoughts. “Of course,” Moira replied after several long seconds. “That makes more sense.” She looked down at and around her plate. She then looked down at the floor. In a frustrated, raised tone Moira asked, “Where’s my fork?”

“It’s in your hand, Moira,” Felicity answered gently.

Moira looked over at her hand and found her hand holding her fork. She set her fork down in a precise manner on her plate and took a hold of her glass. After a sip of her water, she set it down and resumed eating.

The table became silent.

The only sounds made were the occasional scrape of a plate with a utensil.

Oliver hated these cruel reminders of the reality of his mother’s condition. After looking between Moira and Oliver rapidly, Barry kept his eyes focused on his plate. He chewed his lip more than his food. Felicity looked heartbroken. For both Moira and Oliver.

Setting her fork down again, Moira asked, “What were we talking about?” With an aggravated tone added, “Or should I remember that too, despite the awkwardness all of you are creating?”

Sufficiently chastised, Oliver spoke up quickly. “Sara’s fundraiser. And to be honest, I don’t think the charity is expecting a huge amount in donations. It is a smaller charity.”

“That’s another thing,” Moira said. “This kind of event attracts younger people. And younger people don’t have a lot of disposable income to give to charities. If this Sara wanted to make this event successful, she would have had a more traditional fundraiser, like a dinner.”

“Oh, she specifically said she did not want to do a dinner,” Barry said. “I think she thought that would be boring.”
“Boring?” Moira asked in a higher tone. “I’ll have her know I have personally planned many fundraiser dinners and they were never boring. It might take some creativity to make it fun, but that is what separates the average planner from the extraordinary.”

“I think Sara’s thinking on the matter,” Oliver said, though he really had no idea what Sara’s thought process was, “is younger people wouldn’t attend a dinner. And before you go back to which age groups have more disposable income, I think Sara is hoping to also spread awareness of the charity.”

Oliver kept the fact he agreed with his mother on one fact to himself. It was taking place sooner than people could plan for. He wondered about a low turnout and Sara’s ability to pull off such an event with so little time. But if Oliver had voiced his concern, Moira would never like the idea. And she still had some say about QC’s charitable donations, though Oliver would need to change that soon. It would look bad if QC didn’t make a donation. Oliver wanted to avoid hurting Sara’s feelings.

“It is going to be a fun event,” Oliver stated again. “The older crowd can relive the ‘50s, and the younger crowd doesn’t have to play ‘Guess What Food This Is.’ It’ll be just like a high school dance.”

Felicity made a grimace at Oliver’s last comment, but continued to focus on her dinner.

“What, Felicity?” Oliver asked.

“I just hated high school dances when I was in high school,” Felicity said as she looked up at him. “I have my doubts on whether the passage of time will change my mind.”

“Oh, come on. This will be different because you’ll actually like a fair amount of the people attending, and they like you. Plus, no chaperones this time. You can dance as close to your dance partner as you like.”

Felicity smiled and raised her eyebrows at Oliver. “So says the expert on public indecency.”

Oliver caught her reference.

“As long as it isn’t legally considered ‘public indecency’ and gets you arrested, you can dance as close to your dance partner as you like,” Oliver amended.

“Uh huh,” Felicity replied with a wider smile.

“First,” Oliver listed, “I was not dancing with anybody so my situation does not apply here. I was just naked. Second, I wasn’t arrested.”

“Because of me,” Felicity stated, a smug look on her face.

“Am I to be forever in your debt because of that?” Oliver asked.

“Or until you convince a security guard to not call the police on me.”

“So forever,” Oliver grumbled, but a smile formed on his face despite his best efforts. Oliver looked over at Barry who smiled looking between Oliver and Felicity. Moira pursed her lips in annoyance, clearly not enjoying the topic of Oliver’s irresponsible past.

“The dance is going to be fun,” Oliver rerouted the conversation back to its earlier topic. “But you have to give it a chance for you to really enjoy it.” He pointedly looked over to Felicity. “And, Mom, if you’re worried about it adding to my workload, Sara is the one planning it and I told her to contact Sin if she needed anything. All I have to do is find a costume and show up.”
“It sounds like you’re actually going to go into the event,” Barry said, “and not just walk the red carpet.”

“Yes,” Oliver agreed. “See, Mom, another reason why this is going to be a great event.”

Oliver received a text from Sara the following morning asking him to meet her at the Diggles’. He assumed it related to the fundraiser and hoped he wasn’t about to get roped into any of the planning. When Oliver got to the Diggles’ home on the overcast day, where Sara stayed, Lyla was the only one there. Wheeling her luggage behind her, Oliver knew she was off to another business trip.

“Hi, Oliver,” Lyla greeted. “Johnny is at the bakery.”

“Actually, Sara asked if I could meet her here.”

Confusion flashed on Lyla’s face and she looked down at her watch. “Uh, she left about forty-five minutes ago. You’re welcome to wait, but I have to catch a plane.” She gave him an apologetic smile. Oliver nodded. “Lock up when you leave?”

“Of course. Thanks, Lyla.”

Oliver sat down in the living room on the Diggles’ comfy couch as he heard Lyla start her car and pull away. Oliver reached over to turn on the lamp so the warm light diffused through the room. Yesterday’s mail remained on the coffee table in front of him and the smell of coffee lured Oliver’s eye to a mug left on an end table by one of the chairs.

He was surprised Sara wasn’t there after texting him to meet her ASAP. Oliver pulled out his phone to look through his email. There was one from Sin about the sock-hop. She seemed to have a good chunk of it organized and only needed Oliver’s okay on her plans. Which made him curious about why Sara needed to see him. Oliver just sent his reply when he heard a car door slam. A few moments later, Sara came through the door.

Her hair was wind swept and her cheeks were rosy. Oliver hadn’t realized how cold the wind made it outside.

“Ollie, you made it before me,” Sara said as she dumped her purse on a chair and plopped down beside it. Oliver was a reminded of a tornado. Sara brought a fuck-load of energy into the room and expected everyone in the room to become caught up in whatever mood she was in. “I didn’t know I was going to be gone so long.”

“It’s all right,” Oliver responded. “I haven’t been waiting long.”

“I checked in on Cisco and Nyssa. I should have planned more time with all of Cisco’s babbles.”

Oliver was surprised Sara had willingly spent time with both Cisco and Nyssa. She had been right there with him in his complaints and speculations, of Nyssa in particular. For all her talk, Sara did seem to spend a large amount of time with both of them. Oliver scratched his forehead with the pads of his fingers and wondered if there was something there he didn’t know. He smiled to himself, amused by his paranoia.

“What did you want to talk to me about?” Oliver asked.

Sara sighed and Oliver realized how disappointed she looked, bordering on depressed.
“My sister called me last night at three am. She was obviously drunk and she begged me to come back. She doesn’t want to tell her husband she was drinking again, so she can’t ask him for help. Laurel says I’m the only one she trusts.”

“Oh,” was all Oliver was able to respond. It was the very last thing Oliver expected her to say. It hadn’t even registered to him as a possibility. Oliver knew her sister depended on Sara, but he hadn’t known the extent of how much her sister used Sara as a crutch.

“She wants me back ASAP, so I’ve got quite a drive ahead. But I wanted to tell you goodbye and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“I won’t be able to have the sock-hop fundraiser.”

“Oh. Right.”

“And you were so accommodating to my last-minute planning. And so enthusiastic. You were the most excited about it.”

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. “Shit happens.”

Sara let out a humorless laugh. “That it does. I would say I’d just reschedule the sock-hop, but I don’t know when or even if I’m coming back.”

“I’m sorry you’re being called away,” Oliver said. He was disappointed they hadn’t had more time to hang out. It had been a while since Oliver had the careless fun Sara brought into his life. “It sounds like you like Starling City better than you initially thought you would.”

“That’s true,” Sara replied with a bashful smile. “Though, in my defense, I had no idea I’d meet amazing people like you.”

She looked straight into his eyes with a look of affection. Tears pooled in her eyes, but refused to drop. Oliver was shocked to see so much emotion from Sara.

“I’ll make sure to keep in touch with you,” Sara said. She stood up and walked towards Oliver. Oliver stood up to meet her. She reached up and put her arms around him. He leaned down and returned the hug. As she stepped out of the hug she placed a kiss on his cheek and her lips lingered for a moment. “It’s really nice to have someone I can share anything with.”

She gave him a look Oliver knew gave more weight to her words.

Before she stepped away she grabbed his hand and squeezed and gave him a sad smile. Sara then stopped procrastinating what was inevitable for her and strode out of the house.

Oliver stood frozen until he heard her car start.

He rubbed his finger and thumb together, but soon paced the length of the living room slowly. Oliver’s brain scrambled to catch up on all Sara had admitted to him.

Did Sara like him?

She must, Oliver thought. There was no other explanation to Sara’s emotional goodbye to him. That, her heavy looks, and her lingering kiss could only mean one thing.

Sara liked Oliver.
Liked him, liked him.

Oliver was stunned.

She was attracted to him.

And, clearly, the thought of not being able to pursue a relationship with him broke her heart. Or else she wouldn’t have been so depressed.

Oliver wasn’t sure how he felt about this. He had fun with Sara. Enjoyed spending time with her. Sara made things he had dreaded, like a carnival, fun.

He stopped pacing.

He must like Sara.

Right?

Oliver stared dumbfounded into the beige wall of the Diggles’ living room. He had never felt serious about any woman before. Oliver had thought if he ever did, it would feel different.

More all-encompassing.

Of course, Oliver was disappointed Sara had to leave, but he wasn’t devastated by it. Oliver had looked forward to the sock-hop, but, frankly, it disappeared from his life without much of a wrinkle.

What Oliver needed was to spend more time with Sara so he could examine his feelings for her. But that appeared to be impossible. At least for the time being. Her sister has snatched Sara up before anyone in Starling City could really know her.

After dashing to his car, Oliver turned the windshield wipers on his Porsche. He left with confusing and unclear feelings. And no idea what to do with them.

Mr. Dennis and Walter, who just returned from Australia, had already sat down and discussed one aspect or another of QC when Oliver walked in.

“Sorry I’m late,” Oliver apologized in a flippant tone when he sat down next to Walter. “I had another meeting, which just popped up today.” He turned to Walter. “Walter, good to see you. Glad you’re back.”

“Thank you, Oliver,” Walter replied.

“If we could get back to the matter we were discussing,” Mr. Dennis cut in, “I have some other concerns I would like addressed.”

“And what concerns are those?” Oliver asked. His tone was snide but Oliver didn’t care. He wanted to be snider. Mr. Dennis wanted to take Oliver’s family business away from the Queens. Mr. Dennis didn’t deserve any respect.

“Your lateness being one,” Mr. Dennis replied. The gotcha look on Mr. Dennis’ face made Oliver want to smack it off. “I was just going over the financial report you submitted to the board last week with Mr. Steele. It’s a mess. It’s like someone who knows nothing about the company wrote it. If it
were written in crayon I would have assumed my five-year-old wrote it.”

Oliver was just about to tell Mr. Dennis where he could put the report, and the crayons, when Walter turned to Oliver and said, “I think it’s actually quite good for someone as inexperienced as Oliver is. Like I told Mr. Dennis earlier, you have made remarkable growth since taking on the role of CEO. With a little more direction and support, I believe you will succeed in your role.”

“Thank you, Walter.” Oliver was grateful to have Walter with him in these meetings with Mr. Dennis. Even Oliver knew it’d be better to not have the next day’s headlines be ‘CEO Arrested in Assault of Board’s Director.’

“But there are many qualified candidates who already know the job and would be able to jump in without needing classes to do their job.”

“None of them have the last name of Queen,” Oliver growled.

“That is not as consequential as you seem to believe, Mr. Queen,” Mr. Dennis sneered. “There is also the matter of adding more people in leadership positions who, somehow, have less experience than you.”

“Are you talking about Barry?” Oliver asked. His fingernails dug into his palm.

“Yes. Mr. Allen hasn’t even graduated yet and you hire him as director of Applied Sciences.” Mr. Dennis shook his head and Walter rubbed his temple. “Are you even aware the responsibilities the director has? Of course not. That would mean you actually paid attention all these months when, we all know, you’ve only considered this position an inconvenience to your club-running time.”

Just as Oliver pushed his chair out, Walter, once again, saved Mr. Dennis from Oliver’s rage. Walter put a hand on Oliver’s arm and faced Mr. Dennis. “That was out of line. I have seen real dedication on Oliver’s part to learn the job. Of course he wants his family’s company to be a success. It’s ludicrous to think otherwise.”

“His actions say otherwise.”

“Mr. Dennis,” Oliver said through gritted teeth, “Barry has real talent and Applied Sciences will be better off with him at the helm.” Oliver wondered how much hit men charged. He could afford it. There had to be more perks to being a billionaire besides being chastised like a child for not running his own family’s company like the asshole, Mr. Dennis, would have.

“His hiring leads me to question if you’re going to replace all the leadership positions in QC with all inexperienced people to make yourself feel better.”

“No, of course not,” Oliver answered. “Walter’s job is safe.”

Walter didn’t smile along with Oliver’s joke. Oliver sighed and looked away.

“It makes me, and the rest of the board, look to find someone who will take your position serious, Mr. Queen.”

“Am I mistaken, but you and Oliver had a deal?” Walter asked. “He has until the opening of Applied Sciences to prove he can handle the job.”

“We are rethinking that deal,” Mr. Dennis replied as he leaned back in his chair.

Oliver’s eyes shot to Mr. Dennis. “No. You gave me a deadline. We still have several months to go
before we hit it.”

“In the meantime, our stocks are taking a hit. Mr. Allen’s hiring, and frankly-”

“Oh, because you’ve been holding back so far,” Oliver mumbled.

Mr. Dennis sighed. “And you don’t inspire confidence in the market. The board’s job is to ensure the value of the company.”

“The company is just fine,” Oliver said. He would not let this little piss ant take his company away from him.

“What I believe Oliver means,” Walter said with the only calm voice in the room, “is Applied Sciences will more than make up for the dip we are experiencing now. All of us are unaware of Oliver’s true ability. The deal you made gives us a chance to see it.”

How did one find a hit man? Oliver doubted he could find one on Craigslist.

With reluctance, Mr. Dennis conceded, “Fine. We’ll continue to honor the deal. But we want to see Mr. Queen make more of an effort. Really any effort would be preferable to what he’s doing now.”

“Don’t you worry,” Oliver said. “From now on I’m going to give 110 percent.” At the very least Oliver could find a way to fire Mr. Dennis before he fired Oliver.

“Your sarcasm doesn’t ease my worries.”

“Have you tried-

“Thank you, Mr. Dennis,” Walter interrupted and stood up. Mr. Dennis followed. “I know Oliver is going to surprise you.”

“Let’s hope so.” With that, Mr. Dennis walked out the door. Oliver’s body sagged down into the chair.

“Thank you, Walter.”

“You might want to hold off on ‘thank you’ until you see how much work I have planned for you to get you off the board’s problem list.”

Oliver groaned. Being a CEO no one trusted sucked.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Oliver is confused about his feelings for Sara and Felicity provides comfort. Later, Oliver meets Isabel’s fiancé.

The sun hung low and, if not for the tinted windows, would blind Oliver in his top floor executive office. He stared at the numbers on his screen, trying to make sense of them. Oliver would have been on his way home or to the club if he wasn’t so distracted. His brain kept wandering off in the direction of Sara, her liking him, and his feelings for her.

Playboy was a word often associated with Oliver in the tabloids and a few other, more reputable, news outlets. To a certain extent, Oliver had believed the term applied to him. He had never had a serious girlfriend, but could always find the company of woman when he so desired.

What had separated him from other playboys, in his mind, was Oliver never made promises to the women he was with. Before things happened beyond a handshake and a few flirty words, Oliver ensured every woman he was not looking for a relationship. Oliver didn’t want to be the bad guy, and tried to do the right thing. Every one of Oliver’s hook-ups knew their acquaintance with Oliver would only last a night or two.

There had been a couple of encounters that went beyond his usual one, or two, night stands. That arrangement had ended amicably between Oliver and McKenna Hall, when McKenna’s job transferred her to another state.

It had ended with a restraining order with Carrie Cutter. After a week, Carrie declared she was in love with Oliver and convinced herself Oliver felt the same way. She followed Oliver everywhere, broke into the manor several times, sent Felicity threatening letters, and promised to kill him and herself if he refused to be with her.

Carrie was the reason why Moira had made Oliver hire Digg as a bodyguard. Carrie’s stalking occurred shortly after Moira had her stroke and diagnosed with vascular dementia. Moira needed to feel in control about the other aspects of her life. Control over her home and her son being alive seemed like the minimum life could grant Moira.

He still felt embarrassed by the headlines it had produced.

Once Carrie had been committed to a psychiatric facility, Oliver vowed to never have another relationship with a woman beyond a one night stand. Emotional attachments were too messy for Oliver and he was happy to avoid them completely where women were concerned. At the moment, with Verdant and launching Applied Sciences, Oliver didn’t have time for dates or heartbreak.

Yet, Oliver found himself liking Sara.

He was glad he knew more about her than he did about the other women whom he slept with. Sara was attractive and he liked the time he spent with her. It was a new and weird feeling.

Even with his like for Sara, Oliver couldn’t see dating her. He imagined what he would say to her if
she came back to Starling City and wanted a relationship with Oliver.

Oliver’s hypothetical reasons varied. He liked her but he was too busy. He didn’t want to add another worry to her life when she already had her sister’s. He didn’t know how to date. He didn’t know how to be faithful. It sounded like more work than he was willing to put in. Oliver knew they would grow tired of each other. He didn’t want a relationship.

All of these reasons were true, Oliver realized. He knew they would never have a romantic relationship. Oliver surprised himself when he felt relieved.

He did not look forward to the resulting talk with Sara this revelation made necessary.

With all this bouncing around in his head, Oliver had trouble focusing. Hence the working through sunset.

A clearing of a throat brought his attention to the door. Felicity was there, her head tilted to the side as she studied him.

“Hey,” Oliver greeted. He pulled his arms above him to stretch his back and yawned widely. “What are you doing here?”

Felicity walked into the office and sat down in the seat across from him. Her dress didn’t have a wrinkle in it, which made Oliver self-conscious about how rumpled he looked with his jacket off, sleeves rolled up, and tie loosely tied and hung around his neck. He ran his fingers through his hair in an attempt to smooth any rogue strands of hair.

She seemed concerned, but hesitant. It was like Felicity double, and triple, guessed her decision to be there.

“You weren’t at dinner,” Felicity stated. “I wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine. Just working,” Oliver replied as he held his hand out to display the paper and computer running on his desk.

“Hmm. I wasn’t sure. After today. With the news. I just wanted to see if you were okay and…I don’t know, provide an ear. Or a drinking buddy.”

“What are you talking about?”

Felicity took a deep breath and focused more on Oliver. “I heard about Sara leaving earlier than expected.”

“Oh, that. No, I’m fine.” Oliver couldn’t help but smile at her concern for him. It comforted him to know they always had each other’s backs.

“Are you sure?” Felicity asked. Her voice hitched when she said, “I know you two got close during her visit.”

“I really am okay. I promise.”

Felicity swept some imaginary lint off her dress and bit her lower lip. After the few seconds of fidgeting were over, Felicity looked back up at him and asked, “Then why are you still in the office this late?”

“Well, I started late for one. Since I had to go over to Digg’s to say goodbye to Sara. And then I had
to cancel everything Verdant had ordered for the fundraiser.” Oliver decided not to tell her he had just called Sin and had her cancel everything. Felicity obviously worried enough as it was. Oliver didn’t want to add himself to her list of concerns. “I had a meeting with Walter and Mr. Asshat. And opening a whole new division in a multibillion-dollar company takes some work, believe it or not.”

“That’s all this is?” Felicity asked, as she ensured she did her due diligence taking care of her friend.

“Yes. Scouts’ honor.” He raised his hand and stuck three fingers up in salute.

“You were a Scout?” Skepticism flooded her tone as her brow scrunched together.

“No, but they shouldn’t be the only ones who get to use that. Exactly how does one prove their everlasting honor and truthfulness at ten? And why do they have exclusive rights to Scout’s honor?”

Felicity laughed. “They are the Scouts,” Felicity replied, then bit her lip. Oliver saw she held back some nugget of factual information about the Scouts. He was impressed she was able to hold back the babble.

“How about,” Felicity said, after a moment of them staring in each other’s eyes, “I take you to Big Belly? You have to be starving.”

“That sounds great,” Oliver agreed. “You eating, too?”

“Yeah. Your chef served that fish we both hate. I only just managed to move it around my plate to appear as if I ate any.”

A smile pulled at his lips as he quickly saved his project, shut down his computer, and organized the papers on his desk into their files. Oliver could tell Felicity had trouble accepting his organizational system, but she squeezed her hands together tight to keep quiet. After grabbing his coat off the back of his chair and folding it on his arm, Oliver walked around his desk to Felicity’s side.

He indicated she should lead the way out. As she went out the door, Oliver’s hand lightly touched her lower back. With a smile, Oliver said, “Dinner will give you the chance to tell me the piece of trivia about the Scouts you wanted to tell me.”

“Oh, thank God,” Felicity replied with a gush of air. She reached out and held his upper arm in relief. They stood in the elevator bank shoulder to shoulder. Oliver inhaled deeply to get a whiff of the perfume that remained on Felicity that late in the day. “It was beginning to feel like a song stuck in my head.”

After sending an email to a nervous board member, Oliver glanced at the time and realized he only had a couple of minutes before a meeting unknown to him until that morning. Oliver dreaded the meeting the moment Gladys told him about it. He wasn’t sure what it was about, but he hoped it would result in a mutual benefited end to their professional relationship. Oliver hoped she would make it somewhat easy. It wouldn’t help anyone to drag it out.

The sound of heels clacking on the marble floor outside his office brought Oliver’s head up. There, looking very tan and superior, was his 11 o’clock meeting.

“Good morning, Isabel,” Oliver greeted as nicely as he could while she walked through the door and took a seat across from him, not sparing him a look. Instead she pulled out a file and her phone from a large black and gray purse. When Isabel sat up she purposefully brushed her hair away from her face with her left hand. Her left hand that had a heavy and bulky diamond engagement ring on it.
Felicity would wonder how many times a day she snagged it on something.

Isabel finally made eye contact and looked at Oliver expectantly. He stared back, unwilling to say more than his greeting when she hadn’t returned it. As there was no longer a personal aspect to their relationship, Oliver refused to make small talk. He would win the staring contest.

The silence felt just as unbearable as the car ride back from the Diggles’ Christmas party. At least Oliver didn’t have to reject her this time.

She let out a long low sigh.

“Fine, Oliver,” Isabel said in a snipped tone. “I’ll start. Now that I’m back I want to start booking you for some appearances. There’s a gala next week and a restaurant opening in a month. It’s supposed to be super chic.”

“Wait,” Oliver interrupted, sitting up in his chair. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

Oliver took a moment, confused, and then asked with deliberate emphasis on each word, “Why are you here?”

“To do my job, Oliver. Just like you. And I’d like to speed things up if you don’t mind.”

“I thought, well, after everything,” Oliver said, doing his best not to appear nervous. Isabel looked down at the green tiled floor. Oliver was thankful he wasn’t alone in being embarrassed. This would be an easy sell. “That you and I would no longer be working together.”

Isabel looked up and shot fire through her eyes at Oliver. Her nostrils flared and she sat higher and crossed her legs. “Oliver, I’m your PR consultant. We have a contract, that you signed.”

“Yes, but don’t you think it’ll be uncomfortable for us to continue to work together?”

“I’m a professional. Our contract is up in two years. You are my client. Unless you want to buy me out of the contract.” Her words were sharp and calculated. Oliver fought the urge to squirm a bit. There’s nothing he’d like better than buying out her contract. Oliver would happily do so if it meant it took her out of his life. Isabel continued, “But now you have a board of directors to answer to, I’m not sure they would see that as a good use of company funds.”

“I will-”

“Using your personal funds,” Isabel cut him off, “would make it appear as if you were trying to hide something scandalous. It would hint at sexual harassment, pregnancy, or some other torrid misdeed. It makes you, the CEO of QC, look as if you went back to your old rebellious playboy ways. Which would not be good for the company. So, as your PR consultant, I highly recommend you don’t end our contract.”

Isabel leaned back in her chair, placed her hands in her lap, and smiled coldly. It was Oliver’s turn to sigh. He didn’t understand why Isabel would want to continue to work with him after the Horrible Christmas Misunderstanding. It was beyond awkward between them. She felt it when she walked into the office. Plus, if she continued to work with Oliver, Isabel would occasionally bump into Barry. And from what Oliver inferred from Isabel’s laughter at Oliver’s scheme, she couldn’t look down more at Barry if she was at the top of the Grand Canyon and Barry buried 50 feet below it.

There was no way she would want to be seen with Barry ever again.
But she would like to be seen with Oliver again, because his last name was Queen. If it was money she wanted, Isabel wouldn’t have bothered to warn Oliver about the public perception of firing her. The name Queen got her in a lot of doors that otherwise wouldn’t have even existed for her. Like the wardrobe to Narnia, the Queen name was magic.

Oliver knew Isabel would not let go of the Queen magic until the very last second of their contract.

Two years. He could grit his teeth for an hour a week for 24 months. Probably less. Oliver was fairly certain they signed a three-year contract fourteen-ish months ago. Twenty-two months would be even easier. Oliver made a mental note to ask Felicity to make a countdown clock for his laptop.

“Fine, Isabel,” Oliver replied in a cool and calm manner. Isabel would not have the satisfaction of seeing him riled up. “I saw the invitation to the gala, but I already have plans that night. I could go to the restaurant opening. Make a reservation for two.”

“We should talk about the image you give when you show up to events with a different girl, and I do emphasize girl, each time.”

“Fine,” he said more clipped. “I’ll bring my mother or Felicity.”

Isabel paused and set her phone on her lap. “We should talk about that.”

“Talk about what?” Oliver barely withheld a growl. He refused to talk about what he thought Isabel wanted to talk about. His personal life was off limits to Isabel. Especially in regard to Felicity.

“People, especially news organizations-”

“Tabloids,” he interjected with disgust.

“Not just tabloids,” Isabel corrected. “Reputable news outlets are speculating about your relationship with Ms. Smoak. If-”

“Let them. We’re good friends and, like I have told you several times before, I won’t explain the nature of our relationship to anyone.” So much for appearing unaffected.

“At least let me prep you. You will start getting questions about her. I could only hold them off for so long.”

A skeptical laugh escaped Oliver’s throat. It was amazingly convenient the moment Isabel can no longer keep reporters from asking him about his relationship with Felicity coincided with Oliver’s rejection of Isabel. Oliver would not subject Felicity to the prying eyes and invasion of privacies masquerading as journalism. Oliver leaned forward and made direct eye contact with Isabel. He projected his voice a decibel too loud for the space between them, “I will not discuss my relationship with Felicity.”

“I can see that’s a touchy subject. I will try to remember not to bring it up again.”

Oliver unclenched his jaw and took a deep breath. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Isabel answered. She picked up her phone in both hands and typed on it.

Rolling his eyes at her rude behavior, Oliver attempted to get her attention, “Isabel? What else is there?” After no response, he counted to ten. He would not give her a reaction.

She spent another ten seconds focused on her phone before she put it back down and looked up at
Oliver. A chilling smile told Oliver he wouldn’t like what Isabel planned. He contemplated how it would look if he had security walk her out of the building. Probably bad. Looking at her smile that only became colder, Oliver thought it was almost worth the risk.

“I want to make sure we have a good business relationship,” Isabel started. Her eyes practically danced. “For that reason, I think it would be best to introduce you to my fiancé now.”

Oh, goody, Oliver thought. There were very few people Oliver wanted to meet less than this poor schmuck. He tried to remember what an article about their engagement had said about this guy. Cisco had babbled part of it to him, but Oliver could only recall the sound of white noise.

Being groomed since birth to smile when it was the last thing you wanted to do, Oliver gave Isabel a small grin. He didn’t have the slightest regret turning Isabel’s proposal down, and Oliver had to ensure she knew that.

“Are we meeting him downstairs then?” Oliver asked.

“Oh, no,” Isabel brushed off his question. “I had him added to the visitor’s list. He’s been in the lobby waiting for my text.”

“Ah, nothing better to do?” Oliver couldn’t resist the slight jab.

Isabel’s eyes narrowed and her smile lessened. Just as she was about to respond, a very tall tan man stepped into the outer office from the elevator banks. Oliver could see he was muscular and somewhat older than Isabel. Older than Oliver would have expected, seeing the amount of gray that colored his temples and goatee.

The other distinguishing characteristic the man had was an eye patch.

Oliver was sure he didn’t remember reading Isabel’s fiancé was a pirate. He guessed people had eye patches. But who? Weren’t there surgeries now? Eye transplants? Or glass eyes? Who wants the stares an eye patch would bring? The pirate jokes alone would persuade Oliver to any other option. No, Oliver could see by the bulky way he held his body, the grimace on his face, his snarl he gave, and how he cracked his knuckles this man wanted to be feared.

Isabel and Oliver both stood up and walked to the door to meet the scary pirate. Isabel snuggled right into his side, one arm around each other.

“Oliver, this is my fiancé, Slade Wilson. Honey, this is Oliver Queen.”

“It’s nice to meet you, kid,” Slade said, with a thick Australian accent, his hand extended to shake.

Oliver took the other man’s hand and squeezed just as hard as the pirate did. “You, too.” Oliver wouldn’t call him a silly nickname. It would imply he cared about being called kid or about Slade’s engagement to Isabel. Neither were true. Oliver was used to much worse names and being underestimated. It made it easier to win if they weren’t expecting anything.

“Congratulations to you both,” Oliver said with his fake high society smile.

“Thank you,” Isabel said. “We’re very happy.”

“Yes, we are,” Slade said as he looked down to Isabel and then back up to Oliver. The look he gave Oliver seemed to challenge Oliver. It was unclear if the challenge was over the claim to Isabel or who was manlier. The last thing Oliver needed was a pissing contest with this man.
“Do you two have a date set for the wedding?”

“October 21st,” Slade answered.

“That doesn’t give you a lot of time to plan.”

“I’m not worried,” Isabel responded. “If I had to, I could plan it in a week. But we want his family to be able to make it.”

Oliver nodded. He really didn’t care and just wanted them to leave. They didn’t seem as if they intended to leave. They looked as if they wanted Oliver to invite them in. Sometimes Oliver really hated his life.

“Come on in, have a seat,” Oliver pointed to the chairs across from his desk, and not to the couches on the other side of the office. Oliver did not want them too comfortable. They already overStayed their welcome. Which was none at all.

“So, Slade, is it?” Oliver asked. “What do you do?”

“I’m the Australian ambassador to the US,” Slade responded with a puff of his chest.

“I thought I detected an accent.”

“That was one of the first things that drew me to Slade,” Isabel gushed. It unsettled Oliver to see Isabel be soft and giggly. “Well that, and his amazing physique.”

Oliver had no response to this. Nor did he want the conversation to stay on Slade’s physique. “So being a diplomat must be interesting.”

“It’s great. I can park wherever I like and not pay any of the tickets I get,” Slade laughed. He then leaned in closer to Oliver’s desk and faux whispered, “Diplomatic immunity.”

“Hmm,” Oliver nodded.

“Slade gets invited to many of the state dinners. And you wouldn’t believe the security clearance he has.”

“I’m not really allowed to talk about that. You understand. Let’s just say it’s high and I know things that would make you want to live on a deserted island for the rest of your life.”

“Then please, don’t tell me,” Oliver hated this small talk. Did Slade actually think they were going to be best buddies? Oliver had a hard enough time keeping eye contact with his one eye and not moving his gaze to the eye patch.

“You understand keeping secrets though, right kid? I’m sure there are many company secrets you know people would kill for.”

“I barely know the key code to get into the underground employee garage,” Oliver played off his role at QC. He refused to play their game.

Slade laughed. It was loud and off putting. “Don’t worry, kid. One day I’m sure they’ll give you all the security codes and company secrets. They just have to gain trust in you and realize you aren’t the dumb kid you used to be, in those tabloids Isabel showed me.”

Isabel talked to Slade about Oliver? Oliver bet that was an interesting conversation.
“I had an eventful youth. Fortunately, I found the right people who helped me grow out of that phase.” Oliver gave his practiced answer Isabel taught him. He was sure both Isabel and Slade knew that. “With all the state dinners and secrets, it sounds as if Starling City is going to look boring in comparison.”

“Oh, I think it’s just fine.” Slade looked over at Isabel in a way Oliver guessed was meant to be loving. Without context, Oliver would have assumed Slade swallowed something rotten. “The people in it are what gives Starling City its charm.”

“Aww, honey. That’s sweet.” Isabel giggled and Oliver wondered if an angel lost its wings.

“Yes, you are wonderful, sweetheart. Earlier, while I waited in the lobby, I met a charming young woman in the lobby. She said you two knew each other. Lis?”

“I don’t know a Lis, but I do have thousands of employees. It is hard to keep all their names straight.” Oliver just wanted to get back to work. Which is something Oliver never thought he would ever want.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Felicity? She just seems like a Lis to me, you know?”

“No,” Oliver said to himself and clenched his fist. Felicity was a Felicity. End of discussion.

“Lis seems more intelligent than half of the folks at the NSA combined. I’d keep her close, if I were you, kid. She’s a real asset. I’m going to pick her brain about our security at our embassy. Maybe even get her on helping the Australian government upgrade its firewalls. And Lis seems very personable. That’s rare with IT people.”

“She’s really busy here,” Oliver said. “And I’m sure Felicity,” he stressed her full name, “would tell you she hates big spiders and kangaroos.” Oliver didn’t want to be the one to end the meeting, but couldn’t help it. He had to with Felicity mentioned. There was only so much he could handle in one meeting. “Look, it was great meeting you,” Oliver stood up and walked around his desk. He held his hand up towards the door, directing them out. “But I have to get back to work. Isabel you’ll email the restaurant reservation confirmation?”

“Yes. I do ask that next time you make sure I’m available before scheduling yourself onto my calendar.”

“Your receptionist said this time was open.”

“I’ll talk to her, too. Goodbye.”

“Nice meeting you, kid.”

The couple walked out of the office arm in arm. Oliver did his best not to vomit. “You, too,” Oliver whispered to himself with a sneer on his face.

He turned back to the traitor of an assistant he had. “I will be back later this afternoon. Please reschedule whatever I have until then.”

“Are you sure?” Gladys asked as she stood up and met Oliver on the other side of her desk. “You have a meeting with Mr. Dennis. He does not like to be put off. I think it would be best if you stayed for that meeting.”
“Fine,” Oliver said through gritted teeth. “But the next time that woman wants to schedule a meeting with me, clear it with me first. And revoke her privileges of adding guests to the visitor list.” Oliver turned back towards his office then faced Gladys again. “Oh, and make sure Slade Wilson is taken off Security’s approved visitor list.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, if it’s okay with you, I’ll be leaving early today. Please call Digg and make sure he’ll still be at the bakery at three.”

Oliver needed to share that experience. And complain. Digg was the perfect sounding board.

When three o’clock hit, Oliver stood in the elevator heading down to his car in the garage. His meeting with Mr. Dennis had not gone well. Oliver had been so distracted, by Isabel and Slade, he had not been able to focus on any of Mr. Dennis’ concerns. It certainly didn’t help Oliver’s image within the board.

The drive through downtown to Kick Ass Bakery was quick, but looking for parking took more time. Slade’s brag about being able to park wherever the hell he wanted repeated over and over in Oliver’s head. He finally found a spot barely big enough for his Porsche. After a quite-a-few-points turn and a couple of bumper bumps, Oliver parked five blocks away from Digg’s bakery.

Every step he took towards the bakery, Oliver personally congratulated himself on doing the right thing with parking legally. Just because he could afford a ticket, he didn’t flaunt it openly. Oliver worked hard to rid himself of the image of him thinking he was above the law.

Stepping into the bakery, the bell by the door announced his arrival. The smell of bread filled the space. Oliver took a deep breath of the bread smell the bakery was infused with. He instantly became calmer.

Diggle stepped out from the back and greeted Oliver with a smile. “Hey, man. Gladys said you’d be stopping by. She seemed insistent I didn’t leave before your arrival. Everything okay?”

“She’s afraid of the repercussions of putting Isabel on my calendar without my approval.”

“Does she need your approval for scheduling your day?”

“When I don’t like the person, she does,” Oliver said, indignant. After seeing Digg’s skeptical look added, “She should pencil people in and once I’ve approved them, send a confirmation to them.”

“Well now she knows that,” Digg replied. Oliver could tell Digg humored him, but it really wasn’t that difficult of a concept. Digg came around the counter, and clapped Oliver on the shoulder as Digg walked past Oliver to the door. Once Digg locked the door and turned the open/closed sign to closed, he said, “Come on back with me.”

Oliver followed Digg behind the counter and into the back. Oliver sat on a stool as Digg prepped the dough for tomorrow morning.

“Was meeting with Isabel that bad?” Digg asked. It was evident Digg thought this was one of those times Oliver responded over-dramatically. Digg kept his eyes on the task in front of him so Oliver could feel less self-conscious. It was in times like these Oliver truly appreciated what an amazing friend Digg was.
“It was awful.” Oliver said. He was happy to prove to Digg he was not being over-dramatic. If anything, Oliver’s attitude minimized the agony of the meeting. “She reminded me QC still has two years on its contract with her, and how it would look like I tried to cover something up if I bought her out of the contract with my own money.”

“So, you have two more years dealing with her. That’s not so bad.”

“That’s what I thought. But then she brings her fiancé into my office to meet him.”

“Jealous?” Digg’s raised his eyes to meet Oliver’s.

“No,” Oliver said as fast and as clear as he could. He would not let Digg go down that road with him. Because no. “But the guy, Slade Wilson, is an asshole.”

Digg returned his attention to cracking eggs into a bowl. “How was he an asshole?”

“Okay. First, he went on and on about how he’s the Australian ambassador and has diplomatic immunity. How he can get all the tickets in the world and it won’t matter because he won’t have to pay them.

“For some reason, he has an eye patch, and I could tell he likes it. He likes throwing people off with it.”

“You think he’s into power plays?”

“Being an ambassador and bragging about diplomatic immunity and his security clearance, yes, I think he likes power. And once he has it, he likes to show it off.”

“That seems to fit with Isabel, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, okay,” Oliver conceded. “But now I have to deal with him? That’s not fair. She should keep her personal life out of her professional one.”

Digg stared at Oliver and raised his eyebrows in question. Oliver knew immediately what Digg referenced.

“Fine, you have a point,” Oliver relented. “But I wasn’t doing it to hurt anyone. I tried to help both Isabel and Barry.”

“People still ended up hurt.”

“Isabel wasn’t hurt, she was just mortified. And I do feel bad for Barry and I’m doing what I can to help him.”

Diggle pointedly didn’t say anything else. Just as Oliver started to defend himself, Digg turned the mixer on and the whirring noise filled the room. Oliver tapped his foot impatiently on the barstool’s foot rest. Oliver didn’t understand why everyone was on his back about his attempt to help Barry. Yes, Oliver should have been more careful with Barry, but Oliver wasn’t going to do it again. Digg finally turned off the mixer and kneaded the bread.

“You know, I’m more careful with Barry now.”

“That’s good,” Digg replied. The rhythm of Digg’s kneading calmed Oliver back down.

“You sound like Felicity.”
“She and I tend to agree on most things.”

“Oh, you’ll never guess,” Oliver stated, his mood darker. “But guess what Slade called Felicity?”

“He met her?”

“Yeah, apparently in the lobby while he waited for Isabel to text him.”

“Hmm. What did he call her?”

“Lis! Can you believe that? Nobody calls her Lis. Nobody! And five minutes after meeting her he takes the liberty to create a nickname for her. Slade doesn’t even know her.” Oliver got worked up again. His heart thudded fast and his cheeks reddened. “Oh, but get this, he wants to try to steal Felicity away from here. Slade wants her to start working for the Australian embassy, and then work for the Australian government.”

“I doubt he’ll be able to convince her.”

“Right? Thank you,” Oliver exclaimed. “He doesn’t even know her.”

“You already said that.” Digg remarked.

“Well, he doesn’t.” Oliver’s voice raised on its own accord. “He has no idea what Felicity wants to do. He’s just going to shove his agenda into the middle of her life and call her Lis while he’s at it.”

“Have a cookie. They’re right next to you,” Digg said. Oliver looked at the green sprinkled sugar cookies and grabbed one. As he chewed his first bite of the soft cookie, Digg put the dough he kneaded into two pans. Digg walked away to put the unbaked bread wherever it went overnight. Oliver continued to eat the cookie and curse Slade Wilson in his head.

As Oliver swept some green sprinkles off his pants with his hand, Digg reemerged. “Felicity’s not the type to get bullied into doing something she doesn’t want to do.”

“I know that, Digg. But that doesn’t give this guy the right to assume he knows what’s best for her like we, the people in her life, don’t know her at all. This, in despite of all the years and shit we’ve been through together. And she has a mind of her own. He never even considered what she wants.”

“Sounds like you were right in your assessment of him,” Digg said. “He’s an asshole. Good thing is you shouldn’t have to deal with him much, if it all.”

“I hope you’re right. You don’t think Isabel would be petty and keep bringing him around, do you?”

“Aren’t you the boss?” Digg asked, amused.

Oliver sighed. “I’m finding I have less and less authority than I was led to believe.”

“I’m done for the day. Come grab a beer with me. It’s almost five o’clock.”

“Okay, but we are not going to the place with karaoke.”

Digg laughed as he turned off the lights. They walked out the door and Digg locked the place up. Oliver shook his head. Slade Wilson was such an asshole. As they walked to the bar across the street, Oliver couldn’t help but whisper incredulously, “Lis?”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Isabel gets what she wants and Oliver is forced to go to Cisco for help.

“Before you yell at me,” Gladys walked into Oliver’s office and laid down ground rules, “I tried to stop it. By the time I was told, it was too late.”

Oliver tensed.

“What?”

“Ms. Rochev is on her way up.”

“Seriously?” Oliver whined as he threw the pen in his hand down hard on his desk. “Why? How did she get past security?”

“You know she’s on the list,” Gladys explained as if Oliver was a child. “As for why she’s here, you will have to ask her.”

She turned to leave but Oliver stopped her.

“What about security calling each office before sending guests up?”

“Security is understaffed.” Gladys said as if it were an obvious answer.

“Fix it,” Oliver ordered.

“Not my job, Mr. Queen.” She stated unhelpfully. She added, “You might try the head of security.”

With that she left.

Oliver missed Digg. This never would have happened if he were still his bodyguard. And Digg would have fixed it for Oliver.

Isabel. Ugh. What could she possibly want? Oliver was sure they had settled everything between them the other day. There wasn’t anything she had to say in person she couldn’t write in an email.

The thought of hiding went through Oliver’s head, but then he heard the elevator ding followed by the clicking of her heels and, with dread, knew he had lost his opportunity.

“Mr. Queen,” Isabel marched into his office, which left Gladys glaring at her again. Oliver could tell Gladys wanted to announce her. “I want to discuss something with you.”

“Primarily,” Oliver replied as Isabel made herself comfortable on one of the couches of his office, “it is custom to have my assistant announce all guests before they enter my office. If I’m in the middle of something, you don’t interrupt.” Oliver could have had Isabel wait. For an indefinite amount of time. Oliver swallowed the smile the thought caused.

“Please, we both know you weren’t doing anything. I’m lucky to have found you in QC.” Isabel waved off his concerns. “You are probably the least involved a CEO has ever been in his company.”
Oliver internally questioned if there were enough security personal to escort Isabel out of the building.

“What do you want, Isabel?” Oliver asked, loud and impatient. He bounced his knee up and down, happy it hid underneath his desk.

“Join me on the couch, Oliver.”

Fuck. Oliver’s feelings for Isabel really had turned to hate.

“Isabel, this is my office. If you don’t want to yell at each other to be heard, there are two perfectly good chairs in front of my desk. The desk I was sitting at before you came in.”

“This will be better if we’re more comfortable.” Oliver stared at Isabel. There wasn’t a reason he should accommodate her, and they both knew it. At least Oliver was almost certain Isabel knew it. Though the calculated smile on her face said otherwise. “Just come over, Oliver. I won’t bite.”

Oliver refused to budge. He wasn’t going to be told what to do in his own office. Especially after being insulted.

“Think of it this way,” Isabel continued, “the sooner you come over, the sooner I leave. Then you can go back to all your important CEO work I interrupted.”

His next PR consultant would be more respectful to Oliver.

With a scowl, Oliver pushed his chair out and stood. Each step Oliver took was slow and deliberate. When he reached the couch area, Oliver didn’t sit next to Isabel as she indicated she wanted. He sat on the other couch, opposite her. Oliver didn’t care how childish this made him seem.

Mentally, he listed questions to ask potential PR consultants during their interviews.

“First off, I’m glad you decided to keep me on.”

“Yeah,” Oliver responded with heavy sarcasm. “I’m really loving that decision today.”

Isabel glared at him and then quickly wiped the glare from her face. “Second, I want to establish common ground. I am paid to make you, and QC, look good. So, it is in both of our self-interests for me to give you sound advice and for you to take said advice.”

He would make sure to ask all the PR candidates if they ever treated or talked to their clients as if their clients were children.

Oliver nodded.

“Good. I’m glad we agree.” Isabel sat forward. Oliver knew the major topic for today’s meeting was about to be brought up. He did not have a good feeling about it. His thumb and pointer finger slid in circles against each other. “The public believes us to be good friends. It would be detrimental to challenge or disprove that assumption.”

“Really?” Oliver’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief.

“Yes, Oliver. If they don’t believe we get along, the press, and therefore the public, won’t believe anything I say in a professional capacity. It will make it easier, for everyone,” Isabel paused to emphasized she referenced Oliver, “in the long-run if we behave as if we’re friends.”

Oliver would also ask if the candidates believed deception was a good tactic when dealing with the
public. Not that Oliver hadn’t used it in the past. But this seemed like the perfect time to stop.

“You’re assuming.” Oliver said as he leaned back on the couch and put his foot on his knee. “I’m a good actor. I’m not.”

“That has not been my experience working with you.”

Ever contradict your clients would be a useful question too.

Rubbing his temple, Oliver asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“Nothing too taxing.” Isabel smiled as if she had already won. There had to be one security guard who could drop what he or she was doing and take Isabel outside the building. “A handful of social get-togethers. Drinks, the occasional dinner. Nothing we haven’t done before.”

It sounded like hell.

The next PR person would have clear boundaries on personal and business time.

With a heavy sigh, Oliver consented, “Set up drinks at Verdant with Gladys sometime this week.”

“Actually, I had another idea.”

“Of course you do,” Oliver let slip. Isabel’s glare returned.

“A friend, such like yourself,” Isabel said through clenched teeth, “would want to help celebrate my engagement.”

She had way too much nerve. How could Isabel think he would want to even mention her engagement?

Oliver remained silent.

“To that end, you should throw Slade and me an engagement dinner.”

“What?” Oliver’s foot fell off his knee and he sat up. “No, I’m not doing that.”

“It’s the best thing to show that we get along.”

“I highly doubt there is no other option,” Oliver argued and stood up.

“It’ll prove we are friends and make both our professional lives easier. It’ll look odd if you do nothing. One of your consultants is engaged. You should help us celebrate.”

“I can’t think of one time I have ever celebrated a consultant’s, or employee’s, engagement.” Oliver walked to his desk and then walked back to face Isabel. “Not one.”

“I doubt you’ve spent much time socially with your other consultants or employees. You have to do this.”

The next PR person would not bully Oliver. Ever.

After taking a moment, Oliver asked, “Why do you want an engagement dinner from a person who you don’t like and doesn’t like you?”

“It’s business, Oliver. Nothing more.” She stood up and faced Oliver. “It won’t be difficult. Invite
your friends and make a reservation. I’ll make sure the press is there, coincidentally, of course.”

“You want the publicity for yourself.” How did Oliver not see this from the start? Isabel still tried to connect herself to the Queen name as much as she could. She would continue to do so for the next 22 months. How did it take Oliver so long to not see right through Isabel?

“Don’t make me pull out the threats again. We both know we’ll end up with you giving in. Save time and get me out of your office now.”

A sharp pain throbbed at the inside of his right eyebrow. He might need to invest in an ibuprofen manufacturing company these next 22 months.

With a calm, but low, voice, Oliver said, “I won’t make a reservation at a restaurant.” He would not be hounded by paparazzi for Isabel. “I will have a dinner for you at the manor. You can promote it through social media.”

“That is not what I had in mind.”

“It’s what I’m willing to do. Take it or leave it.” Oliver walked back to his desk and sat down. “And get out of my office.”

Isabel walked toward the door and turned back to Oliver. “I’ll get back to you about nights that work for both Slade and me.”

“Perfect,” Oliver grumbled.

“I’m looking forward to it. I’m sure you’ll plan the perfect dinner.” With that she left and Oliver rested his head in his hand.

Any history of blackmailing a client would be an automatic disqualification for QC’s next PR consultant.

The day continued its downward trajectory.

A meeting with Cisco was also on the day’s agenda. It wasn’t going to cure his headache.

Cisco had sent Oliver several reports via email, per Oliver’s request. The problem was Oliver didn’t have a rudimentary understanding of physics or engineering. Reading Cisco’s reports usually left Oliver with a dull headache and, somehow, more confused.

As he walked to Cisco’s desk, Oliver heard two familiar voices. Cisco and Barry.

The two stood, hunched over something on Cisco’s desk. Their voices were high and full of enthusiasm.

“Cisco,” Oliver called out. The two men jumped. “You said now was a good time.”

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Cisco answered. He quickly moved the device Barry and he talked over. Then Cisco swept his desk with his hand to dump screws, nuts, bolts, screwdrivers, and wrenches into a metal container. The clanking sound of metal hitting metal was felt in Oliver’s head. Oliver walked slowly to the desk. The smell of motor oil came from the desk. Cisco grabbed his laptop from somewhere else and placed it in the center of his desk. Oliver took a seat in a nearby chair.

Barry continued to stand, looking helpless, as he wasn’t sure what, if anything, he should do.
Once Cisco took his seat, he pulled up the reports he sent to Oliver. Barry finally decided to have a seat on the other side of Cisco and bit his thumbnail.

“These reports are the four I’ve sent you. There are others, but these are the most crucial. I’m so glad I get to explain these in person. Now I can really go into full detail about, well, everything. And I can answer any questions you have when you have them. I sometimes find it difficult to get an answer for a question I had a week ago, not that that’s your fault. You’re a busy guy. But I mean, I can barely remember the question then, let alone all the nuances that will help me to put all the pieces together. You know?”

“Yes,” Oliver answered. “Why don’t we get to your first report.” It wasn’t a question.

“Right. Okay, first, what did you understand from it?”

“Assume nothing and go from there.”

“Sure,” Cisco responded. He took a breath and tucked his hair behind his ears. “Do you know about atoms? Made of protons, neutrons, and electrons?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You know about elements on the periodic table and how they are placed in order of their atomic number?”

Oliver tucked his upper lip into his bottom one. He really wished Felicity was here. “What’s an atomic number?”

“Oh, just the number of protons an element has.”

“Oh, just the number of protons an element has.”

“Okay, then yes. But I couldn’t tell much beyond that.”

“That’s fine. You don’t have to have the periodic table memorized. I mean I did when I was ten. But it doesn’t matter. And new elements are being added to it. Recently four new elements were added. Nihonium, moscovium, tennessine, and oganesson. They’re atomic numbers, respectively, are 113, 115, 117, 118.”

“Am I going to need to know these new elements?” Oliver asked.

“No. Sorry. I just get excited by things like this. So, where were we? Right, periodic table. Hydrogen is the first element on the table because it has an atomic number of one. That makes it the lightest element. The second element is helium with an atomic number of two.”

Oliver nodded.

“See, you get it,” Cisco exclaimed.

Cisco continued talking. Somehow Cisco’s enthusiasm never lessened. The rest of the morning and afternoon continued in much the same manner. Oliver had already cleared his schedule before he came down to Cisco’s office. Lunch was brought to them by Gladys. Which gave Oliver the opportunity to hear Cisco slurp from his Big Belly extra large soda.

Barry would occasionally jump in with a comment of clarification or agreement with Cisco that something was ‘beyond awesome.’

The problem was Cisco’s explanations made sense to Oliver. Oliver finally understood what the hell
Cisco talked about. At least he had a good grasp of the basics, which would allow Oliver to make better business decisions. Especially regarding Applied Sciences. So, Oliver didn’t have a valid reason to end the study session.

At 3:27 Oliver couldn’t take it anymore. His brain hit maximum capacity and there was no way for him to cram any new information in. But with Cisco actually making Oliver understand, Oliver was reluctant to end the session abruptly, in case it hurt Cisco’s feelings. Oliver didn’t want Cisco to have a reason to cancel these lessons; with Oliver finally understanding the Greek he had been expected to know.

There was a non-science subject Cisco loved to talk about.

Oliver waited for Cisco to take a breath and then interjected, “Hey, I haven’t asked you how Nyssa is. How does she like Starling City?”

Cisco’s eyes lit up. Oliver’s brain rejoiced at the reprieve.

“Thanks for asking. She’s okay. Well, I say okay, but she’s been a little moody,” Cisco answered. Oliver had to wonder what a moody Nyssa looked like compared to normal Nyssa. “Ever since Sara left. See, Nyssa was really excited about the sock-hop fundraiser.”

“Was she?”

“Yes. She loved the cause. Nyssa even thought about using their services and maybe getting a therapy dog for herself. But now the fundraiser isn’t happening, Nyssa doesn’t want to think about getting a dog.”

“Why not?”

“She said it wasn’t practical. She doesn’t know where she is even going to be six months from now.”

Oliver’s brow furrowed. “Isn’t she going back to her father’s? Soon?”

“That’s the plan. But Ra’s is staying with Talia and Bruce longer. Talia invited Nyssa to Gotham again, but Nyssa said she’d prefer to stay here with me. Isn’t that sweet of her?”

“Yeah,” Oliver agreed. He couldn’t help but think Nyssa is doing everything she can to stay away from her sister. And Bruce. Though it was interesting Talia invited Nyssa. Maybe Talia didn’t know about the affair. And Nyssa just tried to stay away from temptation. Poor Talia. “So Nyssa doesn’t know how long she’ll stay with you?”

“No, but I don’t mind. I like having her around. It’s nice to have someone to come home to. Not like we’re together, together. We’re just friends. I see her as more of a sister.”

“Sure,” Oliver said. “That makes sense. Well I need to get going.” Oliver stood up and stretched his back. “I’ll schedule another one of these meetings either next week or the week after.”

“I would suggest earlier rather than later. So you don’t lose all the information you learned today.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Oliver responded, he turned to leave but turned back around again. Oliver realized what bugged him about Barry. “Barry?”

“Yeah?” Barry asked, shining his very innocent eyes in Oliver’s direction.

“Why are you here and not in your temporary office?”
“Oh,” Barry looked down and focused on the tip of his shoe. He twisted his foot around like he was putting out a cigarette. “Well, I… I heard Isabel was in the building. I didn’t want to run into her. I figured this would be the last place she’d be.”

“You’re not wrong,” Oliver said. “Just next time, bring some of your work down here, okay? We can’t afford to keep wasting days.”

“Right. Sure. Sorry.”

Oliver turned again and walked out the door. Once on the elevator, he squeezed the bridge of his nose. Of course, Barry still pined for Isabel. That explained Barry’s mopey behavior in Cisco’s office. Oliver would have to come up with something to cheer Barry up.

It couldn’t involve women. And it couldn’t be tonight.

Today was already a long day. Oliver couldn’t wait to get out of the office. He’d like to not be in charge of everything. Just a day off. Would that be too much to ask?

Mr. Dennis would say yes. But Mr. Dennis didn’t have to deal with both Isabel and Cisco. In a single day. There probably wasn’t enough vodka in Russia, to erase the day Oliver had.

When Oliver returned from work to the manor exhausted. The extent of what he wanted to do was eat and sleep.

“Why are you here?” Moira asked. Concern weaved through her voice. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“I’m not supposed to be home, Mom?” Oliver immediately worried Moira’s dementia made another fun appearance.

“No. It’s on the calendar. You aren’t supposed to be here. I know I didn’t get it wrong. I was sure Hank told me you wouldn’t be here tonight. I was so sure.”

“Ok, Mom. It’s all right.”

“No,” Moira yelled. “It’s not alright. It’s not fine. I thought for sure you were not going to be here for dinner. I already ate. What are we going to do now?”

Moira circled the entryway, unsure of where to go.

“Mom,” Oliver said in his best soothing voice.

“You aren’t scheduled to be here. Not now.”

“Let’s look at the calendar. How about that?”

Moira stared at Oliver. “So you can prove me wrong. Again. Prove my memory is bad. I already know that, Oliver. That’s the one thing I haven’t forgotten yet.”

“I’m going to go look at the calendar.” Oliver walked toward the kitchen. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Fine. Let’s go look at the stupid calendar.”
Once in front of the calendar, Oliver saw he planned dinner with the Diggles. Shit.

“Why did you lie to me, Oliver? Were you trying to confuse me on purpose?”

“No, Mom. I swear I wasn’t. I just had a long day and forgot. I’m sorry.”

Hank, Moira’s CNA for the night came through the kitchen door. “Everything okay?”

“No,” Moira answered while wringing her hands. “Oliver isn’t supposed to be here, but he is. He says he just forgot, but how am I supposed to plan…plan…” Moira’s looked to the ceiling as she searched for the word she attempted to say. Frustrated, she compromised on, “food time when he just shows up whenever he wants without thinking of the calendar.”

“It sounds like a simple mistake to me,” Hank said in a much more soothing voice than Oliver had. “And since he’s probably going to head out soon to make dinner with his friends, it won’t affect dinner.”

“I had plans,” Moira continued to argue.

“Mom, your plans aren’t going to change,” Oliver reassured her. He placed a kiss on her cheek. After the day he had, if his mother were calmer he would have canceled on the Diggles. But it wasn’t an option with how agitated she was. “What were you going to do now, if I hadn’t messed up?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You were going to sleep,” Hank supplied.

“Oh, no,” Moira refused. “I couldn’t possibly sleep now.”

“How about you take a sleeping pill tonight?” Oliver suggested. “It will help you, I promise.”

“You know I don’t like those.”

“Just for tonight.”

“Okay, Oliver. But I don’t want you doing this again.”

“Yes, Mom. I’m going to go change into some casual clothes. Do you want me to say goodnight before I leave?”

“No. You aren’t supposed to be here tonight.”

“Okay,” Oliver held his hands up in surrender. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

As Oliver left the kitchen he whispered, “Thanks, Hank.”

Hank nodded and went to the locked cabinet with all of Moira’s medication.

Once Oliver sat in his car he was already five minutes late for dinner. His cultivated reputation of always being late kept Oliver from worrying about the twenty-five minute drive to the Diggles’ house.

Digg answered the door within three seconds of Oliver ringing the bell. Digg opened the door wider for Oliver then led Oliver to the dining room.
“Hey,” Oliver greeted Lyla and Felicity. He sat down across from Felicity after he gave her a side hug. “Sorry I’m late. My mom needed some extra attention.”

“We figured,” Felicity said, waving off his excuse. “How is she?”

“She’s okay. I talked her down and her CNA was there.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it,” Felicity responded. She gave Oliver a small smile, which Oliver returned.

Food passed around the four and, once tasted, given its proper praise. General updates of each other’s lives were given. Lyla might be given a promotion at work. Her sister was pregnant again, and her boyfriend had left her. Again. Digg just received a large catering order from Starling National Bank. Digg was both excited and stressed about it. Felicity just completed a time-consuming project and she was thrilled for the chance to have a couple pajama days. Oliver told them everything was right on schedule for the opening of the Applied Sciences, joking that meant they were three months behind.

“How’s everything with Isabel?” Digg asked.

Oliver groaned and pouted a little bit. “She wouldn’t leave my office this morning until I agreed to throw her and Slade an engagement party. Oh, by the way, I need you all to do me a favor and accept an invitation to Isabel and Slade’s engagement dinner.”

“I think I might be busy that night,” Felicity confessed. Oliver’s eyes shot up to hers. He relaxed when he saw her teasing smile. “Painting my nails, having a root canal, or something.”

“I’ll be sure to take your schedule into account when deciding on the date.”

“Why does she want you to throw one?” Lyla asked incredulously. “After all that happened between you two.”

“I’m fairly certain it has something to do with my last name and her need to be connected to it.”

“Ah,” Lyla responded as she raised her eyebrows and took a sip of her wine.

“Does Slade like you?” Felicity asked.

“He either wants to become my BFF or kill me. I can’t decide.”

“So is it just going to be us and them?” Felicity asked in a trepidatious voice.

“Maybe my mom, if she seems up to it. She might even like it. But beside that, who else would I invite?” Oliver asked as innocently as he could. He knew they both thought of Barry. Oliver didn’t have a genius level IQ, but he knew enough to not invite Barry. Or tell Barry about it. Or even think about it when Barry was around.

“We talked to Nyssa today,” Digg chimed in, referring to him and Lyla. “She and Cisco met Isabel and Slade when leaving QC the other day. Apparently Nyssa and Slade have hung out a couple times since.”

Oliver restrained himself from groaning. The two most annoying people on the planet along with the two meanest people at the dinner party. If he didn’t have to do clean up afterward, Oliver might have look forward to some fireworks. As it were, he’d consider himself lucky if he didn’t end the night pounding his head repeatedly against a wall.
“You think I should invite them?”

“It’d be nice,” Digg answered with a shrug. “It’d give Nyssa something to do and to look forward to. And apparently Slade took an interest in her.”

“That does not sound good. He’s engaged!” Felicity protested.

“Not like that,” Lyla replied, amused. “He’s polishing her resume and giving her interview tips. He wants to help her get a job.”

“I thought she didn’t want a job. Isn’t her plan to go back to school?” Oliver couldn’t understand Nyssa. No matter how hard he tried. If her mental illness kept her from attending school, wouldn’t it also keep her from functioning at a job? And why in the world would Nyssa want to hang out with Slade? Slade! What could they possibly have in common? Unless her type of guy was married. No, that seemed a bit harsh, even to Oliver. But what did Slade think he could do, that her friends and family couldn’t do? Oliver was sure Nyssa’s sole purpose in life was to confound him. Or at least a hobby she enjoyed. “What job did Slade think was perfect for Nyssa?”

“He thought of the Uniformed Division of the Secret Service,” Lyla answered. Her tone was too even. Oliver knew she tried to present this without judgment. If she was excited about it, Lyla wouldn’t monitor her tone. Lyla must hate the idea.

“For those of us who weren’t in the military or employed by the federal government, what is that?” Felicity asked. She seemed genuinely curious.

“They are responsible for guarding the White House, treasury, and embassies,” Digg said.

“Oh,” Oliver said. “He thinks he can get her to work for him at the Australian embassy.”

“Probably,” Digg replied.

“From what I’ve heard from Cisco,” Felicity spoke up. “Nyssa does not want any job. What about school?”

“I don’t know. She was a good medic,” Lyla added.

“So why hang out with Slade if he’s pushing her to do something she clearly doesn’t want to do?” Oliver asked.

“She doesn’t have anyone else to hang out with,” Digg replied. “Cisco works all day. She can come down to the bakery, but I hardly have time to talk with her. The few people she knows here, work during the day.”

“And at night she’s with the incessant talker, Cisco,” Oliver filled in. Oliver was certain non-stop Cisco would make him need a mental institution. And buckets of medication.

Felicity smiled softly. Oliver gave her a quizzical look. “It’s nice you feel sympathetic towards Nyssa.”

“Who could help it in that situation?” Oliver answered as he tried to brush the compliment off, but inwardly he was pleased. Giving in, Oliver said, “Okay, so I’ll invite Cisco and Nyssa to the dinner. Maybe Cisco will have a previous engagement and won’t be able to make it.”

“Oliver!” Felicity admonished.
“Do you think I could get away with only serving one course?” Oliver asked seriously. The one course would be appetizers. And the whole event would last fifteen minutes. Thirty at the most.

“I think three would be the very bare minimum,” Lyla replied. “Four would be better.”

“Damn it!”

“It won’t be that bad,” Digg said.

“We’ll all be there, it’ll be fine,” Felicity reassured.

“I still don’t want to spend time with Slade. Or Isabel. But Slade is just so arrogant, and self-important, and boastful. And I’m Team Barry.”

“Oliver,” Felicity admonished with a sharp look. “That is Barry’s life you’re talking about, not some one-hour drama.”

“I’m still with Barry. And I’ll make this dinner go by so fast, you’ll be left wondering if it even happened at all.”

“That’s the attitude,” Lyla laughed.

They had all finished dinner. All four helped clear the table. Felicity shooed Digg and Lyla out of the kitchen, volunteering herself and Oliver to load the dishwasher.

The clean-up included only one mini-water fight. Oliver told himself he let Felicity win as he shook his head to keep his hair from dripping everywhere. When they were done with the dishes and cleaning up the water they splashed out of the sink, they joined Digg and Lyla in the living room, bringing more wine with them.

As they sat down, Digg said, “So, I talked to Sara today.”

“Yeah?” Oliver responded, he tried to appear unaffected. He really didn’t want ‘Oliver likes Sara’ blazoned across his forehead. Especially in front of Digg. There would be no way to live it down. Ever. Digg would forever be holding it over Oliver’s head. Oliver would get calls randomly through the day. It would be Digg, rubbing it in Oliver’s face.

His liking Sara was inconvenient.

“Yeah. She said to tell you hi.”

“Well tell her hi back,” Oliver responded. It was probably okay to ask how she was. It might be weird if he didn’t. Or would it show his feelings too much? “How is she doing?”

“She’s all right,” Digg answered. Digg didn’t seem to be too focused on Oliver. Good. “Misses it here. But, family is important.”

“Yes, it is,” Oliver agreed. He knew that only too well.

“So me getting rid of my sister,” Lyla spoke up, “is a bad idea?”

“That and no one will take your sister,” Digg joked. “She’s too crazy.”

“Oh stop, Johnny,” Lyla admonished Digg with a hit from a pillow next to her. Digg took the pillow from her and threw it behind them, over the couch. Oliver smiled at the couple. Their relationship seemed so easy.
“Oh,” Digg called out. Oliver held his breath. “She also asked me to tell you to tell your little friend hi.”

Oliver smirked. Barry probably wouldn’t know what to do with that information. When Oliver told Barry, it’d provide Oliver with some entertainment.

“Well, I hate to call it, but I have an early day tomorrow,” Felicity said as she stood up.

“It’s still early,” Oliver argued. He had found some energy being with people he actually liked and wanted to be around. “And I thought you had a couple of pajama days ahead of you?”

Felicity shrugged her shoulders and hugged Digg and Lyla goodbye. She was gone before Oliver had the chance to hug her goodnight.

He would take her example and leave too. Digg and Lyla would probably appreciate some alone time.

After his farewells, Oliver climbed into his car. He rolled down the windows to help himself stay awake. Oliver inhaled the smell of rain, letting it relax him.

Oliver did his best to not focus on the long day or the engagement dinner he still had to plan. He wanted this little bit of time to himself. He was almost certain nothing about the upcoming dinner, planning it or the dinner itself, would be tranquil. Despite the quiet ride home, Oliver already felt his stress levels spiking.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Oliver has a small dinner party to celebrate Isabel and Slade’s engagement.

“I don’t even know these people. Why do I have to sit through a dinner with them?” Roy asked as he followed Oliver through the ground level of the manor. Oliver did a last minute check of the dining and sitting rooms for the engagement dinner Oliver hosted for Isabel and Slade. Oliver also had to talk with their cook to ensure the meal prep went well and the serving staff had arrived.

Needless to say, Oliver was busy. And Roy wasn’t helping.

“One,” Oliver said as he came to abrupt halt. Roy almost ran into Oliver. “Everyone knows you’re in town and staying here. It’d be weird if you just stayed up in the guest room all by yourself. Two, you have the job to make sure Mom is all right through the evening. Tonight will add more stress for her. Keep her calm. Three, it’ll make Thea happy with the gossip. You can report back to her what happens tonight. Four, if I have to be here, so do you.”

“Fine.” Roy slumped his shoulders and turned away. As he walked towards the stairs, Oliver heard Roy mutter, “I really should have read the fine print in my wedding vows.”

Roy had come to town unexpectedly because a cousin of his was stabbed. The cousin was fine. Stubborn too, refusing to press charges. Roy knew the cousin was in a gang, but the cousin didn’t want any help. Especially from Roy, the guy who had married up and appeared to have abandoned the Glades and everyone in it. Little did the people of the Glades know the anonymous donations going to youth centers, libraries, and scholarship programs in the Glades came from Roy. Roy was also in communications with community leaders in the Glades. He pitched and collaborated on ideas to help everyone, but especially the youth, in the Glades.

Oliver didn’t understand why Roy didn’t take credit for all he did for the Glades, but Oliver admired Roy for it. Anonymous philanthropy was not what the Queens did. Any money given by the Queens included a big ass check and at least four photographers. But Oliver was happy Thea found a good guy.

After confirming with the chef to ensure everything was in order, Oliver changed into his third favorite tux. A double-breasted and open at the collar tux. He decided Isabel and Slade were not worth his first and second favorites. But Oliver also want to show Slade up. Oliver knew Slade had some money, but not near the kind of money Oliver had. Given that, it was doubtful Slade had a custom-made Kiton tux. Oliver knew he was being childish, but since he was forced into the situation, he felt it was warranted.

Feeling a bit rushed, Oliver jogged down the stairs. When he saw Felicity standing in the entryway, his feet stopped. Felicity wore a floor length black dress. The dress left her back bare, exposing her soft skin. When Felicity sensed him, she turned around to face him. The halter top left her shoulders bare as well.

“Hey,” Felicity said breathlessly.
Oliver blinked and focused on her face, which was flawlessly made up, complete with red lipstick. “Hi.” He shrugged off his reaction; he had always known Felicity was a beautiful woman.

“Is everything ready?”

“God, I hope so,” Oliver rubbed his forehead. “If I begin to spontaneously combust, will you put me out, please?”

“Sure.” She patted his arm sympathetically. “Maybe it won’t be as bad as you think it’ll be. They aren’t the only ones invited.”

“You’re adorable.”

Felicity laughed and playfully hit his arm.

“Ow,” Oliver responded but his smile undercut the sentiment.

Roy bounced down the stairs. “All right. Let’s get this night over with. Hi, Felicity.” Roy and Felicity hugged.

The doorbell rang and interrupted their greeting.

“Put your game faces on, the infantry is here,” Felicity warned.

“Aren’t you mixing your metaphors?” Roy asked.

Felicity threw a mock glare at Roy. “Shut up.”

“Why don’t you two go into the sitting room, get yourselves something to drink. If you can make sure my mom is still in there and doing okay, that’d be great.”

Then Felicity gave him a smile as she and Roy exited the entry way. Oliver held onto that image as he opened the door and greeted the guests he did not want.

“Australia, as a whole, is amazing. I think everyone should see it at least once,” Slade continued on. He monopolized the conversation for the whole evening so far.

Isabel focused her attention singularly at Slade, fascinated by everything he said, or at least she was very good at putting on a show. Slade seemed to have a sufficiently enamored look for Isabel.

Nyssa was her usual, stoic non-emotive self while Cisco didn’t stop looking around at everyone with a wide smile. Oliver’s best friend had put on his bodyguard face, which meant Digg was bored and possibly playing some kind of mental game.

Glancing around the table, Oliver caught Felicity looking down at her lap. He would bet half his trust fund she had just checked the time on her phone she snuck in the dining room. Oliver bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud.

Moira had been doing well so far and had been able to follow the conversation. Roy behaved himself. Their salads had just been taken away, which meant they were halfway done with dinner. The time frame didn’t include coffee afterward, but Oliver tried to stay optimistic.

“Aren’t there horribly large spiders in Australia?” Moira asked. It was really nice for Oliver to see his mom like this. Focused and able to add to the conversation.
“If you ignore them, they ignore you,” Slade responded.

“No. That does not sound like a good plan,” Moira shook her head. “I don’t think it’s a very safe place to go.”

Slade looked torn between defending his home country or allowing Moira some leeway.

“Plus, Australia has kangaroos,” Felicity spoke up, “and those things are vicious.”

Oliver smiled. Slade was once again unsure how to proceed. Clearly no one had ever insulted Australia in his presence before. It was amazing to watch.

“Well actually, Lis, Sydney is a beautiful city. It has wonderful weather. Mostly sunny skies. It gets rain, but not near what Starling City gets. Sydney has over 100 sunny days a year, not a cloud in sight. I’m not sure Starling City has ever had a day so nice.” Slade laughed loudly. Isabel smiled wide at him. The rest of the table shot back polite smiles.

“Don’t you spend most of your time in D.C.?” Digg asked.

“Yes, I do,” Slade responded, nodding seriously. “It really is an honor to represent my amazing country. Until you do my kind of work, you really have no idea how satisfying it is to be of service to your country.”

Oliver could tell Digg bit his own tongue. Oliver tried to telepathically peer pressure Digg to say what everyone, at least Felicity and Oliver, knew Digg was thinking. Unfortunately, Oliver saw Digg reign in his thoughts.

“Did you know Nyssa and Digg both served in the army?” Cisco asked. Oliver bit his lip to keep from smiling. He looked over to Slade, attempting to appear simply curious. “I imagine they both know a thing or two about serving their countries. Am I right?”

Cisco swiveled his head back and forth to Nyssa and Digg. Nyssa shook her head and kept her gaze down to the main course just laid down in front of her. Oliver looked down at his own plate. Oliver was glad he had chosen the sea bass with grapes. It was good, but not one of his favorites. In the future, he didn’t want to associate this evening with one of his favorite dishes.

“This looks delicious,” Felicity complimented as she attempted to change the subject to a more conventional, mundane topic. The others agreed with her and everyone ate.

“What about you, Diggle?” Cisco asked, redirecting the conversation to back where it was before the arrival of the main course. “You know how it feels to serve your country?”

“Yes,” Digg answered. “I was honored to do it, even when I was unsure of the mission. And, in the end, I’m glad I did, as I met my wife in Afghanistan.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” Cisco replied. “Where is your lovely wife tonight?”

“Out of town on business.”

“Again?” Roy asked. He had kept quiet for most of the evening, only speaking when Moira needed something. Though Oliver had caught Roy, quite a few times, staring at Slade’s eye patch.

“It’s her job,” Digg said as if he was unbothered by Lyla’s frequent absences. Both Oliver and Felicity knew the truth. Digg supported Lyla and would never make her choose between her career she loved, and was good at, and Digg. It was only the frequent missing of her Digg disliked.
“It is amazing the perks you get as an ambassador,” Slade interjected. “Not only am I invited to quite a few state dinners, I get gifts from some very influential people simply to put in a good word here and there. I won’t say from whom, just that they’re very high up on your government’s hierarchy.”

Felicity, questioning what Slade had just said, narrowed her eyes and looked over to Oliver. Oliver, not sure if Slade just admitted to taking bribes, gave a tiny shrug only she could see.

“I imagine, Oliver,” Slade called out to him, “you have never met the President or even a congressman, or, for that matter, a cabinet member.”

“Not the President, but a couple of senators. And the President does occasionally email me asking to meet me in person. But there are fewer emails now that he can no longer run for office. So really he was just asking for campaign donations.”

“Well I don’t know how you do it, kid,” Slade continued undeterred, “I could never sit in an office all day. I mean I have an office, the best one in the embassy, but I’m always out and about meeting with people all over the Hill.”

Oliver was within seconds of telling Slade the two of them should just pull it out and measure already. Anything if it stopped Slade’s one-upmanship.

“And then when I am in Australia, I’m almost always outdoors. Either on the beach or on a horse. I’m not sure how anyone stays sane here in Starling City. The beaches are too cold. And there are not enough open spaces to really ride.”

“Actually, Mr. Luthor, there are beautiful trails just south of Starling City,” Moira corrected Slade. No one mentioned Moira calling Slade by the wrong name. “I used to take Thea all the time when she was younger. Oliver never wanted to go. Thought it was too girly.”

“Ha!” Slade let out a singular laugh. “I can tell you, kid, there is nothing girly about riding a horse. It takes skill, strength, and patience. And the amount of time and hard work to truly care for a horse properly is not for just anyone. You have to really want it.”

“Well said, Mr. Luthor,” Moira said. The table continued to keep quiet about her confusing Slade with Lex Luthor. Though Slade’s lips pressed tightly together. Oliver wondered if Moira confused Slade’s missing eye with Luthor’s missing hair. Oliver wasn’t sure Moira had ever met Luthor. “Though to be honest, my daughter was never truly invested in her horse. Though it was nice to have something to do with Thea alone. That time really helped bond us.”

“Horses are a wonderful conduit for two people to bond, Mrs. Queen,” Slade nodded with a closed smile. “I was just telling Izzy we should go out and ride together. You know she’s never been. Can you believe that? Being able to teach her what I’ve learned through the years, I think, will deepen our bond.”

“That sounds wonderful, dear,” Isabel cooed with a small smile. Oliver swore she batted her eyelashes at Slade.

Oliver was aware Isabel was not an animal person. Slade’s plan for this wonderful bonding time with Isabel on a horse would not go according to his plan. Either Isabel would make excuses or her hatred of animals would become evident in, what Oliver was sure to be, the most humorous way possible.

“Though I must say,” Slade continued, “I’m not sure it’s possible for us to bond more than we have already.”

Felicity’s disbelief coupled with the sip of her wine she had just taken, resulting in Felicity having a
coughing fit. Unable to help, Oliver placed a hand on her bare back to soothe her. Once the fit was over, Felicity rasped out, “Sorry, everyone.”

“No need to apology,” Cisco piped up. “Pulmonary aspiration is very common and coughing is your best defense. None of us would want you to develop pneumonia or asphyxiate.”

“Yes, that would be bad,” Digg deadpanned, looking straight as Cisco. Cisco gave Felicity, then Digg, little smiles, followed by him tucking his hair behind his ears. Oliver removed his hand from Felicity’s back.

“That reminds me of the time I almost choked on snake meat,” Slade started in with his next story. With superhuman strength, Oliver managed not to roll his eyes.

Oliver made it through the dining portion of the evening without insulting Slade or Isabel. He invited the guests back into the sitting room for coffee. Winn discreetly led Moira out and up the stairs to put her to bed. Once everyone was comfortably seated and had coffee in their hands, Oliver sat down in a chair next to Felicity.

Isabel took out her phone and took selfies of her and Slade in the manor, with mostly Oliver in the background. They had to ensure the photos gained enough attention. Oliver attempted to ignore them.

After looking around the room, Slade said, “This is quite a nice house. It reminds me a bit of my apartment in D.C. The paneling is very similar. Though my sitting room is quite a bit larger. I do entertain many more guests than you would ever have need to. Starling City isn’t drawing any person of importance, is it?”

The rest of the guests murmured, but Oliver could tell it was not of agreement. Politeness kept everyone from arguing with Slade. Had this not been his and Isabel’s engagement party, Oliver believed there would be a heated debate, with Slade alone in his views. Isabel would probably abstain from the argument, as her livelihood depended on Starling City being a major city in the U.S.

“Oliver, you feel the stress,” Slade said in a concerned tone.

“What stress?”

“Well, knowing the Queen name, especially when it’s really just you now,” Slade tilted his head toward the stairs, indicating Moira, “isn’t enough to put Starling City on the map of influential cities.”

Oliver closed his eyes and literally saw red. He felt overheated, but his fingers, closed in a fist, were cold. He counted to ten and took deep breaths. A flowery scent helped calm his emotions.

Roy interjected in a rush, “So Nyssa, I saw you in the library today, didn’t I?”

Oliver was never so grateful to have Roy as a brother-in-law. It would not have been good form for Oliver to punch Slade, Oliver’s guest, in his one good eye.

“Hmm,” Nyssa looked startled to be dragged into the conversation. She considered Roy for a moment and then answered softly, “Oh, yes, I was there.”

“You were in one of those private computer rooms. It’s always weird those rooms have one glass wall. I mean it’s good I guess so everyone knows if someone is in there or not. But it can be a little awkward.” Roy rambled. It was odd for Roy to ramble. Oliver must have looked more like he would
challenge Slade to a duel rather than the dick-measuring contest from earlier. “It looked like you were Skyping with someone.”

Nyssa’s face reddened. She slowly took a sip of her coffee, her ruby ring glittering on her finger. Having every eye on her probably did not help with her blush. Nyssa sat up straighter and faced Roy, “Yes, that’s right.”

“Why don’t you use my computer?” Cisco asked.

“My computer is to your exact specifications. I do not want to disrupt any of it.”

“Well, thank you. It did take me forever to set it up exactly like I wanted. I even had Felicity give me some tutorials to change some of its default settings. You remember, Felicity?”

“I do,” Felicity said. “They were some, um, intricate settings you wanted. Is the system still performing well?”

“Yes. Though it is getting a little slow. It might be time to put in another memory card.”

“That’ll probably help,” Felicity agreed.

“So, Nyssa,” Slade interjected, “you’ve been going to the library to talk to your family?”

Nyssa cleared her throat. “Yes, uh, I have been using Skype at the library.”

Oliver couldn’t help but notice how Nyssa had not confirmed it was her family she Skyped with. Oliver laughed to himself with the thought it might be her family technically, but Oliver doubted Nyssa talked to her brother-in-law as if he were family.

“That just sounds stupid. Izzy, do you hear this?” Slade rhetorically asked. “No. From now on, Nyssa, you will come to our place. Our wifi is the fastest you can get. I can even come pick you up from Cisco’s place, or have a driver pick you up. After you Skype, we can have lunch and spend our time discussing potential positions for you in D.C.”

Nyssa’s eyes went wide. “That is okay, but thank you.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Slade continued. “If I need my laptop, you can use my tablet.”

In the corner of his eye, Oliver saw Digg stand and leave the room quietly. Digg’s phone had lit up. Oliver may have never felt more envious of his friend until that moment.

“I would rather continue my trips to the library.”

“No, no. It’s better this way. You won’t have to bother with buffering and the video feed cutting in and out.”

Nyssa took several deep breaths before saying, “The library’s internet connection is very fast. I’ve never had trouble with the video. I like the library.”

“That’s nonsense, isn’t it, Izzy?”

“Yes, dear, it is,” Isabel encouraged. The couple’s pet names for each other screeched in Oliver’s ears. He was quite certain if he had ever tried to call Isabel ‘Izzy,’ she would have stabbed Oliver.

“We can’t allow it to continue. And it will be much easier to find a job for you with us in the same place.”
“No.” Nyssa’s voice was loud. And from the way her eyes darted to the floor to avoid everyone’s gaze, Oliver bet it was louder than Nyssa had intended. Much quieter, Nyssa said, “Thank you. I will keep going to the library. And, as I’ve said multiple time, I am not interested in a job. Once my father comes back, I will attempt school again.”

Oliver was sure Nyssa’s emphatic ‘no, thank you’ ended the matter. When Slade spoke up again, Oliver wondered if Slade ever took no for an answer.

“My generosity simply cannot allow you to not use our penthouse. The surrounding itself is infinitely better than a public library. You will be much more comfortable at our place.”

He knew he would regret getting involved, but Nyssa looked as if she would either kill Slade slowly or cry. Oliver wasn’t sure which would have been the worst scenario. Though his mother would be upset if blood got on the rug. The rug was one of the last things Moira and Oliver’s father, Robert, purchased together.

“Perhaps,” Oliver butted in, “Nyssa prefers the privacy of the library’s rooms.” Slade turned his face toward Oliver and scowled. Oliver continued, “And, I assume, the library takes no for an answer.”

Slade’s scowl deepened, which Oliver was glad to notice made him far less attractive. Oliver caught Nyssa looking at Oliver, too. She gave Oliver a small smile. Oliver wasn’t sure if Slade’s scowl or Nyssa’s smile unsettled him more. He was uncertain if getting involved was worth the consequences.

Turning to Felicity, Oliver saw her smile at him. He smiled back and, just to tease her, winked. Felicity shook her head and Oliver knew, in her head, Felicity called him incorrigible.

“Hey,” Digg greeted everyone quickly as he walked back into the sitting room. He sat down on Oliver’s other side. Digg whispered to Oliver and Felicity, “I just got off the phone with Sara. Her sister is entering a rehab program in Hub City. Her sister and brother-in-law are actually moving there.”

“Does that mean she won’t be living with them anymore?” Oliver asked.

“No, she is moving with them,” Digg quickly said. “But, Hub City is so much closer to Starling City, Sara said she’ll be able to travel back and forth.”

“That’s great, Digg,” Oliver exclaimed. “I know you wanted to see her more.”

“I’m really happy for her. It'll be good for her to get a break from her sister’s drama from time to time. The rehab is inpatient for only a week and a half and then she has outpatient therapy every day. Sara sounded enthused about the program.”


“Tommy,” Digg corrected.

“Tommy, that’s right,” Oliver kicked his memory. “What is he doing in Hub City?”

“Sara said his family business has an office in Opal City, so Tommy is transferring there for the time being and commuting.”

“It sounds like Sara’s sister has a good support team around her,” Felicity said. Oliver could tell Felicity wasn’t nearly as enthused about Sara’s return as Oliver and Digg were. Her voice took on a too polite tone she usually reserved for Isabel or her more difficult clients. Oliver didn’t know why, but he was certain Felicity did not like Sara.
Oliver, himself, didn’t know how he felt about Sara returning. He wasn’t sure if he still had feelings for Sara. Oliver was sure he didn’t want a romantic relationship with her. If Sara still had feelings for Oliver, it would make it uncomfortable between them. And if Sara was closer and spent more time in Starling City, with Digg, it was bound to make things awkward between Oliver and Digg. Oliver didn’t want to lose Digg’s friendship.

Oliver thought it might have been better if Sara had stayed in Blue Valley.

Digg explained more about the recovery program for Sara’s sister, when Slade’s loud voice boomed out, in an only half-kidding tone, “What are you three trying to keep secret? Don’t you know that’s rude?”

“It is rude, darling,” Isabel agreed and continued as if she and Slade were joking, but both of their tones made it clear they weren’t. “I think you should have to share with the rest of the class.”

“My intention wasn’t to be rude,” Digg said. “I’m just not sure the rest of you would find excitement in my news.”

“I think we can decide for ourselves, Mr. Diggle,” Slade responded. Oliver couldn’t help but wonder if Slade’s voice was always so loud. Unwittingly, an image of Isabel and Slade sleeping together attacked him. Her making squeaking noises only emphasized how deep and loud Slade’s animalistic grunts bounced off the walls. Oliver shook his head and closed his eyes in disgust. Oliver suddenly wished they had finished the evening with cocktails instead of coffee. He would have preferred the chance to drink that horrific image away.

“My army buddy, Sara Lance, and her sister and brother-in-law, are moving closer to Starling City. So, Sara will be able to visit quite a lot.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Slade said. “It’s nice to see brothers-in-arms keeping in touch after their missions. Taking care of one another. Becoming almost a family.”

Slade’s over familiarity with the group, assuming connections between people Slade had never even met, irritated Oliver. Isabel may have filled Slade in on some of the details of them, but that did not mean Slade had a right to comment on them.

Turning his head away from Slade, Oliver looked over to Nyssa. And the big smile she wore. The smile looked so foreign, Nyssa looked like a different person.

“That is exciting,” Cisco agreed with Slade. “Diggle, do you think she’ll have the sock-hop fundraiser? I know Nyssa really looked forward to it.”

“I don’t know,” Digg replied. “I don’t know how much time she’ll be able to spend in Starling City or what her obligations are. Sara just said she’d be able to visit us more often.”

“It’ll be fun to have her around more,” Oliver said. Digg nodded with a thankful smile. Felicity sat back in her chair and crossed her arms in front of her.

“Izzy, have you met this Sara?” Slade asked.

“No, I have not. I was busy getting a tan and meeting you, sweetheart,” Isabel grabbed his hand and squeezed, “when she came to town for the first time.”

“We’ll have to meet her then,” Slade announced. “Next time she’s in town, Diggle, bring her on over to our place. Bring your wife, too. The five of us can have brunch. How does that sound?”
A reluctant murmur of agreement sounded from Digg’s direction. Oliver was aware Slade discussing future get-togethers in front of everyone, and not including everyone, was rude. But Oliver was polite enough to not call out anyone for appeared rudeness in front of everyone.

Also, he was thankful he wasn’t included.

Coffee cups were empty and the conversation had long periods of dragged silences. It was time for the guests to leave, but Oliver couldn’t shoo them out like he wanted to. It was Nyssa that Oliver had to thank for starting the walk to the door.

“It’s getting late,” Nyssa said as she stood up. Others stood too. Nyssa turned toward Slade and Isabel still seated on the couch. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

“Thank you,” Slade said. “I’m sure we’ll see each other soon. I’ll text you.”

Instead of acknowledging the invitation, Nyssa turned to Oliver and said, “Thank you for dinner.”

“Thank you for coming,” Oliver responded.

Nyssa and Cisco were led by Oliver to the entry hall. Their coats were retrieved from the guest coat closet. As Oliver helped Nyssa into her coat, Roy, Digg and Felicity came out to the hall as well. Oliver thought he should receive some extra karma points for helping Nyssa of all people.

After a long moment, Slade and Isabel entered the hall as well. Oliver wondered why they lingered in the sitting room all alone. He considered frisking them, but knew they wouldn’t take anything. Isabel still had a professional relationship with Oliver to maintain.

Thanks, congratulations, and goodbyes were given several times. In the flurry of activity with everyone leaving, Oliver realized Felicity had disappeared. He thought she may have wanted to talk with him more. But as he walked the rest of his guests out, Oliver saw her car leave the front gates. Oliver felt disappointed to not have had the chance to tell her goodbye.

He came back in and slowly closed the door, his body slumping against it. Roy walked over and stopped at the stairs.

“Please don’t ever invite me to one of these things again,” Roy said.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Oliver replied.

“Were we at the same party?” Roy asked. “Did your party not have Pirate Wilson there? Because that guy is a dick.”

“Yes,” Oliver agreed. “Yes, he is. Thanks for being there.”

“I think you might owe me a couple.”

Oliver nodded. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Roy continued up the stairs.

Oliver went back to the sitting room to find the serving staff were already cleaning up. He was thankful. Though he felt exhausted, Oliver knew he wouldn’t be able to go to sleep right away. He trudged up the stairs and into his room.

As he changed into sweats, Oliver remembered Sara was coming back. With a sigh, Oliver supposed he should come up with what to say to her to let her down gently and still maintain their friendship.
Sara seemed like the sort of person who would react either beyond angry and vow revenge, or she would think it wasn’t a big deal and act as if nothing had ever happened.

The second option was clearly the best option. It allowed Oliver to stay friends with Sara. If the first option happened, Oliver would never hear the end of it from Digg. That was if Digg still talked to Oliver.

His worry reminded Oliver why he never did relationships. There were too messy and Oliver never saw any advantage of being in one.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Sara is back and she and Oliver host her fundraiser at Verdant

8 Years Ago

“How the hell am I supposed to decide the trajectory of my life right now? I’m only twenty.”

Oliver chuckled and leaned back against his couch. His miracle graduation from Harvard was in a week. Felicity’s graduation from MIT was in two weeks. Oliver insisted, and Felicity agreed, on spending as much time together until then. The thought of not seeing him everyday seemed weird. They had become so close in the last year. “You know this is a good problem to have, right? Every company you applied with offered you a job. I hear that’s the dream.”

“One company, Oliver,” Felicity’s voice raised as she turned toward him. “Only one company was supposed to offer me a job. Then my decision would be made for me. This is impossible.” She threw the letters from various companies offering her a job across the coffee table. A few fell down onto the floor. Felicity slumped against the couch and crossed her arms in front of her. She knew she was being petulant but she didn’t care.

“You haven’t been yelling this while on campus, have you?” Oliver asked. “I don’t want to have to worry about some stressed out over-achiever, who has zero job offers, punching you. Or planning your murder.”

Felicity took a breath and counted down from three in her head. “I know you’re right. I should be happy, not worried about completely screwing up my life.”

“But you’re you,” Oliver replied. “You can react however you want. I am rethinking the keg I ordered, though.”

“What?” Felicity’s head swiveled fast to face Oliver.

“I’m joking. Geez, by now I know you better than that, thank you very much.” Oliver’s smirk told Felicity he wasn’t actually hurt. Felicity mumbled an acknowledgment anyway and turned her head back toward the pile of letters. Maybe if she glared at them long enough the right job offer would float to the top.

“Tell you what,” Oliver said as he stood up. He walked over to the fallen letters and collected those along with the few still on the table. “I will help you go through all these letters saying how amazing you are and how you are the only one who can keep these companies succeeding. I can tell you what I know about the people in charge.”

Felicity bit her lip.

“What?” Oliver asked as he sat back down next to her.

“It’s just,” Felicity’s voice faltered. Looking away, she continued in a quiet voice, “How much time have you actually spent paying attention at your family’s company?”
“Har-har,” Oliver responded. “And though that’s a legitimate question, I wasn’t referring to any knowledge about their business sense. I have, however, spent my fair time in fundraisers and company launchings that I have met more CEOs than seems humanly possible. Besides, I know you’ve done research on each company before you applied to all of these jobs. I can help you with a more personal aspect.”

“Thank you,” Felicity said, her voice heavy with sincerity and gratitude. Any new information had to help her make a decision. She also admitted Oliver’s insight would be unique.

“Don’t mention it.” It seemed to Felicity as if Oliver was blushing. Normally he loved any kind of attention and praise. She studied his face but he refused to look at her. He cleared his throat and read the first letter. “Luthor Corp? Felicity, you can’t be serious?”

“They offered me a very generous package considering I have zero experience.”

“Lex Luthor is one of the slimiest, creepiest people I have ever met. Not to mention crazy. That’s a no.” Oliver turned the letter over and placed it back on the coffee table, creating a no pile. Felicity acknowledged he had a point.

“Fine. Metropolis does sound like a great place to live. Expensive, though.” She had been worried about rental prices after some initial research.

“Next, we have Stagg Enterprises,” Oliver continued on.

“That was more of a safety net job application than anything,” Felicity explained. The position would have been one big yawn fest.

“Then Simon Stagg and his boring ass can go to the no pile. You don’t have a need for a safety net job.” He turned his attention to the next letter. “DeFrey something or other. Who is their CEO?”

“Cairo DeFrey.” Felicity liked the idea of working for a woman.

“Right, she had some problems with her company, her sister, and some kind of criminal activity.”

“That’s over with, now,” Felicity defended.

“Hmm,” Oliver didn’t voice his judgment but Felicity knew he didn’t like it. “I don’t know Cairo very well. The one or two times I’ve seen her, she’s ignored me. Seems like a serious person.”

“Serious is good.” Felicity fidgeted. She knew Oliver would hate the one item in her con list regarding the position. “Um, that job is in Paris.”

“Paris?” Oliver turned toward Felicity. She nodded. “Well that puts this in the no pile.”

He went to place the paper down when Felicity sat up and grabbed his wrist. “That isn’t a reason for me to say no, Oliver.”

“You’ll be in another country. I’m not sure how I’ll survive if you live on the opposite side of the U.S. Who would keep me from making all the dumb decisions I made before I met you? I won’t have you an international flight away from me.”

“Oliver, be serious.” Felicity rolled her eyes and released his wrist. He could be so stubborn at times.

“I am,” Oliver stated.

“I’m not going to choose a job based on its geographical distance from my friends.” She took the
letter from him.

“Do you even know French?” Oliver argued.

“I can learn. It goes in the maybe pile.” Felicity placed the letter face up in a new pile next to the no pile.

“Fine,” Oliver grumbled. Felicity knew it would not be the only conversation they had about where she lived. He looked at the next letter. “Kord Industries. Thomas Kord is okay. His son is worse than I ever was. Also, ruthless. And guess who is being groomed for the CEO position.”

“Maybe pile.” Felicity couldn’t put every job offer in the no pile.

“Dayton Industries? Steve Dayton is one of the most arrogant people you will ever meet. Good luck getting credit for any work you do.”

Felicity didn’t need a load of praise, but she wanted the chance to move up in whatever company she decided to work for. Not getting credit for her work could hamper that. “Okay, let’s put that in the no pile.”

“Good. Hawkes International. Veronica Hawkes is fun. I can sign off on her.”

Oh no. She would not put herself in that situation. Felicity sighed. “Did you sleep with her?”

Hesitating, Oliver asked, “Would that affect your decision on working there or not?”

“No pile.”

“Felicity.”

“I don’t want to work someplace where all I can think about is my boss slept with one of my best friends. And if she and I ever bumped into you together, the awkward factor would be way too high for me to handle.” Not to mention the jealousy factor Felicity would work hard to deny.

Oliver put the letter in the no pile. He stared at Felicity and she tried not to squirm. She managed to keep Oliver from knowing her attraction to him. The two of them had run into exes of Oliver’s before. It was difficult not to on his campus, Harvard wasn’t that big, and him being Oliver Queen. As far as she knew Oliver didn’t suspect anything.

To her relief, Oliver picked up the last letter from his lap and started to read it. “Wayne Enterprises? No!” He smacked the letter down in the no pile.

“Oliver?” He could be such a child sometimes. “A position with Wayne Enterprises is highly sought after.”

“No.”

“Lucius Fox is known for how generous a CEO is.”

“Bruce. Wayne.” Oliver responded through gritted teeth.

“Yeah?” Felicity’s brow furrowed.

“Bruce. Wayne.”

“What about him, Oliver? Did he run over your puppy?”
“Felicity, please.” Oliver turned to Felicity, took her hand, and looked straight into her eyes. “For me. Do not work for Wayne.”

There was a long pause as Felicity searched Oliver’s eyes. Felicity wasn’t sure what his problem was with Bruce Wayne. She had noticed the couple of times Bruce Wayne’s name came up, Oliver would become completely silent. She could tell it was important to Oliver. “Okay, Oliver,” Felicity agreed. “I won’t take the job with Wayne Enterprises. But don’t think I don’t know this isn’t about some sort of rivalry you have with Bruce Wayne. If you had any legitimate objection about him, you would tell me the details.”

“Thank you, Felicity.” He squeezed her hand and let go.

“After all that there are two in the maybe pile,” Felicity reached out to grab the letters. “This seems more manageable. Kord Industries and DeFray Entreprises.”

“I still say no to France,” Oliver mumbled.

“I already put Wayne Enterprises in the no pile for you. You are just going to have to suck up whatever decision I make.” Felicity gave Oliver a look that told him the discussion was over.

“Fine,” Oliver acknowledged and zipped his mouth closed. He finally seemed able to tell when she was serious and meant what she said. After a moment of him staring at the two remaining letters, his eyes went wide. “Wait. Felicity.”

“What?” She looked up from the reading the letters.

“Where is your ‘congrats you’re hired’ letter from QC?”

“I…” She looked down at her lap. Felicity had hoped he wouldn’t have noticed. “I didn’t apply at QC.”

“What? Why not? I, and by that, I mean my father, would get you a position a lot higher than these piddly little entry-level positions that you’re way overqualified for.”

In a small voice, Felicity answered, “That’s not how I want to get a job.”

“Why not? That’s how everyone gets jobs. What’s that saying, ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know?’”

Oliver sighed. Felicity had never seen him more frustrated.

She looked up at Oliver and replied, “I want to get a job on my own merit. Besides, I don’t have any corporate experience. I have to pay my dues.”

“Screw dues. You’re the smartest person QC could hire. And don’t you think I’ll need your help working at QC at whatever executive position my father has picked out for me?”

“I can’t be your tutor forever, Oliver,” Felicity said in a soft but exasperated tone. He looked back into her eyes. She tried to let him down gently. Felicity had avoided it, hoping Oliver would figure it out on his own. Apparently he hadn’t and Oliver didn’t like it. She wasn’t sure if he was angry or sad, but he brewed an argument in his head and Felicity hoped it wouldn’t take him long to be reasonable.

The two jumped when his phone rang from the arm of the couch. Oliver sighed and turned away from Felicity. “Hello. Thea…Thea slow down. What about Dad?”
His QC office became the place to most likely find Oliver in recent days. He re-read, for the fourth time, an analytical report comparing two completely different pieces of technology. Both projects were going to be assigned to Applied Sciences. Oliver needed to understand the ins and outs of them to present to the board.

Oliver contemplated running away with a new identity when Security called. Sara Lance was in the lobby and asked to see him. Oliver smiled and told Security Sara could come up.

After Digg’s announcement about Sara’s move to Hub City, which was within driving distance of Starling City, Oliver waited for Sara to show up. When Oliver asked Digg about her visits and when they would happen, Digg told Oliver it took longer than originally planned to move Sara, Sara’s sister, and Sara’s brother-in-law to a new town.

Waiting was not something Oliver was good at. Though this time he didn’t know if it was better to keep waiting and never have an I-just-want-to-stay-friends talk with Sara or if Oliver built it up too much in his mind. Maybe her family obligations made her romanticize anything not related to her sister. Oliver understood the compulsion.

As he waited for Sara’s appearance at his office door, Oliver jiggled his leg and tapped a pen on the desk repeatedly. Once he realized he jiggled his foot so much his desk shook, Oliver stopped moving both his leg and hand. He took a deep breath.

His second deep breath was interrupted by the sound of the elevator ding. Oliver went to stand up, but thought it’d be better to be seated at first, but then worried he was being rude. Sara turned the corner as Oliver went back and forth in his head about standing or sitting and had just risen out of his chair again.

Oliver kept his forward momentum and stood up. He walked over to the other side of his desk.

“Hey, Ollie,” Sara said with a big smile. She walked over and hugged him quickly and then plopped down in a chair next to them, her legs spread.

“Hi, Sara,” Oliver replied. He paused and wondered if he should sit in the chair next to Sara or if he should go back to his chair. Oliver cursed himself out in his head about standing or sitting and had just risen out of his chair again.

“Hey, Ollie,” Sara said with a big smile. She walked over and hugged him quickly and then plopped down in a chair next to them, her legs spread.

“Hi, Sara,” Oliver replied. He paused and wondered if he should sit in the chair next to Sara or if he should go back to his chair. Oliver cursed himself out in his head about standing or sitting and had just risen out of his chair again.

“That is the rumor,” Sara said.

“How’s your sister?” Oliver asked. He didn’t really care but he could be polite. Oliver wasn’t even sure if he could remember the sister’s name. It started with an L, he knew that much. Laura?

“Laurel is doing better,” Sara answered. Laurel! Oliver had been so close. “She actually wants to be in rehab this time. So maybe this time it’ll stick.”

“Do you like their new house?”

“It’s a house,” Sara shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a nice house. It should be after the money they spent on it.” Sara paused and squinted her eyes at Oliver. Oliver tried not to squirm. “But you don’t care.”

Oliver gave a tiny shrug, unable to deny it.
“Okay, the reason I’m here,” Sara said in a more business-like tone. Oliver tensed. His leg jiggled up and down again. Facing Sara, Oliver realized his practice scripts never took into account how Sara could react in a way contradictory to how Oliver planned it in his head. The idea of a serious relationship terrified him. In the end, all relationships ended. “Now that I’m closer to Starling City and can commute between the two places, I want to put on the charity event for Paws and Stripes.”

“Right, the fundraiser,” Oliver responded.

“The sock-hop,” Sara corrected with an excited glint in her eye. “I want to make sure your offer to use Verdant is still good. I know I canceled on you last minute, but my situation is much more stable now.”

“It’s fine. Let’s have it at Verdant.” Oliver’s leg stopped bouncing but his muscles still tensed.

“Great!” Sara exclaimed. “I still want to have it as soon as humanly possible. How about this coming Tuesday?”

Oliver was about to agree and then remembered Sin’s reaction to him agreeing to hold the sock-hop with hardly any prep time. Oliver knew it was in his best interest to keep Sin happy. “How about the Monday after? It’ll give my manager more time to plan, which will cause her to swear at me less.”

“Okay,” Sara agreed. “You’ll call Sin now?”

“Sure. Actually, I could help plan now,” Oliver said. “I was just about to plan my escape. Some distraction might do me and QC some good.”

Sara scrunched her face up. “Umm...actually, I saw a couple people in the lobby I know. I said I would go grab coffee with them after I asked you this. Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s fine,” Oliver replied. “The board of directors will like the appearance as if I’m doing my job. I’ll call Sin and tell her to work with you again.”

Sara stood up. And turned towards the door when she stopped herself. “Thanks, Ollie. It’s going to be great. I’ll make sure to keep you in the loop.”

“No problem. Are you sure you don’t need some more muscle to start planning this?” He turned back to his computer screen and scowled.

“I’ve got plenty of guns to get the planning started.” Sara headed towards the exit. She stopped again and Oliver looked back up at her. “But if I do need extra muscle I will call...Digg probably. His are just so much bigger.” With a wink and a laugh Sara skipped away to the elevators. She earned a glare from Gladys and Oliver had to stifle a laugh. He didn’t want Gladys to think he laughed at her.

When she left the floor, relief flooded Oliver’s body. Oliver realized Sara no longer liked him. If she ever did. It was the best possible outcome.

Oliver tried to think back to the day Sara left and couldn’t remember what had led him to believe she liked him. Sara had been sad to leave, but her trip here had been cut short. Even after it had been postponed 100 times.

He had seen something in her eyes. But it wasn’t there anymore. And Oliver wasn’t even sure he had had real feelings for Sara either. He may have just been caught up in the moment. Either way, their romantic feelings for each other were kaput.

Oliver could continue to have fun and hang out with Sara. And there wouldn’t be any strain in his
friendship with Digg.

With a sigh, Oliver went back to the analytical report. After he was three sentences in of his fifth re-read, Oliver stopped. His eyes and his brain hurt. Oliver closed out of the report. He didn’t have to know everything today. The board wouldn’t ask too many technical questions.

His cell phone buzzed. It was Sin. Shit. He was supposed to tell her about the sock-hop being back on. Oh well, it wasn’t like the ten-minute lead time Sara had given him would make or break the fundraiser. Oliver would just have to be super nice to Sin and maybe remind her he was the boss. Again.

Though the sock-hop would get Oliver back into Verdant. That would have to make Sin happy.

Oliver wanted to surprise everyone and show up to the sock-hop early. He was the owner of the club holding the fundraiser. Oliver thought he should be there for any last minute questions or emergencies.

When Oliver entered Verdant, he noted he arrived ten minutes early. He had aimed to be thirty minutes early, so he was still on Oliver-time. But Oliver still made it in before the crowd was let in.

He paused and took in the sight of his club. It did not look like Verdant any more. It reminded Oliver of the set of the diner in Back to the Future when Marty went to the 1950s. The entire dance floor had a large black and white checkered mat over it. The tables surrounding the dance floor were small circular tall tables with teal tops. The teal matched the padded seats of the round stools around the tables. Sara perched a jukebox in front of the DJ station.

Sara had the idea of borrowing a classic car and putting it in the club. On the opposite side of the dance floor a 1958 red Buick was parked. Sara even convinced the owner of the car to let them raffle off a drive in the car. However, the owner insisted on driving because the owner didn’t trust Sara much.

There were fairy lights strung up above the club. Somehow with the warmer, dimmer light, the decor didn’t look cheesy. It looked like a romantic date waiting to happen.

“Sara,” Oliver called out. She stood behind the bar with Sin. He spread his arms out wide, “This looks amazing. Both of you did a great job.”

“Thanks, Ollie,” Sara responded with a prideful grin.

“I assume the compliment will be reflected in my paycheck?” Sin asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

Oliver laughed. “Sin, this is for charity.” The insinuation earned a glare from Sin. “I’m kidding. I donated your time, not you. I will pay you for your extra work these past two weeks.”

Sin smiled and walked toward the wait staff to give them final directions, Oliver assumed. He shook his head. “So much for me instilling a sense of community and philanthropy to my staff.”

“Yeah, that probably went out the window when I suggested the wait staff wear those red checkered aprons with the white paper hats.”

“Thanks for that,” Oliver responded dryly.

“But I have to say you can rock a leather jacket.”
“You think?” Oliver asked. The black jacket along with the rolled-up jean legs and plain white tee shirt seemed a little too casual for the night. He guessed years of suits had programed Oliver to expect a certain stuffiness at fundraisers.

“You look perfect,” Sara complimented. “What about me?”

Instead of a poodle skirt, Sara wore jean capris with blue and white checkered fabric at the bottom hem of the capris and at the top of the high waistbands and pockets. She paired it with a plain white blouse and a blue and white checkered scarf holding her ponytail in place. “You look great.”

“Thank you,” Sara replied with a mock earnestness. She looked down at her phone. “I guess it’s time to let the people in. If anyone shows up.”

“Shut up,” Oliver answered. They both moved toward the door. “You sold out of tickets.”

“But what if they just bought the tickets to contribute but then don’t come tonight. And then this big empty space remains empty and we don’t make any money on the auction items.”

“Relax. People will come.”

“I’m just messing with you,” Sara laughed. “Let’s get this party started. Sin, get the music playing.”

“Sure,” Sin yelled across the club. She pointed a remote toward the jukebox and pressed the play button. Sara, Sin, and Oliver had gone over and over the playlist. Everyone had an opinion on the best songs and the worst songs. The last email Oliver received about the playlist was late that afternoon. He thought it was a little silly to argue over something as trivial as music. To Oliver, all 1950s music sounded the same.

Sara pushed the entrance door open to tell Ramirez, the bouncer, to let people in. The music filled the room. It was quite a change from the music usually played in Verdant. Oliver found he couldn’t help but tap his fingers against his leg to the beat of the music. Sara arched her eyebrow at him; Oliver tapped with more exaggeration.

Digg and Lyla entered the door first. It was fun to watch their faces as they took in the club. Oliver would have thought they entered watching fireworks with their oohs and ahhs.

“Sara, you did a great job,” Lyla said, still taking everything in.

“Yeah, you actually knew what you’re doing,” Digg joked.

“Har-har, Digg,” Sara responded.

They four walked to the bar and got drinks. Smiles and anticipatory energy for the night bounced between them.

Soon others came through the door in spurts. Sara left their small group to greet everyone. Oliver was thankful, though this fundraiser was being held in his club, he was not the host. He could enjoy the limited responsibilities he had, which basically consisted of showing up.

When Felicity showed, she walked up to the group. She wore a red dress with big black polka-dots. She wore black-seamed nylons, which ran up her muscular calves. Layers of tulle from her petticoat peeked out from underneath her dress and poofed it up, making the dress swing around her small frame. Her glasses were replaced with cat-eye glasses and her normal ponytail was placed higher and had a red scarf tied around the base of it.
Oliver handed her a drink the moment she got to them. Felicity accepted it with thanks and, if Oliver didn’t know better, swore she ran her eyes over him. But he guessed he had just done the same to her. They just took in each other’s costumes.

Barry showed up in a long letterman sweater, unlike every other guy who came in a white tee-shirt and black leather jacket. “Great outfit, Barry,” Oliver approved.

“Are you sure?” Barry asked as he looked around. “No other guy is wearing this.”

“That makes you an original, Barry,” Oliver comforted.

“Yes, Barry,” Felicity added with a nod. “People are going to be bored with all the million Danny Zukos by about an hour into the party. You’ll be a welcome change.”

Barry smiled at the praise and stood a little taller. He really was putty when given compliments.

“Hey,” Oliver joked to Felicity. “Are you saying people are going to be tired of me in my leather jacket?”

Felicity bit her bottom lip as she looked over Oliver again. When she looked back up to his eyes, her pupils were wide. Her voice stuttered, “Yes. You look like every other guy in here.”

“How is that different than any other fundraiser? Except I’ve replaced a tux with a tee-shirt and jacket.”

“That’s true,” Felicity sighed. “It really isn’t fair the men have it so easy planning on what to wear to events.”

“Yes, we do,” Oliver confirmed. “But apparently, we get boring.”

“So it evens out in the end,” Felicity concluded. Oliver nodded at her but his eyes jerked up over her to a couple walking their way.

Slade and Isabel.

Of course they were present at a public event that featured Oliver. How else would the public associate them with the Queens.

Oliver turned back to the bar and got another drink.

“Hello, everyone,” Isabel greeted with what looked like enthusiasm, but Oliver was unsure if it was genuine or not. The group welcomed the couple and pleasantries were exchanged. Barry slid a little behind Oliver. Before awkward conversation had a chance to begin, Sara joined the group. Introductions were made.

Slade just started to say something about embassy parties when Sara interrupted him. “I was under the impression you two were bringing Nyssa and Cisco. Are they with you?”

Oliver hadn’t been aware they were missing.

“Oh, oops,” Isabel said, barely concerned if her constant smile was anything to go by.

“It’s fine,” Slade announced. “We can have our driver go back and pick them up. No damage done.” Slade retreated to talk to his and Isabel’s driver.

“I’m going to need a drink,” Sara stated as she made her way toward Oliver and the bar. Her smile
vanished and her mood darkened. In a hushed tone, Sara added to Oliver, “Especially if I have to
deal with Eye-Patch-Asshole and Stuck-Up-Bitch all evening. Are they always this self-centered?”

“No,” Oliver whispered back. “Sometimes they’re also insulting.”

“You remember the two of us are starting the dancing?” Sara asked.

“I hoped you would forget,” Oliver said. Sara texted him asking him to learn dances from the 1950s.
The texts continued until Oliver had to say yes to get them to stop. QC’s board had not been amused
his phone kept buzzing in their monthly financial meeting. Nor the time Oliver spent watching the
different dances on YouTube.

“We have to set an example,” Sara said, louder this time so the whole group could hear her. “People
will feel self-conscious if they are the first dance. We have a responsibility, Ollie, to make people feel
comfortable dancing. It’s kind of a big thing at sock-hops.”

“Fine, but you owe me.”

Sara shrugged. “What do you want?”

“That’ll be determined at a later date,” Oliver said in a mock-threatening tone. The group laughed.

“I would be glad to help get the dancing started,” Slade offered. “I don’t mean to brag, but I am quite
a dancer. There have been a couple of dances at the White House, and I never had a minute where I
wasn’t dancing. Once all the ladies saw how skillful a dancer I was, they fought over me. I don’t
want to say it almost caused world war three, but it was close.”

Slade and Isabel laughed at his joke and the others chuckled insincerely a moment later.

“Well, yeah, the more the merrier,” Sara replied, as she tried to move past the awkwardness.

“Sorry,” Felicity said. “I won’t be dancing. I’m too much of a klutz and for the safety of everyone
it’s better if I don’t attempt to dance.”

Oliver pouted. He hadn’t realized how much he’d been looking forward to dancing with Felicity.

“Felicity, I-”

“I don’t want to dance to this song,” Isabel interrupted. Oliver bit his lip to keep from demanding an
apology. “It’s sexist.”

Oliver noticed Sara’s shoulder and neck muscles tense. He looked to her hands and saw they were in
tightly held fists. Oliver gently put his hand on her upper arm, trying to be casual about it. Sara
tensed more for a moment and then took a deep breath and relaxed. It would be a long night for Sara
if she didn’t learn to roll with Slade and Isabel being their usual selves.

Felicity interjected over the lively fun song, Tutti Frutti, “Obviously a sock-hop is going to play 50’s
music. And, Isabel, the songs back then had a different, and, yes, sexist, perspective. But in the ‘50s,
they were at the cusp of the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism. So one could argue-”

“Thank you, Felicity,” Isabel interrupted. “I…appreciate the history lesson. It still doesn’t make the
song less sexist.”

“You’re going to be sitting out a lot of songs then,” Lyla responded. Instead of looking for the
impact her words had on Isabel, Lyla, proving how awesome she is, took a sip of her drink and
looked toward the door. “Oh, look, Cisco and Nyssa are here.”
Looking down at his watch, Oliver was surprised to see them so soon. Slade must have tipped his driver very well to ignore things, such as speed limits. Oliver wondered if Slade’s driver had diplomatic immunity.

Cisco showed up in the normal Danny Zuko outfit, but with, what Oliver assumed from the sheen, a pleather black coat. Nyssa was in a light blue poodle skirt and a white blouse with a rounded collar. Her dark ruby ring didn’t go with her outfit, even a little bit. Both costumes were thin, generic, and probably bought at a Goodwill or a cheap costume shop.

“Hi, everyone,” Cisco nodded to everyone, individually. His smile spread so wide it nearly ate up the rest of his face. “This looks awesome.” He waved his hand around the club. “And everyone’s outfits are amazing. I can already tell we need to do this more often.”

Most of the group smiled, nearly in sync, good naturedly. Nyssa even smiled, and it reached her eyes.

“Since everyone is here, and has a drink, we should start the dancing,” Sara announced. She looked directly at Oliver when she mentioned dancing. Sara looked as if she was trying to get away with something.

With a sigh, Oliver decided to enjoy the evening. He could pout and complain or Oliver could have fun. Having fun meant Oliver had to be enthusiastic and want to dance. A new song he immediately identified as La Bamba came on. Oliver took it as his cue. He finished his drink, set it down on the bar, and held his hand out to Sara. “Can I have this dance?”

Sara took hold of his hand and with the other placed it over her forehead dramatically. “I thought you’d never ask.”

With a laugh, Oliver spun her out to the checkered dance floor. After establishing a basic step, Oliver twirled Sara around. Isabel and Slade joined them. Oliver guessed this song was okay, and didn’t send the wrong political message. Absently, Oliver wondered if Slade’s limited eyesight would lead to an injury. Sara and Oliver danced around them and Digg and Lyla, who had followed Slade and Isabel onto the dance floor. Oliver felt relieved to find his feet, hips, and the rest of his body found the beat of the song.

As the dance continued, Oliver became more confident in his dance abilities. He flipped Sara over his arm and, as he realized they reached the end of the song, lowered Sara into a dip. Oliver pulled Sara up and clapped with everyone else in Verdant.

He was a little out of breath, but Oliver figured he had just ran around the dance floor three or four times.

Yakety Yak played. Sara looked up at Oliver with a raised eyebrow. With a tone of daring Oliver, Sara asked, “You want to keep going?”

“Let’s do it,” Oliver said as he grabbed her hands and led them into the pretzel. He was surprised to find he remembered a lot of the moves he had learned in a swing class he took in college to meet girls. The class had apparently accomplished two things.

He looked back at the bar and saw Felicity sitting at the bar. She watched everyone dancing and talked to Sin. Oliver thought she’d enjoy dancing if she tried, but she’d be too self-conscious of her lack of coordination resulting in bruised toes of her dancing partners. Oliver wanted Felicity to try, maybe with someone who wouldn’t mind being stepped on. He was sorry she deprived herself of the fun she could have if she danced.
With his hands on her hips, Oliver lifted Sara to his right hip, his left hip, then her legs opened to meet him at his middle. Finally, Sara straightened her legs and Oliver swung her straight over him, held the position for a moment, and set her down; both of them laughing. They continued to dance and laughed whenever Oliver lifted Sara.

Oliver was glad to see more people had joined them on the dance floor. He saw Nyssa and Cisco dancing. It made it a little crowded, but Oliver just led Sara to the edge of the dance floor if he wanted to do a tricky maneuver. At the end of the song, Oliver double dipped Sara then carefully set her back down on the floor.

Sara’s smile matched his own. Her cheeks flushed and Oliver could feel the heat from his own cheeks. Oliver didn’t think he’d get such a good workout tonight. He regretted the leather coat.

“I need some water,” Oliver told Sara.

“Ollie,” Sara whined and her bottom lip stuck out.

“I’m bowing out of one song.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Sara spun around and stole Digg from a grateful Lyla. Lyla walked back to the bar with Oliver.

“Hey, Barry,” Oliver said.

“Hey. You looked great out there. I wish I could dance better.”

Oliver tried to wave Sin over, but she was busy serving other people. He hoisted himself onto the bar and grabbed a couple bottles of water. Once his feet were back on the ground, Oliver handed one of the bottles to Lyla.

“Thank you,” Lyla said. She opened the bottle and took a big gulp. Oliver guzzled half of his.

“You should go out and dance, Barry. No one cares how good someone is.”

“Says the person who looked like a professional dancer.”

“Where’s Felicity?” Oliver asked. When she wasn’t at the bar, Oliver hoped she went out to the dance floor. But Oliver couldn’t see her. The dance floor was crowded, but Oliver would know Felicity’s ponytail anywhere.

“She went to the restroom,” Barry said.

“Oh,” Oliver said. He sat down and took off his leather jacket and wiped the sweat off his brow.

“You need to roll up your sleeves if you’re taking your jacket off for the rest of the night,” Lyla suggested.

“Thank you.” He turned his head and rolled a sleeve up with one hand. “How’d you get Digg to dance?”

“I bribed him.”

“With what? I need to know how to bribe him.”
Lyla smiled as if she held in a laugh. “Oliver, do you really want to know what I promised him?”

Oliver eyes widened to comedic levels. “No. But Lyla, that does not help me.”

Lyla shrugged her shoulders.

“What are you two talking about?” Barry asked as he looked between Oliver and Lyla, with a very confused look. Oliver raised his eyebrows suggestively. “Oh. Sex.” Barry looked back to Lyla. She had a dangerous glare focused on Barry. “Which I will stop thinking about right now.”

“That’d be better for you,” Lyla said. Oliver laughed and Lyla joined in. Barry went pale for a second and then half-heartedly laughed with them, which only made Oliver and Lyla laugh harder.

“Song is over. I promised Sara I’d go back out there. Lyla?” Oliver offered his hand.

“One song,” Lyla consented tentatively. “And no crazy flips. No flips at all.”

“No flips.” Oliver agreed. Rock Around the Clock played. Oliver spun Lyla to the dance floor. He was careful not to do any intricate steps.

When the song stopped, he switched partners with Digg and danced with Sara again to Rockin Robin. Oliver saw Digg and Lyla leave the dance floor after the song. He convinced Dr. Snow to dance one song with him while Ronnie looked at the LaSabre. The Banana Boat song was a bit slower, but Oliver made the best of it. Mostly Oliver just kept spinning Dr. Snow until she laughed and held herself upright on his arms.

In between dances, Oliver would steal a second to drink more water and beer, and say hi to Felicity and Barry.

Oliver knew he had a good time when he found himself dancing with Nyssa to Que Sera Sera. He even danced to Mr. Sandman with Gladys, which made Oliver doubt his, and Gladys’, sobriety.

The music cut and Sara stood up on the DJ platform with a microphone in hand. It took a minute for the crowd to hush and look up at Sara. Oliver watched from the back, leaning against the bar.

“Hey, Daddy-O, cut the gas,” Sara yelled out. “First, I want to thank everyone for coming out and looking so hip. Paws and Stripes is a great charity and their mission is a straightforward and tangible way to help veterans. I’m a veteran, like so many of my friends who are here tonight. So give yourselves a round of applause.”

The crowd clapped and Oliver heard a high pitch whistle, which made everyone laugh.

“Second, I want to thank Oliver Queen the owner of Verdant and Sin the manager. They have been very generous and tonight would not have happened without them.”

Applause happened spontaneously as the crowd knew what was expected of them. Oliver gave the crowd a little wave.

“Third, before we get to announcing the winners of the silent auctions, there is a group dance I want everyone to do. If you haven’t seen the silent auction items up for bid, they are to the side next to the beautiful car. They’re great prizes, which have been so generously donated by local businesses and individuals. So if you aren’t dancing, you may want to go look at them and put in a last minute bid.

“If you are dancing,” Sara said with a gleam in her eye, which made Oliver nervous, especially because he could see it from where he stood, “we are going to do a group dance popular in the
fifties: the stroll. If you don’t know what the stroll is I’ll explain it. You’ll get into two lines, facing your partner. While in line you’ll two step or whatever basic step you want to do, and the head couple will dance down the line. If you want to get crazy, now is the time. If you don’t, that’s good, too. No judgment. No need to feel self-conscious, just have fun.

“So everyone find a partner and line up.”

Sara climbed down from the platform and grabbed Oliver. “You’re my partner, right?”

“Sure,” Oliver affirmed with a smile. The group around them laughed at Sara’s antics. Though Nyssa was characteristically glum, despite how much she had smiled earlier on the dance floor.

“That’s right. We have to show them how it’s done. We’re going first, if you hadn’t figured it out.”

“I guessed,” Oliver nodded.

“I have to go put on the music, but go to the head of the line, save our spots, and don’t let anyone steal you. You’re my partner.”

Oliver laughed and walked toward the head of the line. He stood next to Slade, whose dance partner was Nyssa. Nyssa’s partner didn’t evoke any enthusiasm in her. Just as Slade took a breath to go on about how he invented the stroll or something equally absurd, Shout blasted out the speakers. Oliver had never been more thankful for loud music.

Everyone two-stepped as Sara ran to her place in line. She put her hand on Nyssa’s arm to make room for her. Then Sara faced Oliver and they both moved forward.

With dancing so many times together, Sara and Oliver knew how the other danced. They started with some fairly basic spins, Oliver knew Sara didn’t want to intimidate less skilled dancers. At the halfway mark Oliver lifted Sara to his hip and then swung her to wrap her behind him. Sara turned herself until she was in front of Oliver in his arms. The line of people clapped and cheered. Oliver ended their parade with lifting Sara into a backflip. Sara smiled up at him, he returned it, and they took their places at the end of the line.

The line ended four-and-half-feet from the bar where Felicity, Digg, Barry, and Walter Steel sat together. Oliver was glad Walter had made it. He moderately dressed down from his usual outfit with a sweater over his dress shirt. Looking down the line, Oliver saw Cisco across from Lyla and laughed to himself about the pairing.

Isabel walked up to them, and with her shouting to be heard over the music, Oliver picked up on every word.

“Mr. Diggle, I’d love to show everyone how well you dance.”

“Sorry, only my wife and one very pushy veteran can get me to dance.”

“I understand. What about you Mr. Steele? I bet you have some great moves hiding in you somewhere.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. If I can help it, I never dance. With the possible exception of a waltz.”

Oliver was surprised she took the rejection of two people well. Slade slid into the spot next to Oliver.

“Isabel, I think I have a dance partner for you,” Digg said.
“That’d be great. Who?”

“Barry hasn’t danced yet.” Oliver grimaced. This wasn’t going to end well, though he knew Digg had the best of intentions. “Why don’t you take him out for a spin.”

“You know what? I’m a little tired,” Isabel responded, a gleam in her eyes. “I think I’ll just go sit down. I wouldn’t want to be arrested for consorting with a minor.”

Isabel turned and found a seat a couple feet away from the group. She made eye contact with Slade and smiled. Her eyes gleamed evilly. Slade chuckled and Oliver reminded himself Slade was bigger than he was. And Slade had diplomatic immunity.

The surrounding crowd stared at Barry and whispered to one another. Barry looked down, his entire face burned red, and made himself as small as possible.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The charity event continues and Barry is attacked.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for your lovely comments.

Oliver almost changed his mind and hit Slade. But then Felicity stood up and smoothed her skirt over her petticoat.

“Barry, you want to dance with me?” Felicity asked.

Oliver smiled.

Barry beamed. He stood up and nodded.

Oliver had never been prouder to be friends with Felicity.

They walked hand in hand over to Oliver, and once the next couple took their place at the end of the line, Felicity skidded over to the other side of the line next to Sara. Felicity made eye contact with Oliver and Oliver gave her a smile of thanks and then a wink. Felicity crinkled up her nose and winked back.

“Felicity is really great,” Barry said next to him.

“Yes, she is,” Oliver agreed.

When it was finally Felicity and Barry’s turn, Felicity, again, surprised Oliver. Though she clearly led Barry, Felicity pulled out some impressive moves. She practically spun around Barry. At the end of the line, Felicity had Barry crouch down and she rolled herself over Barry’s back, kicking her legs straight up in the air. Oliver whistled and cheered for them.

Blessedly, the song ended, though Oliver was sure he would hear Shout in his head for the next five days.

The crowd moved to bunch up at the DJ station as Sara climbed back up. With Sin’s help, they announced the winners of the silent auction items. Digg and Lyla won a cheese basket and Felicity won a wine basket. Oliver made a mental note to invite the two groups over with their baskets so they could all enjoy. Ronnie Raymond won the car ride, though Dr. Snow did not look as enthusiastic as Ronnie did.

Oliver slid back through the crowd to the bar where Felicity was. They smiled at each other.

“So,” Oliver questioned, “you’ve been lying all this time.”
“What?”

“You can dance.”

Felicity let out a breath. “That,” she responded as she pointed to the dance floor, “only happened because I led. I’m horrible at following someone’s lead. And really, we should all be thankful the alcohol took over my brain so I would dance, and didn’t leave me more uncoordinated than usual.”

With a small laugh, Oliver scooted closer to Felicity to allow others to get drinks. Her perfume was strong after she exerted herself dancing. One person moved into the space, got a beer, and left. Oliver remained close to Felicity’s side.

“Thank you,” Oliver said warmly. He grazed his hand over her upper arm.

“For what?”

“For dancing with Barry after Isabel embarrassed him,” Oliver said. Felicity nodded her head in recognition of her act.


Oliver nodded and looked over at the couple in question. “I think you saw her more clearly than I did when we first met her. There is a littleness about Isabel I didn’t see until her advantageous proposal to me and subsequent engagement to Slade.”

“Maybe it’s better they are together,” Felicity said. Oliver looked back to her with a questioning look on his face. “It contains their awfulness to each other.” Oliver laughed and then pointedly stared at the empty dance floor, referencing their earlier snub of Barry. Felicity conceded and added, “Mostly.”

“They certainly deserve one another.”

“That they do,” Felicity said. Oliver watched her look over at Barry. “If it helps, you chose better for Isabel then she chose for herself. Barry is a good guy. He’s lucky to have you as a friend.”

Oliver looked more carefully at Felicity. He didn’t know how she did it. He didn’t know how Felicity was able to make Oliver feel better about his mistakes, and, at the same time, compliment Oliver. Oliver was certain he was the lucky one to have Felicity in his life.

Felicity looked back to Oliver and narrowed her brows. With a trepidatious smile, Felicity asked, “What?”

“Nothing,” Oliver said as he still stared at her. Without thinking, Oliver asked, “You want to dance?”

Her uneasy smile turned into one of delight and fondness. She nodded and Oliver held his arm out for her to take. They walked onto the dance floor and then realized no music played. They laughed. Felicity’s was loud as she threw her head back. Oliver looked up at saw Sara still on the DJ’s platform. Sara, having seen them walk on the dance floor, nodded and turned the jukebox back on.

The speakers projected out a slow tempo song on strings. Nervousness gripped Oliver when he realized Sara had put on a slow song and he and Felicity had to dance to it. He looked down at Felicity, who fidgeted, and Oliver calmed. He smiled. Felicity smiled back and held her arms out. Oliver held her right hand and placed his left hand on her waist. Her left arm rested on his shoulder.

Nat King Cole’s unique voice sang about when he would fall in love. Oliver swayed, giving Felicity
time to anticipate his small circular steps. Soon, Oliver instinctively brought her closer to him. Felicity rested her head on his chest since she couldn’t reach his shoulder. Oliver liked it better because he could place his chin on her head. They fit together perfectly.

Having Felicity in his arms somehow comforted Oliver. It felt right. Oliver knew it was because Felicity was one of the few people who knew him completely and still liked him.

Other couples joined them on the dance floor, but Oliver was only aware of them peripherally. He kept slowly rotating them back and forth. Felicity felt warm against him and an image of sitting by a fire drinking hot cocoa on a cold snowy day popped into his head. Having his arm around her, keeping her close, seemed to ground Oliver.

Much too soon for Oliver’s liking, the song ended. Keeping Felicity close to him, Oliver dipped her. He hovered over her for a moment, both smiling contentedly.

He pulled her up against him. Felicity startled and remove her hands from his shoulder and hand. Oliver kept his left hand on her waist. He walked Felicity back to their seats.

“No bruised toes,” Oliver commented.

“And I didn’t lead!” Felicity exclaimed. “That’s a first.”

“You just need the right partner.”

“That’s what I’ve been missing,” Felicity face palmed her forehead. Oliver laughed.

Digg and Lyla stood at the bar too, along with Barry and Cisco. Cisco told them Nyssa had a difficult time and hunkered down in the restroom. Felicity offered to go check on her, but Cisco said Nyssa had asked if she could just have some time alone.

More drinks were ordered and the remainder of the night they spent talking and watching the other dancers. Oliver was sorry to see the night end. He enjoyed the dancing and the time spent with friends. Even Cisco didn’t irritate Oliver like he usually did.

Oliver was disappointed Sara had hosting duties so she couldn’t sit with them. He hadn’t even been able to see Sara after he sat down.

The night air nipped at them as they walked outside. Oliver handed his jacket to Felicity and she accepted it gratefully. The light from the full moon lit their way to their cars. Oliver enjoyed looking at the few stars he could see past the parking lot’s yellow buzzing lights.

They said goodnight to each other and separated. Once his driver had closed the rear car door, Oliver rolled down the window to let the cool air hit his face. Once they drove past the city lights, Oliver could spot stars in the sky. He had never been good at finding constellations, but he could always find the Big Dipper.

The ride home went by quicker than normal for Oliver. He knew it was a good thing as he was expected in the office early the next day. But he wouldn’t have minded another hour or two reliving the night and counting the stars.

Bounding down the stairs humming a Nat King Cole tune, Oliver made his way to the kitchen. Though he was wide awake, he was certain it wouldn’t last. Oliver hoped coffee would sustain him when he crashed from the little sleep he got last night. He was surprised to find his feet weren’t sore;
however, his arms burned a bit when he stretched them over his body. Oliver knew it was worth it.

Dancing had been fun. Originally Oliver thought he’d suffer through the first couple dances, but it was fun to see what lifts he and Sara could do. It was great seeing everyone outside of their usual elements and dressed up. Oliver loved that he had gotten Felicity to dance. Dancing with Felicity was his most enjoyable moment of the night. He’d even be willing to dance again if he could convince Felicity to dance with him.

The smell of his coffee woke Oliver up even more. Once he poured a cup and sipped it, Oliver was sure he could work for days without sleep. Not that he would want to work days or even a full 24-hour day. He wasn’t crazy. Or Felicity.

Thinking of Felicity reminded Oliver of the look on her face when she and Barry walked up to the stroll lines. Felicity had handled Isabel’s slight of Barry so well. That Isabel and Slade embarrassed Barry like that, in front of everyone, made Oliver just as angry as he was last night. Barry had done nothing to them. The only reason why the couple focused on him was they viewed Barry as an easy target. There would be too many repercussions if Isabel and Slade had gone after Oliver.

Thank god Felicity saved the day.

Saved it by not only asking Barry to dance, but also by dancing well enough to not embarrass Barry any further. After the stroll, Oliver had seen Barry dance a few more times. Barry may have only danced with Sara and Nyssa, but by doing so Barry showed Isabel and Slade they couldn’t ruin Barry’s evening.

It was so perfect, it was almost as if Oliver planned the whole thing himself. Maybe he should send Isabel and Slade a thank you letter. Oliver would thank them for giving Barry the opportunity to prove he was so far above them, despite the couple’s perceived social standing. Oliver resolved he would at least send a thank you card, or even some flowers, to Felicity.

Another positive outcome Oliver hoped would happen because of the encounter would be Barry finally getting over Isabel. Barry had to see Isabel for who she really was. Oliver didn’t know what else could knock Isabel off the pedestal Barry had placed her on and end Barry’s infatuation.

Just as Oliver was about to walk out the door, his phone beeped with an incoming text message. Barry had a scare and Sara sent Oliver a message. Oliver should meet them at QC. Oliver quickly texted back he was just leaving the house and he’d see them as fast as he could drive there. Oliver then called QC’s security and asked them to escort her and Barry to his office when they arrived.

Gunning the engine, Oliver hoped the donation the Queen family gave to the SCPD would be enough for him to not be stopped.

Oliver rushed off the elevator into his office to find Sara giving Barry a bottle of soda. Barry was pale, sweating, and, as Oliver saw Barry taking the offered soda, shaking.

“What happened?” Oliver asked in way of greeting. He walked up to both of them and stood by the couch. “Barry, are you okay?”

Barry looked up to Oliver and seemed surprised to see Oliver in his own office. As if realizing he was asked a question, Barry nodded, looked back down, and took a sip of the soda.

“She’s? What did you mean by scare?”
“Ollie, everything is okay now,” Sara explained. She sat down next to Barry. “So just relax. Sit down. Put your feet up on this incredibly expensive table.”

“What happened?” Oliver asked again through gritted teeth.

With raised eyebrows, Sara gave Oliver a pointed look, then to the empty place on the couch, and back again at Oliver. Oliver gritted his teeth and sat down. He gave his own pointed look to Sara so she would know Oliver wasn’t going to ask again.

“I was getting coffee,” Sara began in an annoyingly calm voice. Oliver’s finger and thumb rubbed against each other. “When I walked back to my car, I saw two people in the alley next to the coffee shop.”

“Okay,” Oliver said.

“I noticed one of them had a knife. So, I went into the alley to scare the guy with the knife off. I didn’t realize the other guy was Barry until—”

“Wait,” Oliver interrupted, his fingers stilled. He looked over at Barry. “Someone pulled a knife on you?”

“Oh, I really don’t think so,” Sara said. “Just let me talk, okay?” Oliver put his hands up in surrender and then hastily put them back down again. He realized it was probably insensitive, given Barry had been forced to do that very thing at knife point earlier. Sara shook her head, incredulous. “I told the knife dude to leave. He got scared and grabbed for Barry. I was faster. I got Barry out of the way and subdued knife guy.”

“Wow. Are you two okay?”

“Barry’s fine. Just a little shocked. The sugar should help.”

“What about you?” Oliver asked Sara.

“Me? I’m fine. Not even a scratch.” Sara smiled.

“Did you call the police?”

“About that,” Sara began, “I was on my way back to Hub City when all this happened. I’m already going to be late as it is. I don’t have time to give a statement to the police.”

“We should file a report,” Oliver said incredulously. “The, Oliver rolled his eyes at the moniker, ‘knife guy’ needs to be found before he does this again.”

“The chances of the cops finding this guy is slimmer than discovering the pope has an illegitimate child. You know, not impossible but it won’t happen.”

“Barry?” Oliver asked. “What do you want to do?”

“Huh?” Barry looked up at his name but didn’t know what he was asked.

“Do you want to file a police report?”

“Um, do I have to?” Barry’s voice was small and childlike. Oliver sighed. “Not if you don’t want to.”
“Good,” Barry replied. Barry put his head back down to stare at the carpet more.

After about three seconds, Oliver prodded Barry again, “So, is that a no, Barry?”

“What?” Barry asked. Oliver counted to ten and reminded himself Barry had gone through an ordeal and required more patience than usual.

“You don’t want to go to the police?”

“Oh, no. Thank you.”

Sara laughed and patted Barry hard on the back. Oliver hoped that might wake Barry from the stupor Barry was in. Sara stood up and said, “Drink more soda, kid.” She turned to Oliver. “I have to get going. Laurel is going to be so annoyed when I walk in late.”

Oliver stood up and walked Sara to the door. “Thanks for saving Barry.”

“Of course. He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, he is. Drive safe.”

With a salute, Sara walked toward the elevators, winking at Gladys. Gladys seemed uncertain how to react to Sara’s innocent flirting.

At the door to his office, Oliver asked, “Gladys, can you postpone my first meeting, please?”

“Yes, Mr. Queen.”

Walking back into his office, Oliver stopped halfway to the couch. He had no idea how to handle someone who was in shock. Sara had said sugar. Barry had that. Oliver thought maybe going for a walk would be a good idea. But then Oliver remembered Barry’s shaky hand and how he was held at knife point outside.

“Barry,” Oliver said loudly. He walked the rest of the way to the couch and sat down. He draped his arm on the back rest. “You survived. You should celebrate. Not mope.”

“You’re right,” Barry said as he nodded his head. His voice stronger. “I had a near death experience and survived to tell the tale.”

Biting his tongue, Oliver refrained from saying Barry wasn’t likely to have died from a mugger nor had Barry even told the tale. Sara did. Oliver supposed Barry could tell it later and over dramatize it as much as Barry wanted to. “That’s the spirit.”

“Uh,” Barry grunted as he stood up and shook his legs and arms out. “I’m just not sure how to stop thinking about it, you know? I mean, I just walked to Cisco’s like I always do in the morning.”

“You always walk to Cisco’s?”

“Yeah, we carpool. Well, I don’t have a car here in Central City, so he drives. But I walk to his place because otherwise he’d have to backtrack and it would negate the purpose of a carpool. And it’s only a couple of blocks. I like the walk. At least, I did before it was interrupted by knife guy and my life flashed before my eyes.”

“Maybe we should talk about something else?”

“I don’t think there’s anything we can talk about that will distract me from almost dying,” Barry
almost laughed.

“How about last night? That was fun, right?”

“Yes. So much fun,” Barry responded. His face lit up, he smiled, then his smile disappeared. “Well, it was fun after I danced with Felicity. Before it kind of sucked.”

Oliver wasn’t surprised. Isabel and Slade seemed to suck the fun out of every place they were when they weren’t even trying. When they did try, last night happened. “I hope you are now, finally, over Isabel.”

“Without question,” Barry said quickly. “I’m not even sure what I saw in her before. She is just mean. And with Slade, she’s like doubly mean.”

“She is cruel.”

“Yes, that’s it!” Barry said and pointed his finger at Oliver. “Isabel is cruel. And with how she treated me last night, I’m, uh, I’m a little embarrassed my feelings lasted as long as they did.”

“Don’t be,” Oliver said, though he internally agreed with Barry. “She’s not worth it. And you’ll find someone else in no time.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Barry, don’t let Isabel steal your self-confidence.”

“It’s not that. I just think I might stay single. Like you.”

“Like me?” Oliver asked. “I’m never going to find ‘the one’ and I prefer it that way. You’ll find your soulmate and change your mind.”

“No,” Barry insisted. Barry sat back down on the couch with a sad bounce.

“Okay. Why?”

Barry turned away from Oliver, but not before Oliver saw a blush spread across Barry’s face. “You can tell me, Barry. How can I help you if I don’t know what’s wrong?”

Turning slowly back around, Barry assessed Oliver. For his part, Oliver remained still and focused, even if he thought Barry was being ridiculous.

“All right.” Barry took a breath and exhaled it slowly. Finally he admitted, “I have feelings for someone else.”

“Great.” Oliver was relieved Barry was moving on. Yet there was a little voice in his head that found his feelings for yet another woman, a total of three in one year, amusing. Oliver cleared his throat to keep the laughter down. “But then why stay single? Is she married?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. She’s just, I guess you could say, unattainable. For me, at least.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She is just so far out of my league. And if Isabel was insulted by my feelings for her, this person would, well, she’s better than that. But I’m still me. She...she is just much more comfortable in formal situations than I am.”
“She might not care.”

“That’s true. She is pretty awesome. And she did save me,” Barry babbled on to himself. Oliver continued to fight back a smile. Of course Barry would have feelings for Sara the minute she rescued him. Thinking to himself, Oliver couldn’t say Sara would be opposed to Barry asking her out. She seemed to have an affection for him. Oliver thought of how he could arrange for them to spend more time alone together. As the first scheme came into his head, Oliver checked himself.

Oliver wasn’t going to make the same mistake again.

“Barry,” Oliver interrupted Barry’s monologue. “I don’t want to cause another Isabel situation with my tendency to force things to my will. So, I don’t think we should talk about her after this. I will say I think you have a chance with her. But be careful. Watch how she talks to and acts around you. Pay attention to her behavior. Don’t assume anything.”

“That makes sense.”

“I don’t think she’d care you aren’t comfortable in a large crowd or with uppity millionaires.” Sara would be comfortable enough for both of them.

“No, that doesn’t really sound like her. But maybe she deserves better than me.”

Oliver sighed. “Don’t you think she should get to make her own decisions about who and who doesn’t deserve her? Observe her. Don’t be creepy about it. See what you can surmise about how she feels about you.”

“Okay. You’re right.”

“And, we’re not talking about this again,” Oliver stated firmly. He would do all that he could to avoid accidentally hurting Barry again. “If we don’t talk about it, I can’t manipulate anything or anyone.”

“Deal,” Barry said as he held out his hand and shook Oliver’s. Oliver thought it was a little cheesy, but Oliver figured he could humor the younger man. Barry stood up and walked around the couch. “Thank you, Oliver. You’re the best. I should probably get to work now.”

“You’re welcome. And I should do that work thing, too. Oh, by the way, did Cisco know to come into the office without you?”

“Oh, yeah, Sara texted him.” Barry jogged out of Oliver’s office and to the elevator bank. Oliver walked over to his desk and checked his email.

He laughed at Barry’s plan to stay single. There was no way Barry, being the hopeless romantic he was, would ever be able to stop imagining his life with a partner by his side. Sara might not be the most obvious choice for Barry, but Oliver heard opposites attract. And she was a better fit for Barry than Isabel ever was. The more he thought about it, the more Oliver realized Sara would be good for Barry. She could get Barry more out of his shell. And Barry could reign in some of Sara’s more crazier impulses.

He would not interfere again though. In that vein, Oliver decided he would try not to think about them together. Oliver would wait until they were officially together before he thought of them in any couple-y way.

A pop up reminder from Gladys flashed across Oliver’s screen. His next meeting was in seven minutes. Oliver looked up at Gladys through the glass wall. She stared at him and then she
repeatedly pointed her finger to an imaginary watch on her wrist. Oliver shook his head and stood up from his chair. Thanks to Gladys, Oliver was constantly aware he had more important things, like the future of QC and Applied Sciences, to think about instead of Barry’s love life.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Oliver hosts lunch for his friends and Felicity has a surprising speculation.

Oliver had been relying too much on work to see Barry. To keep Barry in Starling City this weekend, Oliver promised to hang out with Barry out of the office. He took Barry to Kick Ass Bakery for some bonding and donuts. They were not allowed to discuss any work. Oliver was more than okay not thinking about work for however long was possible.

Entering the bakery late morning, Oliver and Barry found Digg and Felicity on the customer side of the counter. Felicity had a half-eaten donut with red frosting and sprinkles in one hand, and a large coffee in the other. Oliver also noticed she had some red frosting on corner of her lips. Chuckling, Oliver walked over to them. He took a napkin from the dispenser on the counter and turned to Felicity.

“Hold still,” Oliver said. “You have frosting on your lips.”

“Oh, where?” Felicity asked. She almost set her coffee down when Oliver stopped her.

“I’ll get it, now just hold still,” Oliver ordered. She relented and seemed to hold her breath as well. Leaning into her space, Oliver gently wiped the corner of Felicity’s lips. “There. All gone.”

“Thank you,” Felicity responded quietly. Oliver realized he’d been staring at her lips and rushed his eyes up to hers. Their eyes connected and he smiled softly. Felicity’s eyes were dark and her smile was hesitant. Oliver leaned away and took a half step back.

“Red frosting?” Oliver questioned with forced lightness. His thumb and index finger rubbed against each other. “How old are we?”

If not for her hands being full, Oliver knew Felicity would have smacked him for the remark. She still glared at him. In an all-knowing tone, Felicity said, “It’s wild cherry. And it is the best donut Digg makes.”

“The best?” Oliver asked skeptically.

“Yes.”

“I know that’s not true,” Oliver replied. Felicity was about to interrupt when he held a finger out and added, “I know this because the best donut Digg makes is the maple bar.”

“The maple bar?” Felicity sounded scandalized. “That’s what you’re choosing? The boring, been done a million times, you can get anywhere maple bar? I can’t believe we’re friends.”

Oliver laughed and went up to the counter with Barry to order a maple bar in a to-go bag and a small coffee, just to spite Felicity. Mari, Digg’s one full-time employee, came back with Oliver’s order, and a chocolate glazed donut and a hot chocolate for Barry. Once Oliver paid, he and Barry walked back over to Digg and Felicity.
“What’s going on?” Oliver asked, indicating the two of them.

“John is leaving the bakery for the rest of the day,” Felicity said as if she were Digg’s proud mama. She rocked back and forth on her toes and smiled up at Digg.

“It’s fine,” Digg replied, his voice faltered. He looked over the counter. “Mari knows what she’s doing.”

Oliver stared at his friend. Though Digg knew Mari was competent enough to be in charge for a few hours, it was clear Digg questioned his own decision to leave. Oliver was almost positive images of fire, robberies, and floods bombarded Digg’s mind.

Poor guy. Digg never had so many worries when he was Oliver’s bodyguard.

To get his mind off all the possible things that could go wrong, Oliver decided to help Digg look on the bright side of physically leaving the bakery. On a Saturday. “What do you have planned?”

“We’re having lunch with Sara, Cisco, and Nyssa,” Digg said absently.

“That should be fun,” Oliver commented. When Digg didn’t respond, Oliver shared a ‘what do I do now’ look with Felicity. Felicity could only shrug her shoulders a minuscule amount. “Uh, where are you going for lunch?”

“We haven’t decided yet.” Digg replied as he stared at Mari working. He seemed to notice a mistake Mari made and was about to step back around the counter. Felicity who had finished her donut, hit Oliver against his stomach.

“Ow,” Oliver pouted. He looked down at her and she signaled him with her eyes toward Digg. Oliver, his voice a little louder than necessary, asked, “Digg, why weren’t Barry and I invited?”

“Oh,” Digg stopped in his tracks. “I, um, we weren’t sure if-”

“I see,” Oliver said as he took a few steps away from the counter and closer to the door. “You five are your own little group and you don’t think Barry and I would be of any use to you. No, it’s fine. I’m not hurt.”

“No, that’s not it at all.” Digg asked. Digg had unconsciously moved with Oliver.

“I think it is,” Oliver replied as he and Felicity slowly stepped toward the door with Digg and Barry unknowingly following them. “I think you have your own secret handshake and everything. Outsiders are clearly not wanted.”

“Secret handshake?” Digg questioned. “No, we don’t do that.”

“Oliver,” Felicity said and looked around Digg who was between them, “do you think the only thing that makes a group exclusive is secret handshakes?”

Oliver was proud Felicity went with his on-the-fly plan. “I mean, what else is there?”

A beleaguered sigh escaped Felicity. “I’m not sure I want to tell you about secret organizations who wield power. Some do exist but I’d say most are thought up by conspiracy theorists and I don’t want you to become one of them.”

He almost halted their turtle-paced race to the door. So much so, Barry stepped on his heel. “Sorry,” Barry whispered. Oliver waved him off with his free hand.
“I would not become a conspiracy theorist. I’ve seen X-Files. Those guys are crazy.”

Digg’s head volleyed back and forth between Oliver and Felicity.

“I think you might have conspiracy theorist in your DNA,” Felicity joked, “and one look at their logic might have you trying on tinfoil hats.”

“Oh, look Digg,” Oliver said. “Here’s the door. Let’s go through it.”

“But-”

“Mari knows what to do,” Felicity said. “And if something out of the ordinary happens, she can call you.” She opened the door and the bell chimed. Felicity pushed on Digg’s back to move him out the door. “Come on.”

With a large sigh, Digg humored Felicity and left the bakery with Barry close behind. Felicity held open the door for a woman in her fifties entering the bakery and a college age student leaving with two big boxes, presumably full of donuts.

As Oliver walked past Felicity, he leaned down and whispered, “I would look amazing in a tinfoil hat.” Felicity stared at Oliver in amusement then let go of the door. Oliver caught the door with his foot and a chuckle.

Digg and Felicity stood still on the sidewalk outside the bakery’s display window. Oliver looked around and saw nothing. “Uh, guys, what are we waiting for?”

“The rest of our secret group is meeting us here,” Felicity said with a sarcastic smile. “Though they are late.”

Just then the sound of sneakers hitting the sidewalk at a rapid pace came closer. Cisco skidded to a stop when he reached them. He sucked in a gulp of air and continued to breathe heavily. “Sorry we’re late. I kept telling them we needed to get a move on if we wanted to make it on time. But they didn’t listen. And now we’re late. I’m so sorry. I tried.”

Nyssa and Sara just crossed the street at a stroll to meet the rest of the group. Cisco bent over and placed his hands on his knees. He continued to huff and puff, which didn’t help make his cheeks less red. He did move out of the way of the door for a father and daughter who walked up to the bakery.

When the other two women reached them, Nyssa said, “I didn’t know Oliver and Barry were joining us.”

“Oh, we weren’t,” Barry said.

Oliver took over the answer. “But we just happened across these two dear friends of ours, and we knew they wouldn’t want us to feel left out.”

“Is that what we thought?” Felicity asked with her eyebrows raised.

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Especially when I’m offering to have lunch at my place.”

“Oli-” Felicity tried to cut him off, but Oliver was determined to hijack the lunch. It was his duty as well to ensure Digg had a healthy work-life balance.

“Cooking will be done for us, which will be amazing because the chef we have is always trying to outdo himself. And it won’t cost you anything except gas to get there.” Oliver loved outwitting
Felicity. It wasn’t that Oliver was hurt he was left out of this little excursion. He knew Felicity purposely left him out because Nyssa and Cisco were going to be there, and Felicity knew well how Oliver felt about them. But there were plenty of people he did like.

With Oliver’s invitation, he knew they would come. It was too tempting an offer, and too rude to decline.

“That sounds great,” Cisco said. He stood up again and his breathing returned almost back to normal. The woman in her fifties exited the bakery and the group moved out of her way.

“Are you sure your mom won’t mind?” Felicity asked in a soft tone only Oliver could hear.

He thought back to earlier in the morning and knew Moira would be okay. “She’s having a good day,” Oliver answered back just as quietly. Then, louder, to the whole group Oliver said, “It’s a sunny day, which will make for a nice lunch.”

It was one of the first nearly-cloudless days of the year as spring made its presence known.

“Sounds wonderful, Ollie,” Sara said as she saddled herself up to his side. “After lunch, can we go exploring through your mansion?”

“Why? It’s just rooms to look at. We just happen to have more of them.” Truth was, though his mother was having a good day, she would not like people she didn’t know traipsing through her house. It would agitate her and make her worry. Moira never left the valuable heirlooms out for display in the main rooms for fear they’d be broken or stolen. It’d be better to avoid the possibility altogether. “If you’re really bored we could go for a walk on the grounds.”

“I guess that’ll do,” Sara said in a disappointed voice. “So, are we going to go or stand here all day?”

A couple walked up to the bakery. Soon Cisco greeted them, “Hi, Caitlin. Hi, Ronnie.”

“Hey, Cisco,” Dr. Snow replied. “Mr. Queen. Felicity. Mr. Diggle. Everyone else.” The group laughed politely and greeted the couple in return.

“Good morning, Dr. Snow,” Oliver said. He held the door open for them.

“Thanks,” Ronnie said to Oliver with a nod. Oliver nodded back.

The group moved toward their cars. They all parked two blocks away to allow Digg’s customers to park closer to the bakery. Oliver pulled out his phone to text Moira, her CNA on duty, and their chef to tell them everyone was coming over for lunch.

“Digg,” Sara called out, “did Caitlin and Ronnie ever make an offer on that house they liked?”

“I didn’t know they were thinking of buying a house,” Digg said.

“Yes, you did,” Sara said. “You told me they’ve been saving up for a down payment and they were really close to their goal. Caitlyn wanted to save more because she tried to talk Ronnie into a four bedroom house instead of a three. You don’t remember this? She wants room for more kids than Ronnie wants.”

“I knew none of that,” Digg said.

“Well, I didn’t make up something as mundane as house buying with two people I barely know.” Sara responded and Oliver laughed. “Did I make it up?” Sara asked, more to herself.
Nyssa had a coughing attack and the conversation halted. Once Nyssa’s throat cleared the group moved toward their cars again.

Cisco picked up the lost ball of last conversation, “That’s funny, because Caitlyn told me about them wanting to get house but not agreeing on the size of the house. Ronnie wants one kid but Caitlyn wants two or three. But she asked me not to tell anyone, because Ronnie doesn’t like to be gossiped about.”

“Mm,” Sara replied. “I must have psychically got it from you.”

“Maybe,” Cisco said. “The amount we don’t know about the human brain is enormous. So it’s possible, but highly unlikely, you read my mind.”

“I’m sure I read your mind,” Sara said with a teasing tone.

“Or Nyssa’s,” Cisco suggested. “Because I couldn’t help myself and shared the news with Nyssa. I knew she wouldn’t tell anybody.”

“Okay,” Nyssa spoke up, “we’ll meet everybody at the Queen manor? You don’t need us to bring anything?” She looked to Oliver.

“Nope,” Oliver said. “I’ll see everyone in a half hour. Barry, we’re over here.” Oliver dragged Barry along past Felicity who stared at Nyssa and Sara. Oliver stopped and asked Felicity, “You okay?”

“Oh, yeah.” Felicity shook her head to clear it. “I’ll see you at the manor.”

“Ollie!” Sara cried out from across the street. “Cisco’s car is so cramped. Can I ride with you and Barry?”

“Sure. You’re lucky I didn’t bring the Porsche or we’d have to tie you to the bumper. I’m test driving this Aston Martin for the week, so I actually have back seats.”

“You’re hilarious,” Sara said as she jogged over and hung on Oliver’s arm. “Barry, do you mind sitting in the back?”

“Oh, sure. No problem,” Barry replied quickly. Oliver wasn’t surprised he gave up his cushy seat for a hard and cramped back seat. He’d probably offer to run alongside the car if Sara wanted it. Oliver was happy she paid some attention to him. The car ride would provide them time to talk to each other.

Barry was better when he talked one-on-one than in large groups, anyway. This had the potential to be a problem when it came time for Barry to talk to the QC board. Oliver had tried to think of a solution but none had come to mind. Maybe Sara could help Barry get over his shyness.

The slamming of car doors echoed off the brick walls of the small dead end street everyone parked on. Once Oliver got in and buckled, his passengers were ready to go.

“Are we racing everyone?” Sara asked.

“Not enough to get pulled over,” Oliver said. “But we are going to beat everybody there by at least ten minutes.”

“Yes,” Sara cheered. Barry made a noncommittal noise and sat back further in his seat, making sure his seat belt was fastened securely. Oliver held in a laugh as he started the engine and shifted into gear. He pulled out onto the street and passed Digg and Felicity. Digg’s car wasn’t even started yet
and Felicity had just put her car in gear. Once on Main Street, Oliver passed Cisco and Nyssa at an intersection.

Oliver looked forward to this little impromptu lunch.

The nice day allowed Oliver and his guests to have lunch on the shaded patio of smooth slate tiles. Moira had joined them as well. Their cook had made caprese salad, spinach and ricotta gnudi with tomato-butter sauce, freshly baked garlic bread on the side, homemade orange cream sherbet for dessert, and sangria to drink. Oliver was impressed the chef could make such an elaborate meal for eight people with very little notice. He made a mental note to fatten his Christmas bonus.

After the meal, the group lounged back in their chairs and sipped more sangria. Oliver inwardly complimented Barry for sitting directly across from Sara. It was the best way to stay in her eye line and really observe her.

“It was a beautiful day like this,” Moira broke the comfortable silence, “when I married Robert.” Oliver took a deep breath. They had been married in January, a week after a blizzard had hit Starling City. Felicity gave him a sympathetic look from across the table.

“Mom, you and Dad got married in the winter.”

“No. My nose got a little sunburn.”

She had actually got windburned on her nose and cheeks. Oliver wasn’t sure what day she confused with her wedding day. Though Dr. Snow did say Moira would start making up stories and think they were real.

“Mom,” Oliver called to her. He knew it wasn’t the time to argue with her. It wouldn’t accomplish anything. “I think it’s time for you to take a nap.” He tried to ignore the hidden glances from the rest of the table. He did see Sara take a big gulp of her drink with wide eyes, darting back and forth between Moira and Oliver.

“I guess you’re right. I mean, if you think so,” Moira nodded. “The…uh…um…yellow light has been too much.”

Oliver stood and helped his mother out of her chair. He walked her inside and handed her off to Paul, who said he would take Moira to her room. Before going back out to the patio, Oliver took a deep breath. This morning Moira had been having such a good day. But her sudden worsened symptoms were something Oliver had been told to prepare for.

If only he had taken that advice.

Taking his phone out, he texted Dr. Snow. Moira would have to be tested to see if she had had any mini-strokes recently.

He put on a smile and stepped out to the patio. “Sorry to have had to leave you like that.”

“Please,” Sara said, turning from Nyssa to face him, she waved off his apology and smiled brightly at Oliver.

He sat back down next to Sara. “What’d I miss?”

“Nothing,” Sara whispered loudly enough for everyone to hear her. “Thank god you’re back to...
 entertain us.”

“Well, Barry and I,” Cisco started, “were talking about Dr. Wells and a really exciting research project he and the rest of Star Labs are working on. I mean it has the possibility to change how we think about everything.”

“If,” Barry interjected, “he can prove it.”

“Dude,” Cisco turned toward Barry, “if anyone can prove it, it’s Dr. Wells. With all his knowledge and resources at his command. I mean, the man is a genius.”

“So are you,” Barry argued. He turned to Felicity, “And Felicity.”

“Okay, but not on the same level as Dr. Wells. No offense, Felicity.”

“None taken,” Felicity responded with an amused smile.

“They have been like this,” Sara leaned into Oliver and really whispered, “since you left. I ran out of sangria and the silverware was taken with dessert so I didn’t even have a utensil I could stab my ears out with.”

Oliver bit his lip and looked away from Sara as to not laugh. He took a deep breath and reached for his own drink. Felicity and Digg engaged in their own conversation. Nyssa listened to all of them, but didn’t participate in any.

As he took another sip, Sara complained, “Hey, I didn’t drink any of your sangria when you left to hide your mother, please stop shoving it in my face that you still have some.”

“How considerate of you to not drink my drink.”

“I thought so. But that’s just who I am. I am a magnanimous and generous person. Everybody says so.”

“You’re right,” Oliver played along. “Those were the exact words Digg used to describe you. He also has said you’re humble and would rather have a thousand mosquitos bite you ten times each than dare speak out of turn.”

“I…I don’t know which part of that sentence to use to make fun of you for.”

“That was the point.” Oliver leaned back into his chair and took another sip of his drink. To rub it in further, he vocalized how refreshing the drink was, “Ahhhh.”

Sara hit him hard in the arm. Oliver gritted his teeth through the pain. Her punch felt like a battering ram hit him instead of Sara’s fist. He was sure he’d have a bruise, unlike the times Felicity hit Oliver and he exaggerated the amount of pain he was in. Oliver blinked the moisture away that had welled up in his eyes. Oliver finally turned to back to Sara to see a self-satisfied smile on her face. Behind Sara, Oliver saw Nyssa had a small smile of her own. Oliver grumbled, “I take it back. You’re a horrible person.”

“They all realize it in the end,” Sara acknowledged with a lofty tone. “But there are two things I have to make fun of you for.”

“Haven’t you done enough damage?” Oliver asked as he rubbed his left arm.

“First,” Sara said and ignored Oliver’s pout, “you really were raised with moneyed people.” With her
fingers she made air quotes, “‘Speak out of turn?’ Nobody been born in the last one hundred years has said that.”

“You’ve never spent an afternoon of hell at the country club, forced to endure hours of conversation with geriatric ladies.”

“Why-” Sara stopped herself. “You know, never mind. I don’t want to know why you did that.” Sara gave Oliver an odd look. “And, second, ‘a thousand mosquitos biting me ten times each’?”

“I think that’s probably due to Felicity’s influence,” Oliver admitted.

“What?” Felicity asked when she heard her name. She sat up and leaned toward Oliver.

“You’re a bad influence on my phrasing,” Oliver replied.

Felicity scoffed, “Without me, you wouldn’t have passed English 101.”

“I never admitted that.”

Felicity ignored him and turned her attention back to Digg. Barry had stopped listening to Cisco to hear the exchange. Though he smiled, Barry hadn’t actually interacted with Sara. Oliver thought of ways to bring them together to have a conversation and then chided himself for trying to manipulate Barry’s life again. One day Oliver would be cured completely of the bad habit.

Turning back to Sara, Oliver saw her stare at Nyssa. And Nyssa looked anywhere but at Sara. As if sensing his eyes on her, Sara turned back around to face Oliver. She gave Oliver a smile that made him worry for whomever was in Sara’s sights.

She leaned even closer to Oliver, her torso unsupported in between their two chairs. Oliver leaned closer to Sara, though he didn’t suspend himself as Sara did. Once she faced away from the rest of the group, Sara asked in a hushed tone only Oliver could hear, “I wonder if Nyssa has heard from her dear, sweet brother-in-law, Bruce Wayne, recently?”

Oliver gave a breathy laugh. He whispered back, “I’d guess not if Talia has anything to do with it.”

“Should I ask her?”

“No,” Oliver said in a more censoring tone. He knew it was a bad idea and crossed a line. Their gossip remained amongst the two of them.

“I think I will. Watch her face for any sign of admission she has a secret about the two of them.” Sara pushed herself up straight and turned to Nyssa.

“Sara,” Oliver said in a slightly loud voice. He was barely aware the conversations around him had stopped.

“Sara,” Sara said in a sweeter voice than her normal tone. “I wondered if you have heard from Bruce, your infamous brother-in-law.”

The pale skin of Nyssa’s cheeks went pink, which emphasized her freckles more than normal. Oliver brought his hand up to his mouth to cover the laugh he did his best to stifle. He didn’t want to admit he found Sara’s gall and Nyssa’s reaction humorous.

Sara’s smile was too innocent to be genuine, but rather mocking. Sara’s meaning was obvious. At least to the three who understood what Sara really asked. The others could only have suspicions of
Sara’s true motives, and most were apt to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“I didn’t…” Nyssa stumbled over her words. She looked around to find everyone staring at her. Nyssa stood up and walked away from the group. Everyone else looked around at each other, either confused or empathetic. After a quick walk around the surrounding area, she composed herself and sat back down and started again, “I didn’t realize how late it was. I am expecting a call from my father soon and it would be better to be back at Cisco’s for it. Cisco?”

“Oh, right, of course,” Cisco said as he scrambled to get up. “Barry, do you want a ride back into town?”

“If you don’t mind,” Barry answered, then pivoted to Oliver, “and if Oliver doesn’t have any other plans for us.”

“No,” Oliver said and stood up. The group silently agreed to act as if Nyssa had behaved normally. “I think we’ve had just as much fun as we can handle in a day.”

“Digg,” Sara spoke up, “can I get a ride back from you?”

“Only because we’re going to the same place,” Digg joked.

Everyone stood up and went about looking for their personal items. A purse, a jacket, a book, or a pair of safety goggles, in Cisco’s case.

“Thanks for having us,” Digg said and Oliver and he shook hands. “I’ll call you early next week.”

“Sounds good.”

Sara gave Oliver a wink as she passed him, which Oliver shook his head at. But he couldn’t help but smile too. Sara was fun, even if her actions led lunch to end abruptly.

It took longer than Oliver thought it should for everyone to say their thanks and goodbyes. As he walked into the living room, Felicity sat in her usual chair. “Oh, good. You stayed,” Oliver said. He sat and leaned back against the sofa. “Why do guests always seem to stay too long? They always wait until I’m practically shoving them out the door to get them out.”

Felicity ignored his gibberish question. She stared off to the side, seemingly seeing nothing. It was a look Oliver had seen on Felicity only a few times. She was obviously deep in thought, but most times she babbles as she thinks through things and Oliver isn’t held in suspense. The times when she was quiet had always been accompanied with a serious conversation. Oliver waited as patiently as he could and he hoped anyone else but him was on her mind.

Soon enough, Felicity’s voice punctured the silence in the room. “Oliver, may I ask you a question?”

“Sure. What’s going on in that big brain of yours?”

“First, I need to know what Sara’s question about Bruce Wayne was about.”

“It was a joke,” Oliver said then cringed. Being questioned about it by Felicity made him feel embarrassed. He tried to play it off. “It’s nothing really. But it was a bit mean, if Nyssa understood what Sara really meant.” Oliver assured quickly, “Which I don’t think she did.”

“Hmm.” Felicity looked back into space.

Oliver waited a few moments. He was sure he was about to get a speech about needing to be kind to
Nyssa. Again. Of course, Felicity was right. But everyone was kind to Nyssa, and, as far as Oliver saw, she rarely repaid the favor. Did Nyssa really expect the whole world to be kind to her? Especially when Nyssa believed herself to be better than everyone. Though Nyssa’s extreme reaction to Sara’s question made Oliver second guess himself.

“I don’t want you to be hurt, but I am fairly certain of this. And if I don’t speak and I am right you could get hurt.” Felicity’s hand knotted together and she refused to make eye contact. “But if I’m wrong, which I really don’t think I am, this could just cause undue worry.”

“Felicity,” Oliver said when she took a breath, “it’s okay. Just tell me.” The conversation took an unexpected turn from Nyssa to himself and Oliver couldn’t guess what Felicity was talking about.

“Right,” Felicity said. She took another half a second to collect her thoughts. “Has Sara told you what her relationship with Nyssa is?”

With an amused but somewhat confused look, Oliver replied, “Not in so many words, but...” Felicity sat forward in her chair. She showed only concern on her face, no judgment. Oliver was sure it wouldn’t last when he confessed the truth. He sighed and then began again, “Sara and I don’t always, or almost never, speak very, um, flattering things about Nyssa.” He didn’t like admitting it. “So, I at least know how Sara feels, which is a general dislike for Nyssa. As for Nyssa, who can tell what she is feeling for anyone?”

“Oliver, I believe I’ve seen a connection between them. A closeness.” Felicity paused. Off Oliver’s uncertain face added, “I think they’re a couple.”

“A couple of what?” Oliver asked with smile.

Felicity didn’t return the smile. With a warning tone, she said, “Oliver.”

“You think they’re dating?”

“Yes.”

“That’s absurd.” Felicity’s words were so unfathomable, his brain couldn’t process them. Laughter bubbled out of his mouth without time to suppress it. Oliver took a breath. “I’m sorry, Felicity, but there is no way that’s true.”

“I’ve seen them looking at each other. Often,” Felicity reasoned calmly. Oliver was a little annoyed at how calm she was; it showed him how seriously Felicity took this. “I can see they are fond of each other.”

Oliver snorted.

She stood up and paced. She continued in a more determined manner. “I think they are keeping their relationship a secret, and they are using you, or at least Sara is, to divert people’s assumptions.”

“Felicity, thank you for looking out for me. We both know where I’d be if you weren’t in my life. Generally, of course,” Oliver joked. He’d be fucked, no matter what the specific circumstances of his life were, without Felicity. She stood still at the end of the couch. “But I know Sara is not with Nyssa. There would be no way she would have said half the things she has said to me about Nyssa if it were true.

“I do know you don’t like Sara,” When Felicity wasn’t appeased, Oliver stood up and walked to her. “You haven’t approved of a lot of what she’s done since she’s got here. And you think Digg and Lyla deserve more from her.”
“They do,” Felicity said. “But I don’t dislike her. I just don’t trust her.”

“I’m sorry for that. I think you two would be good friends if you could accept her more.”

It was Felicity’s turn to snort.

“Don’t laugh. You were determined not to get along with Sara when she kept postponing her trip here. If she had been able to come the first time, I think you would be the one Sara whispers to and you’d have been dragged up for karaoke. And you could have been cc’d on all the damn emails about the sock-hop. Thinking about it, I might suggest to Sara you take my place.”

With a shake of her head, Felicity walked away from him to look out the window.

Oliver couldn’t tell if he had convinced her of anything, but he knew she was wrong about Sara and Nyssa being a couple. It was a hilarious idea and if it didn’t have the possibility of causing uneasiness in Sara about Felicity, Oliver would love to share it with Sara. But Oliver knew it was better to keep Felicity’s wild speculations between the two of them.

He pushed the idea of Sara and Nyssa out of his thoughts. Oliver sat back down and pulled out his phone. Dr. Snow had scheduled Moira for an MRI on Monday. Oliver emailed Kara so she would be ready to take Moira to her appointment.

When he looked back up, Felicity still stood at the window.

“Are you staying for dinner?” Oliver asked.

Felicity contemplated the offer. “Uh, no. I have some things to do.”

“Are you sure? I know my mom would love to see you again. With just the three of us.”

“No, sorry. I actually should have left a while ago,” Felicity said as she gathered up her coat and purse. “Tell Moira I’m sorry to miss dinner and I’ll see her later. I’ll try to come Monday for dinner.”

“Sure,” Oliver responded. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Felicity walked out of the room.

Oliver didn’t want her to be embarrassed about her absurd assumption. He saw the humor in it, so there was no harm done. And Oliver would think it was pride. But Felicity wasn’t a proud person, or at least it wasn’t a fault of hers. She was proud of her company and particularly difficult codes she mastered, or the few times she managed to boil water. Felicity didn’t care about being wrong in front of Oliver and she certainly didn’t care what he thought of her. It might help he was acutely aware of her genius and general impressiveness. Though it was impossible for anyone not to see that after knowing Felicity for less than five minutes.

Which was exactly why Felicity shouldn’t care. She could handle being wrong in Oliver’s view every once in a while. It helped him feel a little better about himself; to know she was just like the rest of the world and not perfect.

A sigh escaped him and Oliver realized he should check on Moira and see if a nap had helped her earlier confusion. Oliver had really hoped all the doctors were wrong, but as he sat on the sideline, unable to do anything, he watched their prognoses slowly come to life. Perhaps there was one or two more drugs they could try, which could slow the progression of Moira’s dementia.

He had promised his mother he wouldn’t go chasing around the world for a fantasy cure. It didn’t
mean Oliver couldn’t try all the options medicine could offer them now. Oliver wasn’t ready to lose his mother entirely to her dementia. He was certain her doctors could provide them with just a little more time for Moira to remain cognizant.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

It’s Felicity’s turn to get roped into hosting an event to keep Isabel and Slade happy. Oliver still doesn’t have the board of director’s approval.

The following weekend Oliver, Barry, and Felicity sat in Oliver’s VIP booth at Verdant. Felicity had suggested the three of them get drinks and Oliver quickly agreed. Oliver and Felicity bypassed any awkwardness their conversation regarding Sara and Nyssa could have contrived by completely ignoring it. The length of their friendship had many benefits. One of them being silly little disagreements never affected their ability to get along.

Barry was thrilled to be included in the night’s activities. Oliver continued to remind himself Barry’s job was new and stressful, therefore Oliver needed to give Barry opportunities to blow off steam.

In the circular booth, with this company, Oliver felt comfortable. The three of them would talk about the previous week or a new piece of tech Felicity and Barry were excited about. Then silence would fall over them and they’d watched the dancers or the people at the bar. There wasn’t a need to fill every second with words.

It looked to be a pleasant evening for Oliver.

Until Isabel and Slade stopped at their booth.

A string of curses clogged Oliver’s brain and he had to physically bite his tongue to keep them from spilling out of his mouth.

“We need to talk,” Isabel said as she sat down in the booth, with no invitation. She slid further in to give Slade room to sit as well, which forced the three of them to slide over. Felicity squeezed in so tightly between Oliver and Barry, she was nearly in Oliver’s lap.

“Hello, Isabel and Slade,” Oliver greeted in a saccharine tone. “Please, sit with us.”

Isabel glared at Oliver, which told him she was not in the mood for humor. Though Oliver seriously doubted Isabel was ever in the mood for humor.

“Why were we not invited to lunch last weekend?” Isabel asked. “It was rude to exclude us. You need to stop actively preventing me from doing my job.”

Oliver bristled at the thought of lunch between he and his friends as a publicity opportunity. As much as he went out to events to promote, essentially, himself, Oliver never used his friends for publicity without their knowledge or permission.

“How did you find out about it?” Oliver asked. He didn’t doubt Isabel was willing to spy on him. The thought unnerved him.

Isabel pulled out her phone and unlocked it. On the screen was Cisco’s Instagram page with the photo of him, Sara, and Nyssa from lunch. Oliver opened his mouth to inform Isabel, and Slade apparently, the difference between a publicity event and a personal day with friends, when Felicity’s
voice stopped him.

“I’m sorry if it came off as rude,” Felicity intervened. Her tone was one where it was sincere unless you really knew Felicity. And Oliver knew this tone was her ‘killing them with kindness’ voice. “It really was an impromptu lunch though. There was no forethought or planning. It was just a spur of the moment gathering.”

“And no one thought to call and invite us, Lis?” Slade asked.

“There was the consideration of not overwhelming the Queen’s staff or Moira with a high number of people,” Felicity explained. Oliver had not thought of either of those reasons but both sounded good. He honestly hadn’t thought of Isabel or Slade at all the day of the lunch.

“I,” Oliver spoke up, unable to keep quiet, “wasn’t using the lunch to increase my visibility.” His jaw ached from grinding his teeth.

“You should be using everything,” Isabel scolded, “as a way to increase your visibility. In an official capacity. Now I wasn’t able to control the message. Everyone is wondering who the two women in the photo are. If they’re competition. And don’t get me started on how many followers that geek got for the one photo.”

Oliver didn’t care in the slightest how many followers Cisco had. He was also tired of filtering his life through the lens of what strangers wanted to see. Oliver should be able to have lunch with whomever he wanted and not have it reported on around town.

“Plus, we would have been excellent guests,” Slade declared. “I will have you know I have been the guests of royalty. Genuine royalty, not pretenders.”

If Oliver could have gotten away with it, he would have laughed. Usually it was just the press who took his last name literally. And one guy at Stanford. But he got expelled, even before Oliver, for streaking one too many times on campus. That Slade thought he insulted Oliver with a pun amused Oliver extensively. Though Oliver kept from laughing, a wide smile still appeared.

“Do you think this is funny, kid?” Slade asked. “Because, I assure you, we do not.”

With effort Oliver schooled his features. “Our intent wasn’t to exclude you. Though I do question what you would have done at the lunch while Isabel worked.”

“If I hadn’t been there when Isabel was, it would have appeared odd. People would have questioned it.”

Beside Oliver, Felicity shifted against him, turned and rested her head behind his shoulder. He was certain he heard a deep intake of breath from her. Clearly, Oliver wasn’t the only one who had trouble keeping a straight face.

“And it may not have been your intent,” Isabel spit out, “but it was the outcome. I thought I made it clear we have a contract. If you break it I will sue you and your company.”

“And,” Oliver said in a low voice, no longer amused, “there was absolutely no publicity or business talk. So, your contract was not violated.

“I would suggest,” Oliver continued, “you stop threatening me. It does not make our working relationship any easier. It also motivates me to find a way out of the contract early. Are we clear?”

“Do not talk to my fiancée like that,” Slade ordered. “You are lucky to have her working with you.
And excluding us from these little lunches gives the message you don’t trust your consultant. And I have been to many important events with presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and Nobel Prize winners. They all clamor for my attendance and you would do well to do the same.”

Oliver almost responded with a brilliant insult about attendance and interaction not being the same thing. Also, maybe it was only Australia they wanted, Slade was just a necessary evil. Oliver wasn’t sure anyone could clamor for attention more than Isabel, but then Isabel found Slade. The two of them constantly looked for ways to up their own publicity.

Fortunately for QC, Felicity inserted herself into the conversation, “I thought about inviting everybody over to my place for brunch. I would love for you two to attend. In fact, you two are the first people I’m inviting. It would be a way to publicize, in an unobtrusive manner, how Oliver relaxes during the weekend.”

Felicity’s invitation stopped Isabel and Slade’s tirade about exclusion. Oliver knew Felicity was not planning a brunch. He would have heard about her plans before any invitations went out. Apparently, Felicity thought that to make up for their impromptu lunch, she would invite Isabel and Slade to an impromptu brunch that would take several days to plan.

Though Oliver didn’t want Felicity to feel forced into a brunch with Isabel and Slade present, he couldn’t think of a different plan. It provided an alternative event for Isabel to publicize the hell out of and gave a warning for anyone else present it would be more of a PR event.

Oliver owed Felicity a massive favor. He reached down and squeezed her bare knee briefly.

Once Isabel recovered from the shock of being unable to continue to act like the injured party, she said, “It would depend on if we were available. We have many obligations and don’t have much free time.”

But they would have been available for Oliver’s impromptu lunch, Oliver questioned in his head.

“I will schedule it around your availability, and mine because it would be strange for me to not be at my own brunch.” She laughed at her own joke and Oliver laughed at Felicity’s laugh. “A weekend day would ensure everyone could be there.” Not to be left out, Barry laughed too. Slade and Isabel stared at them. “Anyway, is next weekend too soon? Or should we plan for the following weekend?”

Isabel and Slade made a production of taking their phones out and comparing their calendars. Felicity received a stink eye from both when she suggested they merge their calendars together. Oliver couldn’t help but think if they couldn’t share a calendar how would they share a bank account, a house, a child, or even a slow cooker? Oliver shook his head at the notion of marriage. He would have to be crazy or madly in love, or, more accurately, both to marry. Though, from his observations, the two weren’t too different from one another.

After a long discussion, mostly between Slade and Isabel, the brunch was set for the Saturday after next. Oliver wondered how much of a bonus he would have to give Gladys for her to schedule an important, all-day, and unchangeable meeting for the Saturday in question. Though Oliver knew he couldn’t leave Felicity after she just smoothed his working relationship with Isabel and, of course, Slade. The person with whom Oliver didn’t really have any relationship.

“This was very kind of you. But that seems par-for-the-course for you, Lis,” Slade said and Oliver gritted his teeth at the nickname. “It is a shame you don’t have a boyfriend. I would be happy to introduce you to some excellent young men.”
“No,” Felicity said a little too loudly.

“Oh. Look, honey, you’ve embarrassed her,” Isabel said a little too sweetly. “I told you she probably was a lesbian. That’s why she doesn’t have a boyfriend.”

“I do know some great woman as well,” Slade transitioned. “I’m sure one or two of them are lesbians.”

“Wow,” Felicity exclaimed, a blush spreading across her face. Oliver couldn’t tell if her blush was from embarrassment or anger. Barry’s blush had to be from embarrassment on Felicity’s behalf. Oliver noticed how tight her voice was. His own fist clenched. He knew Felicity was more than capable of defending herself. But if she gave one tiny sign, Oliver would be all over them. “It is not your business who I am, and who I am not, attracted to. I appreciate your concern but I’m happy with my dating life.”

“Fine,” Slade grumbled. “But if you ever change your mind, I’d be happy to talk to the guys I know? Or ladies? Or both? No judgment.”

“No, thank you.” Felicity responded through gritted teeth.

Oliver would have rolled his eyes at Slade’s inane attempts to find out what Felicity’s sexuality was, but he couldn’t focus on it. His mind stuck on Felicity dating. Oliver hadn’t seen her date for years. She had a couple boyfriends in college, but Cooper was the last. Since him, Felicity had been a little gun shy about dating. Oliver tried to think back and recall the men Felicity had met and discussed with him. And of those, whom she could have dated. His mind went blank.

He didn’t like it. Oliver should know who Felicity had dated. He knew everything else about her. There was also her safety to consider. Maybe Digg knew. Oliver would have to ask him.

“As for the brunch, I really think we should have a picnic,” Slade suggested.

“Yes, a picnic sounds perfect,” Isabel agreed. “I can wear my new hat.”

“It is finally warm and we should take advantage of it. Does your house have a large enough lawn to hold many people?” Slade asked.

“I live in a condo, with no yard. I do have a balcony,” Felicity answered. She was way more patient than Oliver was. “But I will probably give my guests a choice of eating inside or outside, as there isn’t much shade outside.”

“I suppose that will be all right,” Isabel said, but clearly disagreeing. “We just have to be sure not to split the group up too much.”

“No, you’re right, Sweetums. We don’t want to have a party within a party situation. We are too polite to exclude anyone.” An identical pointed look from Isabel and Slade focused on Oliver.

The couple got up from the booth after Felicity reassured, but really insisted, she could handle all the planning on her own.

Oliver released a huge sigh of relief when the couple moved out of ear and eyesight. He folded his arms on the table and sank his head into them. His voice muffled, Oliver said, “Felicity, you’re a saint or a sadist. Maybe both.”

“Ha,” she replied. “I just didn’t want to deal with thinking they were excluded from something. Just you wait, they’ll use this circumstance to say they now know how minorities feel.”
“Gah,” Oliver said. He lifted his head and looked over at Felicity. “They are horrible people.”

“Mm-mm,” Barry agreed. He had slumped down into the booth, finally relaxed after Isabel and Slade left.

“I’m sorry you have to put up with them. At your place. And leaving messages for you. At all times of the day and night. Wondering why you haven’t called them back since their last message two and half minutes ago.”

“Stop!” Felicity pleaded. After a pause she suggested, “I could always change my name and leave the country.”

“His network of presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and Nobel Prize winners would track you down. Then Isabel and Slade would ask why you excluded them from your trip abroad.”

“Fifteen days. Really fourteen,” Felicity reasoned. “Today is almost over.”

“I wouldn’t check your phone tonight if I were you.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I might now. This brunch might be the thing that kills me. And it’d be all your fault because I did it to save your butt.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said with a big smile and a dopey tone. He leaned his head down on her shoulder. She patted his head. With the same tone he added, “You’re my bestest friend.”

“Shut up.” Felicity pushed him off her. He scooted over a bit to give her more room, and she followed.

Oliver took a sip of vodka. It seemed to have been spoiled by Isabel and Slade’s visit. He set his glass down and stared at Felicity. She stared back. He smiled and looked down. After he shook his head to clear it, he said, “Did I tell you about my business trip to Kansas City the weekend after next?”

“That’s it, Oliver. You are my co-planner for this brunch. I’ll be sure to send every message your way so you can stay in the loop.”

“I hate you,” Oliver replied.

“No, you don’t.”

As he contemplated how horrible the brunch would be, Oliver realized he didn’t think it’d be too bad with Felicity. “I have an idea about the theme.”

“Mm?” Felicity asked as she took a sip from her daiquiri.

“What do think about serving Scottish food like haggis and hiring bagpipers?”

“Mr. Queen,” Gladys gently interrupted Oliver from the memo written by the Accounts Director. Oliver looked up to see Mr. Dennis behind her. “Mr. Dennis is here to see you.”
Oliver waved Mr. Dennis in and set aside his laptop. “What can I do for you, Mr. Dennis?”

“I got an email from Ms. Rochev,” Mr. Dennis stated as he sat down across from Oliver. “She wants to have a pre-launch party for Applied Sciences. Did you know about this?”

“No,” Oliver answered honestly. Of course, Isabel went over his head for something he probably wouldn’t agree to. He was prepared for a party to stimulate continued interest in Applied Sciences with investors. He did not want the traditional party typically held for corporations’ new money-making enterprises.

“Are we ready for a pre-launch party?” Skepticism must be the only tone Mr. Dennis knew. Oliver had never heard him say anything without a skeptical tone.

“I think so,” Oliver thought back to his pet project. “The construction crew seems to have a steady pace. I wouldn’t be surprised if the building is done just two months after the estimate.”

“What about your director? And the rest of the staff?” There was the real crux of what Mr. Dennis was asking. “Will they be ready to begin projects once they are in the building? I want to hit the ground running.”

“That’s the plan,” Oliver said. Walter had warned him to not rise to Mr. Dennis’ bait. The more Oliver lashed out at Mr. Dennis, the more Mr. Dennis didn’t believe Oliver could handle the role of CEO.

“I know that’s the plan, Mr. Queen,” Mr. Dennis glared at Oliver. “I’m asking if it’ll actually happen. We don’t want to have a party for something that is, in actuality, a year away.”

“We’ll be ready.” Oliver kept his voice steady.

“Fine. Ms. Rochev wants to hire a party planner. We should have some idea of the party we want before we hire a planner.”

“Sure.” Oliver stared straight at Mr. Dennis to avoid rolling his eyes. Why QC would hire a party planner after Mr. Dennis and he planned the party seemed wasteful and silly. Two things Oliver knew Mr. Dennis was not. But he needed to keep Mr. Dennis happy. “What were you thinking?”

“I think the ballroom at the Starling City Hotel would be nice. Dinners there are always well-received.”

“I’m not sure a dinner there would match the image we are trying to convey for Applied Sciences.” Oliver did not want to throw a stuffy party himself. He refused. “We want to market to younger investors.”

“Yes, but our investors should not all be young. We’ll need a diverse group of investors if Applied Sciences is going to be successful.” Mr. Dennis countered. Oliver forgot about the tone Mr. Dennis used to attempt to make Oliver feel like a child. He wasn’t sure which tone he hated more.

“How about Verdant? I know the owner and can get QC a really good price.”

“I can’t even begin to tell you why your club,” disdain filled Mr. Dennis’ voice, “is the absolutely wrong choice for Applied Sciences pre-launch party.”

“Name one.”

“What about the appearance you are using this party to make your club some money.”
“I wouldn’t charge QC. Obviously.”

“And there’s the fact we are trying to separate your club owning image from your CEO image. I’m sure Ms. Rochev has told you that.”

“Yes,” Oliver admitted. His jaw clenched. “She’s mentioned it a few times.”

“There is also the possibility you won’t be the CEO for much longer. In that case, the board wouldn’t want Applied Sciences to be linked with you. Using your club as the venue would do the opposite.”

Oliver was convinced Mr. Dennis had a dream board filled with images related to firing Oliver. Perhaps with a countdown calendar. Oliver could only nod. Slightly.

“You agree your club is out of the question?”

“Fine,” Oliver always wanted to throttle Mr. Dennis within five minutes of speaking with him. Did Mr. Dennis list that on his resume under special skills? “But I don’t want to do a stuffy dinner. We don’t want to be too formal, it conflicts with Applied Sciences’ younger market image.”

Mr. Dennis sighed. He tapped his finger against his lips. After a minute-long staring contest, Mr. Dennis said, “All right. I can compromise. We can have a drink and appetizer night in the ballroom.”

“Is there another venue you would consider?” The Starling City Hotel’s ballroom was one of Oliver’s least favorite places. In his younger days, he spent too many nights bored beyond reason in the ballroom for business ventures, charity fundraisers, or other events. Back then Oliver got in more trouble in that ballroom than he did in school. And he got in more trouble in school than the teachers could handle.

“I think the ballroom is the best place. Keep in mind, though we are introducing Applied Sciences, it is still QC. We don’t want to push QC’s image, as a whole, too much.”

Oliver picked up a pen and clicked it repeatedly.

“Okay.” Oliver knew he had only gotten Mr. Dennis to concede on one point. There was still a chance he could get his way on other points if he kept Mr. Dennis and other board members out of the loop. “Is there anything else or should I let Isabel know what we want and hire a party planner?”

“I think we’ve got the basics.” Mr. Dennis stood up. “Keep me in the loop.”

“Of course.”

As he picked up his phone to text Isabel, Oliver cursed her. She knew he was the CEO and therefore her point of contact.

He couldn’t even yell at her when Oliver saw her next. He didn’t want to ruin the brunch Isabel guilted Felicity into having.

“Felicity, your home is so beautiful. We don’t visit you often, so I forget,” Moira said as she walked into Felicity’s living room.

“Thank you, Moira.” Felicity stepped out of a hug with Oliver, where her floral scent washed over him, and both walked further into the condo. “You have your choice of seats. You can sit in here. I
have a few books and magazines you could read or I have a couple puzzles. Or you could sit outside. I have a feeling most people will want to sit outside, but you do what you want to. You’re the trend setter.”

“Oh, you…um…you compliment…me,” Moira admonished with an embarrassed smile. “I think I will sit right here and look at what magazines you have. I’m sure Hank will love to read about the latest… Starland gossip.”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been caught up on who is dating who,” Hank replied. He walked with Moira to the couch and made sure Moira sat comfortably and then sat down next to her. “Are J.Lo and Ben Affleck still dating?”

“You really are out of the…the…circle,” Moira said. “Even I know that was several relationships ago, for both of them.”

Hank shrugged his shoulders and took one of the books to read.

“Okay. Can I get you something to drink?” Felicity asked.

“Ice tea would be lovely.”

“Make that two,” Hank requested.

“I’ll get it,” Oliver offered.

“And I’ll show you where everything is,” Felicity said in an obvious tone. She turned her head to Moira and jovially complained in a stage whisper, “Men.”

Moira laughed and Hank chuckled as Oliver and Felicity entered the kitchen. Oliver was amazed at how well Moira was today. He was unsure of how she’d react to a mostly unfamiliar place, but Felicity had made Moira feel right at home.

Since Moira had her stroke, she hadn’t been to Felicity’s place. Oliver had been over a couple times since, but Felicity knew it was easier for her to come over to the manor instead. Oliver hadn’t realized how much he missed being in her place.

“Have the guests of honor arrived yet?” Oliver teased.

“You’re the first to arrive. Which I want to thank you, co-planner, for that. I never thought I’d see the day you arrived early.”

“My mom became anxious about arriving on time. She wanted us to arrive two hours early. I managed to convince her leaving an hour before the scheduled time would get us here plenty early. You’re welcome.”

“You could have come as early as you wanted. I may have answered in my cupcake pajamas,” Oliver gave Felicity a teasing smile. “Hey, at least I wear pajamas.”

“If you’re at home, why does it matter?”

“It’s a safety precaution. What if a fire starts or a robber comes in. It would be way better to start out clothed in those situations.”

“I thought your building had security?”

“Yeah, yeah. Better to be prepared.” Felicity bumped her hip into his and then looked over to Moira.
“It’s good to see her out of the manor.”

“Yeah it is,” Oliver agreed. Felicity gave Oliver a soft smile and rubbed his upper arm.

“And for my next feat of astonishment, I will find the glasses all by myself.” Oliver turned toward the sink and kept turning until he faced the cupboard directly opposite the sink. He walked toward it, opened the doors, and triumphantly held two glasses up in the air. “Yes!”

Felicity laughed. As Oliver went to close the cupboard doors, Felicity said, “Don’t shut it. Get enough glasses for everyone.”

“Not everyone will need a glass. They could choose to drink a beer straight from the bottle.”

“Hey, smartass, just get out enough glasses for everyone.”

Oliver wiggled and clenched his butt. Looking over his shoulder at Felicity, Oliver asked, “You think my ass is cute?”

“I believe I said smart.”

“I was reading in between the lines,” Oliver replied.

Felicity laughed. “There were no lines.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” The doorbell rang and Felicity lightly slapped a towel on Oliver’s ass as she left the kitchen to open the door. “Ow.”

After he handed Moira and Hank their ice tea, Oliver decided to snoop around Felicity’s condo. It hadn’t changed much since he’d last been there. The multiple skylights and large windows along the wall to outside from the kitchen and living room, flooded the condo with light. All her chairs and couches were aesthetically pleasing but they were also comfortable. Oliver missed comfortable furniture.

The comfortable furniture in the manor were the older pieces, which had molded perfectly around Oliver. Unfortunately, once they got older they were replaced. It seemed to Oliver, all the furniture was replaced on a rotating schedule. No piece lasted more than five years in the manor.

What Oliver loved most was he could see Felicity in every book, candle, blanket, and piece of art. If Oliver had never been at Felicity’s before and was plopped in the middle of her condo, Oliver would have known within five minutes Felicity lived here. He could guess exactly why she bought every little tchotchke.

The candles in the guest room had never been lit because Felicity wanted them for decor and not for their primary function. Her grandmother had gotten her the music box for her seventh birthday. Donna, Felicity’s mother, had saved and bought her the clock on her mantle a year before Donna died. It was wider than the mantle, and Oliver knew Felicity worried it would fall. Felicity’s office was the least cluttered because she focused on work in there and wouldn’t see any decoration.

He quietly opened her bedroom door and carefully stepped in. The dark wooden bed stood in contrast to the bright colored walls that seemed to reflect the light that came from the wide sliding door and windows. Oliver walked over to the outside door and looked at her private patio. She had a great view of downtown Starling City and if he stretched his neck he could see the harbor.

Turning around he stumbled upon some framed photographs on her dresser. There sat a picture of Donna with Felicity, and one of her grandmother. Oliver was surprised to see a picture of a young
Felicity and, who Oliver assumed was, her dad. The other two photos were of Oliver and Felicity.

Oliver chuckled at the one of them in college just a couple months after they met. It must have been the first photo of the two of them together. Felicity had been tutoring him and Oliver became bored. He pulled out a disposable camera, which had been popular at the time. Oliver halted the tutoring session and refused to study anymore unless he was able to take a picture of the two of them.

He had a wide, smug smile in the photo. Felicity scowled and was clearly not amused.

The other photo of them, Oliver picked up to examine it. They both wore jeans and a t-shirt. Small paint strokes littered their faces as they sat on the steps leading up to the Starling City Community Center. Felicity’s head rested on Oliver’s shoulder, his arm around her, with his head on hers. Oliver took it after they volunteered at a teen art therapy event. Felicity had lied and said there would be a plethora of women and a chance to impress them with his philanthropy.

The only women there were the retired school teachers who put the event on and the teenage girls who participated in the event. None in the age range required to even think about being charming with.

Afterward, they had cleaned up the studio and gotten into a paint fight. Oliver felt she deserved some retribution for her deception. Felicity disagreed. After they finished cleaning up, and they waited for Digg to get the car, they sat on the steps. Oliver was certain the two of them were better art than the pieces the teens had completed earlier. Skeptical, Felicity had insisted on a picture to prove it.

Once he had taken the selfie with her phone, Digg had pulled up and they raced to the car. Their growling bellies had insisted on a stop at Big Belly. Oliver had forgotten about the photo.

Oliver placed the photo down and left the room. Felicity found him in the hallway.

“Everyone’s here,” Felicity announced.

“Good.”

“What were you doing?”

“Snooping,” Oliver answered as if it should have been obvious. Felicity smacked his chest and his grin widened. “Now let’s get this brunch, for two of the most horrible people I have ever met, done with. First question: where is the alcohol?”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Felicity’s brunch has several tension-filled moments, though Oliver still has a good time.

Chapter Notes

Posting early this week as I’m not sure I’ll be able to post on Thursday. Next week might be the same.

Thank you everyone for your comments! Love them.

The group hung out on the wide balcony drinking mimosas, except Moira and Hank. They stayed in the living room with their overfilled plates of food and iced teas. Digg and Lyla weren’t able to make it due to both of their jobs. Sara had texted Oliver a half-hour ago saying she was running late and her phone was almost out of power.

The sun was warm, the breeze was light. If Oliver had a pair of noise canceling headphones to filter out Slade’s voice, the day would be perfect. He opened his eyes and glared at Slade and Isabel underneath his sunglasses. Oliver would bet half his fortune on Isabel being kicked to the curb inside of a week, if Slade was able to marry the sound of his voice.

“Nyssa,” Slade called out. Nyssa set her glass down on the table, brushed some crumbs off her lap, and looked over at him. Slade glanced at Isabel and they both smiled knowingly. Oliver couldn’t help but feel sorry for Nyssa. She didn’t deserve whatever those two had planned. “I got you an interview with the uniform division of the Secret Service. Well, I say interview, but really, it’s a done deal. The interview is just a formality.”

Nyssa leaned forward slightly and turned her head more toward Slade. Her face went pale and she set her jaw. “I’m sorry, you did what now?”

“Ah, look, Sweetums, she’s shocked,” Slade responded. “She doesn’t know how to thank me properly. It was nothing, Nyssa. I just pulled some strings.”

With quickening breaths, Nyssa glared at Slade. Oliver didn’t know how Slade could be so unobservant to not know the difference between pissed and grateful. Nyssa was clearly the former. So much so, it made Oliver wonder if a fight would break out. Oliver wished Digg and Lyla were there, to stop their fellow soldier from killing Slade on Felicity’s patio. If only to keep Felicity from cleaning up any blood.

“You will have to go to training. The training classes start in a week and a half in Virginia. And then, I have a pretty good idea, you’ll be guarding the Australian embassy.” Slade laughed and Isabel joined in. Slade added to explain the joke, “I have an in there.”

“I told you,” Nyssa said in a eerily calm and quiet voice, “I am going back to school. I am just
waiting for my father’s return.”

“You don’t have to worry about looking like the Secret Service is playing favorites or doing anything illegal. They have your army record and are well aware of how qualified you are.”

“But I don’t want to work for the Secret Service.”

“Don’t be silly. You think being a paramedic will get you anything? Trust me, you’ll be far happier in D.C. You have no idea what is possible there. And with my guidance, you’ll be sure to have every advantage thrown your way.”

The paleness in Nyssa’s cheeks gave way to red. Oliver had never seen Nyssa angry, at least not this angry, before. Oliver stole a look at Felicity next to him and both had uneasy faces. Everyone was uncomfortable. Barry, who sat on Felicity’s other side, shifted himself in his chair and looked down at his phone. Cisco tried to intervene, but appeared unsure of what to say. Or Cisco was scared of Slade. Oliver doubted Nyssa would want anyone to rescue her though.

“I wish to remain on the West Coast,” Nyssa explained in a tight voice. “And I enjoyed being a medic.”

“Being a paramedic will not be glamorous,” Isabel jumped in with a low voice. “You will not be around anyone as important as the people in D.C. Your hours will be horrible. And you will be under appreciated.”

“To me, it doesn’t seem that different from being a guard. And when I’m a paramedic, I will be able to help people.”

“You will help people,” Slade said indignantly. “You’ll be this country’s first line of defense. And it rarely involves blood. And if your father really wanted you to be a paramedic, wouldn’t you be in school right now?”

“It,” Nyssa stumbled over the word and took a breath. She looked down at her lap and argued in a strained quiet voice, “It was my decision to wait. I’m still processing.”

“Processing,” Slade sneered. “What you need is to just get back into the world. Stop coddling yourself and become a productive member of society again.”

“My father says the same thing.”

“I had a feeling your father is a reasonable man. I’m sure we would get on well with each other. Maybe I should meet him? I can help him adjust to the idea of you moving to D.C. and this new job.”

“As I was saying,” Nyssa said as she gritted her teeth. “My father doesn’t think I should be coddled either, but my brother-in-law convinced him to give me some time. My father gave me a deadline. The deadline is up when my father returns from Gotham.”

“But why wait?” Slade asked. “In another month or two, this opportunity won’t be possible for you.”

“Though I appreciate your effort, I never asked for your help. Working for the Secret Service is not something I want to do.”

“But you’re more than qualified,” Slade interrupted. “And, after you put in some time, you can move up to be an agent. That would really put you in the center of things in D.C.”
“No, thank you,” Nyssa responded. She stood up and looked at Felicity, “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Go past the kitchen and make a right. It’ll be on your left.”

“Thank you.” The sound of the door sliding on its track was the only thing heard on the patio. Nyssa walked inside. The air she left was full of tension. Oliver was surprised at Nyssa’s so adamant refusal of Slade’s offer. In fact, Oliver had never liked her more than at that moment.

“Nyssa will come around,” Isabel said to Slade, but her voice carried to everyone. Isabel patted Slade’s leg. “She just has a hard time accepting help from anyone. Once she realizes how generous your offer is, she’ll see how silly she was today.”

“She should be careful not to seem so ungracious, lest the offer be taken away.”

“She’ll apologize. Don’t worry, honey.”

Slade grumbled a bit more, which Oliver didn’t know if he should roll his eyes or laugh at.

A cleared throat turned his attention to Cisco. He stared intently at his finger as it traced the edge of the table back and forth. “You know, I was just thinking there are, well were, seven of us at the table. And across the world the number seven is considered lucky.”

Oliver closed his eyes and searched for more patience. He wasn’t sure if he could handle Cisco’s jabbering on top of Slade playing the part of the injured party. He looked around for something that would extradite him from the patio or something that could silence Cisco. He came up empty.

He did see the shoulders of everyone else relax. Oliver conceded Cisco’s incessant talking was the least confrontational way to diffuse the tension Slade and Isabel created.

“For example,” Cisco continued on, “did you know most people’s favorite number is seven? To the point where if you win the lottery, and a seven is one of the winning numbers, you are more likely to have to share the jackpot with more people. So, I’m not sure how lucky seven really is.”

Isabel sighed and stood up. With her phone in her hand, she announced, “I’m going to be taking pictures for Instagram. Oliver take your sunglasses off.”

“OK,” Cisco acknowledged before continuing. Barry sat up straighter. Oliver slowly took his sunglasses off and placed them on the table in front of him. He squinted to look at Cisco. “To several religions, seven is a significant number. In Christianity, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In Judaism and Islam, there are seven heavens. Muslims walk around the Kaaba seven times on their journey to Mecca.”

Oliver turned his head and hid the yawn that escaped him.

“Hmm,” Felicity said a bit louder than necessary. Oliver figured it was her way to keep him in the conversation. When he turned his head back around, Felicity stared at him. “Confucianism defines the concept of harmony as the combination of Yin and Yang with the five elements: fire, water, earth, metal, and wood.”

“See, it’s interesting, right?” Cisco’s enthusiasm increased and Cisco sat up straighter.

“Um,” Barry cleared his throat. “Also, there are seven wonders of the world.”

“Yes,” Cisco bounced in his chair. “Seven is everywhere. Seven days in a week.”
“Seven colors in a rainbow,” Barry added in quick succession.

“Excuse me,” Isabel said from the end of the table. She put her phone down and took glee in looking down at Barry. “There are only six colors in the rainbow.”

“Uh, no,” Barry said in a much quieter voice. It was obvious Barry did not like having Isabel’s attention. “Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and purple.”

“Indigo?” Slade scoffed.

“Barry’s right,” Cisco said. “People forget, but the blue in a rainbow doesn’t jump to purple, it fades into indigo, which fades into purple.”

Isabel mumbled, “Whatever.” She held her phone up again and snapped more pictures.

Oliver hung his head back against the chair’s back, faced away from Isabel and her camera, and looked at Felicity with a bored look in his eye. He couldn’t believe he was in, well near, an argument about the colors of the rainbow. Felicity just smiled and turned back to face Cisco. Traitor, Oliver thought. He picked up his glass and took a sip of his mimosa.

“Seven also has its mark in literature,” Felicity stated. “Voldemort had seven horcruxes.”

“Oh my god,” Barry exclaimed. “He did.”

Felicity nodded and added, “And the seventh son of the seventh son is a common starting point in folklores.”

“When magic is involved in the plot of a story,” Cisco said with a serious nod, “seven is usually important in some way.”

“It’s also the highest one-digit prime number,” Barry said as his words ran together.

Oliver set his glass down and proclaimed, “My favorite is Seven, the movie. What’s in the box?” He felt a hard pinch on his thigh and looked down and found Felicity’s hand retreating to her lap.

Cisco laughed, “That’s actually a great example. There are seven deadly sins.”

“To be accurate,” Isabel interrupted, “our total number isn’t seven. It’s nine if you include Mrs. Queen and her nurse.”

“Most superstitions only count the people at the table,” Cisco countered.

“Superstitions are nonsense,” Slade grumbled. “They don’t mean anything.”

Felicity chuckled and Oliver turned to her. She faced Slade and asked, “Then why do you have a rabbit’s foot on your keychain?”

“Because,” Slade struggled and he sat up straight. Oliver bit his lip. “Because, Lis, when your superstitious grandmother gives you a gift before you leave your home country, you keep it.”

“Aww,” Isabel gushed. She walked over to his side and stroked his shoulder. “That is so sweet.”

“And besides,” Slade continued after he shrugged off Isabel. Oliver thought Slade would shift the focus on to something, which didn’t call Slade out. “We won’t be seven at the table soon. Sara is joining us. It’s all a moot point.”
“I did notice she wasn’t here,” Isabel said. “When is she supposed to get here?”

“I don’t know,” Oliver answered. “Her text a while ago said she was late. I actually expected her by now.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Barry said. “She had a late start and she can take care of herself.”

“True. But without a charged cell, I don’t have a way to contact her when she’s on the road.”

With a glance to Barry, Oliver was happy to see the other man not react nervously to Sara’s name. Barry hid his feelings for Sara very well. The experience with Isabel at least taught Barry to be more cautious with his feelings.

Oliver looked back inside to check on his mother. She and Hank seemed to be fine, but it was a different place than home. Oliver stood up and announced, “I’m going to go check on my mother. No, Isabel. I don’t want pictures of my mother posted online.” Oliver admonished when he noticed Isabel about to follow him with her phone in hand. “We’ve discussed this.” Isabel’s face went tight but she stepped back and sat down. Oliver glanced at the table and added, more to Felicity, “I’ll make more mimosas while I’m in there.”

“Oh, thank you,” Felicity playfully crooned. She placed her hands over her heart in a dramatic fashion. “You’re my hero.”

“I know,” Oliver responded, smiling.

Once he was inside, he went over to the couch Moira sat on and sat down. Hank sat across from them reading a paperback book. Moira looked up at Oliver and smiled. She had a puzzle on a collapsible card table and had almost completed the border. Oliver was impressed and made a mental note to buy her some puzzles.

“Hello, Sweetie,” Moira said. “Are you having fun?”

“There have been some…amusing moments. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m actually enjoying this. Who would have thought your mother would enjoy putting together puzzles?”

“I’m glad you like it. I’m going to the kitchen to mix some drinks. Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine. I still have my cold tea,” Moira pointed to her glass on the end table on her side. Her plate had barely been touched.

“So I see. Try to eat some more. If you need anything just let me or Felicity know.” Oliver knew Felicity wouldn’t mind and Moira felt the most comfortable with her than anyone else here. He stood up and kissed his mother’s cheek. Oliver looked to Hank with a raised eyebrow and a glance to Hank’s drink. Hank shook his head and went back to his book.

He had almost mixed the mimosas in a large pitcher, when Nyssa came out of the bathroom and peeked in the kitchen.

“Hey, Nyssa,” Oliver said. When he saw her face was blotchy he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Uh, no,” she said. She paused and looked back and forth between Oliver and the door. Oliver went back to placing the orange juice container and the champagne bottle in Felicity’s recycle bin. After 30 seconds Nyssa finally asked, “Could you do me a favor? Wait until someone misses me and then
tell them I left for Cisco’s?”

“You’re leaving?” Oliver turned around to face Nyssa in shock. He didn’t know why Nyssa let Slade get to her. As far as Oliver saw, she held her own against him.

“Yes. I—I’m tired,” Nyssa struggled with if, or how, to word what she wanted to say. Another long pause later, Nyssa admitted, “I’m so tired. I’m tired of leaving my fate to other people.”

Oliver was surprised to find her confiding in him. They were the opposite of close. Oliver was aware what he felt about Nyssa; she felt the same for him.

But she had confided in him. And he couldn’t ignore it. “Okay. Why don’t I have my driver drive you?”

“No,” Nyssa responded loudly. After she paused for a second, she added more softly, “Thank you. I’d rather take the bus.”

“The bus?” Oliver asked in confused disdain. The only bus he had ever been on was the privately hired one he rented for a ski weekend with his fraternity. The two female ski instructors on the mountain kept Oliver from spending time with any of his frat brothers. “Are you sure you don’t want a ride? I could go with you. It won’t take any time.”

“That’s kind, but I like taking the bus.”

“All right. I’ll let people know you left after they realize you’re gone.”

“Thank you.” With that she left the kitchen and the condo on quiet feet, so as not to signal anyone else that she left.

Oliver found himself feeling sorry for Nyssa. He could see how she would think everyone but she decided her life. Nyssa’s life was on hold until her father returned to Nanda. And, as far as Oliver knew, her father paid all of Nyssa’s expenses so Ra’s still controlled her life. Not to mention Slade, who was sure he knew exactly how Nyssa should live. It just so happened it benefited Slade as well. On top of that, she lived with Cisco.

He cut up more fruit for everyone so Felicity wouldn’t have to do it.

Looking out the window to the guests sitting down, Oliver watched Felicity as she talked to Barry. Barry talked quite animatedly; his hands nearly knocked down his glass. Felicity nodded along and seemed to be interested in what Barry said.

Barry being able to talk to anyone with Isabel present was nearly a miracle on par with those two female ski instructors wanting all three of them to hook up together. Felicity did have a way of making everybody at ease.

Oliver liked that she gave Barry attention. It wasn’t too long ago when she told Oliver he did a disservice to Barry by befriending and hiring him. It gratified Oliver that Felicity no longer believed that.

As if she sensed his eyes on her, Felicity turned her head and made eye contact with Oliver. They smiled at each other. A layer of her mint green dress floated up on a breeze. Her hand smoothed down the layer. Oliver winked at her and she tried to wink back. He laughed at her weak attempt.

Felicity turned back to Barry, and Oliver resumed his work cutting up the fruit.
As he headed back out to the patio, the doorbell rang. Oliver held a hand up to Felicity to let her know he would get it.

He opened the door to Sara. “Hey, glad you could make it,” Oliver said. He took in her red face with sweat-plastered hair on her forehead. She wore a black tank top and tight jeans. “You look miserable.”

“I am,” Sara gritted out and side stepped Oliver and into Felicity’s condo. “Laurel is freaking out about everything. My phone’s battery is dead. The air conditioner in my car is shot. And when I finally get here people are leaving. I saw Nyssa walking toward the bus stop on her way to Cisco’s. She must be crazy if she’s willing to wait for a bus in this heat.”

“Why don’t you go in the bathroom and throw some cold water on your face. Give me your phone and I’ll plug it in. And Nyssa was the only one who left. She felt tired.”

“Fine,” Sara said as she slapped her phone into Oliver’s hands. He went into Felicity’s office and found the right charger and plugged her phone in a kitchen outlet. When Sara came out of the bathroom, she still seemed haggard.

“I’m sorry you’re having a bad day.”

“I don’t even know why I came. It would have been so much better if I had stayed in Hub City.” Sara placed the right side of her face on the cold counter of the bar at the kitchen.

“Have something to drink and eat. You’ll feel better.”

“Yuck! I don’t want to eat,” Sara complained. Oliver sighed. They both knew she would feel better after hydrating herself, but Sara seemed intent on being miserable. Oliver didn’t want Sara spoiling the mood at Felicity’s brunch. Especially after the mood lifted from Slade and Isabel’s attempt to better Nyssa’s life.

He believed Isabel or Slade were more likely to bring everybody down when they had a bad day. Oliver wanted to believe better of Sara.

After a moment, she stood up and looked outside. “Why are we eating outside? It’s so hot.”

“It was hot in your car. It’s actually really nice out.”

“Is it?” Sara asked sarcastically with a hint of mocking.

Oliver turned around to the fridge and took out a bottle of water. Handing it to Sara, Oliver said, “Drink this. You’re probably dehydrated. You’ll feel better and you’ll be less likely to bite everyone’s head off.”

She grumbled some more, but opened the water. Sara guzzled down two thirds of the bottle and breathed and huffed hard afterward. Oliver put some crackers he found in one of Felicity’s cupboards in front of Sara. She ate them reluctantly. Oliver busied himself with the pitcher of mimosa, fruit, and clean up. After Sara ate half a sleeve of crackers and had sipped the rest of her water, Sara said, “Thanks.”

“Of course. You feel better?”

“A bit. I still have to drive back with a busted air conditioner.”

“Wait until it cools down a bit before you leave,” Oliver’s tone stated the obviousness of his
suggestion. “Or stay the night at Digg’s and Lyla’s.”

“I can’t stay,” Sara said in her more natural tone. “But I think I’m ready to join everyone else on the patio.”

“Sounds good.”

“Can I trade this water bottle in for a beer?”

“Sure.” Though he knew alcohol wouldn’t help her dehydration. It might help her mood though.

On the patio, once everyone had refills and more food, and Oliver and Sara settled in their seats, Oliver relaxed and stopped taking on others’ worries. Cisco had noticed Nyssa’s absence immediately and Oliver gave Nyssa’s message. Cisco was worried, but Sara told him in a clipped voice Nyssa was fine.

Silence that bordered on awkward surrounded the table.

“Okay, time for a game,” Felicity announced and sat up straight. The group collectively groaned. “It just involves talking. You can stay seated and keep drinking.”

“Like that was ever in doubt,” Sara said, her voice just above a mutter. Off the look Felicity gave her, Sara added, “Sorry, but you would never be able to get us to stop drinking today.”

Felicity ignored Sara and continued, “Let’s play Would You Rather.” Not giving the group a choice, Felicity asked, “Who wants to go first?”

The group avoided Felicity’s eye line.

“Fine,” Felicity exasperation soared. “I’ll start. I’ll give two scenarios and everyone has to pick the one they would prefer over the other.”

In an absent motion, Felicity twisted her lips to the side and looked up in thought. “Let’s see.” Her fingers tapped out a quick random pattern against her glass.

“You know I have to leave in a couple hours, right?” Sara joked.

Felicity closed her eyes for one more moment then reopened them with a clap of her hands. “Okay, I got it.

“Would you rather be able to talk yourself out of any situation? Or be able to punch your way through any situation?”

“Oh, we’re not asking dirty questions?” Sara asked in a somewhat condescending tone.

Felicity looked over at Sara and stated, “You can if you want.”

Sara sighed and took a big drag from her beer.

Oliver quickly answered Felicity’s question, “I already can talk myself out of any situation, would I have to give that up to add punch to my repertoire?”

“Yes,” Felicity said with a smile.

“In the case, I choose to keep talking. Fewer bruises. Can’t risk my pretty face.”
“Punch,” Sara responded.

“I’d go with talk,” Isabel replied. “I have to for my job.”

“I know I should say talk, Lis, but I have to admit there are times I’d rather punch.” Slade let out a loud laugh.

Cisco said, “Talking definitely.”

“Talking,” Barry also said.

Having gone around the table, Felicity answered for herself, “I also choose talking. I mean, how could I, of all people, not choose talking?”

“That is a fair point, Felicity,” Oliver teased. “My turn?” Felicity nodded. “Okay, keeping Sara’s suggestion in mind, would you rather give up your five favorite foods forever? Or, would you rather give up sex forever?”


“It’s not supposed to be easy,” Oliver reminded.

“What about masturbation?” Felicity asked, looking for a loophole.

Oliver thought for a second, “No, that’s included in sex.”

“Fuck!”

“Is that your answer or are you just expressing yourself?” Oliver winked at Felicity. Felicity turned her head away and crossed her arms in mock annoyance.

“I’d give up my five favorite foods. Easy,” Sara interrupted Oliver and Felicity.

“I’m not sure I like this question,” Isabel said. “Pass.”

“That’s not an option,” Sara argued. Oliver was surprised Sara demanded Isabel play by the rules, given Sara’s less than enthusiastic response to the game. But then Oliver remembered Sara’s severe dislike for both Isabel and Slade, and it made more sense. “Answer.”

“Fine. Sex.”

Oliver nearly spit out his drink. He guessed Slade wasn’t too good in bed. Must be the eye patch.

For his part, Slade answered with food, as did the rest of the table. Though Barry blushed more than Oliver had ever seen Barry blush.

“My turn,” Sara sat up and clapped her hands together in giddy anticipation. Oliver knew Sara’s evil brain had thought of a sinister scenario. “Would you rather,” Sara paused for dramatic effect. Felicity sat back and sipped her mimosa. “Pay for sex or get paid for sex?”

“That is disgusting,” Isabel recoiled.

“I agree, Sweetums.”

“Too bad. You have to answer.” Sara’s voice was light and amused.
Eventually everyone answered. The whole group agreed, except for Isabel, again, they’d prefer to pay for sex.

The game continued. Isabel and Slade’s question were tame, boring, and nonsexual. Once Slade had gone and it was Cisco’s turn, Slade turned to Isabel and said in an exaggerated surprised tone, “Wow! Is that the time? Izzy, we should have left a half hour ago.”

“You’re right.” Isabel agreed as she stood up quickly. Cisco’s mouth was agape and then he snapped it shut. He glared at the engaged couple. Oliver almost invited Cisco to take his turn, when, in a sugary sweet voice, Isabel said, “Felicity, we had such a great time. Thank you for inviting us and entertaining all of us for a few hours.”

“I was happy to do so, Isabel.” Felicity’s reply matched Isabel fakeness, tone for tone, smile for smile.

“Let’s do one more selfie of all of us leaving,” Isabel said. “Everyone go inside and stagger yourselves around the door, this way everyone will get in the shot.”

The rest of the group stood up, though hesitantly. They tried to clear the dishes from the table. Felicity waved them off.

Once Isabel took the picture and posted it to Instagram, everyone disbanded. It bordered on rude for the rest of the group to sit back down again. Which was probably Isabel’s intention.

Oliver made sure Moira was still happy with her puzzle. She was, so Oliver stayed to help Felicity clean up.

“Gah,” Felicity said as she shut the balcony door behind her with her hip. Her hands were full with dishes from outside. “Remind me to never do this again.” When she walked to the kitchen, she flipped her shoes off toward her bedroom.

“You didn’t have a delightful time?”

“Did you not witness everyone fighting, but not really fighting, with each other?” she asked. Oliver stood at the sink with the dishwasher open. While he loaded the dishwasher, Felicity put food away.

“Did you notice how I didn’t antagonize Slade at all? Because I’m pretty impressed with myself.”

“Congratulations and thank you. But I didn’t realize I should have hired a referee.”

“I had a good time,” Oliver admitted. “I even liked the mimosas.”

“I noticed Sara was the only one who had a beer.”

“She came in with a really bad mood. I just tried to get her out of her funk so she wouldn’t add another mood-ruining element to the brunch.”

“Why did she come at all then?” Felicity asked more to herself as she maneuvered more food to fit in her fridge.

“She asked the same question. I don’t know. I felt bad for her.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Felicity said. Oliver turned his head and gave her a questioning look. Felicity stood up and replied, “She has you wrapped around her little finger.”

“No. No, she doesn’t. I just understand where she’s coming from.”
“Okay. If you say so,” Felicity allowed.

The two continued cleaning the kitchen and balcony. While Felicity put a load of laundry in her washer, Oliver sat down next to Moira and gave a nod to Hank. Moira almost finished the puzzle.

“That looks great, Mom,” Oliver complimented.

“Thank you, Oliver. This is a lot of fun.”

“We’ll have to get you some puzzles of your own.”

“That would be wonderful. Can we get one with kittens on it?”

“Sure, Mom. We can get a puzzle of kittens.” Oliver said, amused. Felicity came into the living room and sunk down next to Oliver on the couch with a tired sigh. Her eyes closed and she rested her head on her hand. “Mom, we have to get going soon. Felicity wants to have her condo back.”

“You don’t have to leave. I’m happy to have you here.”

“That’s nice of you, Felicity, per usual, but I want to get back before Hank’s shift is over,” Oliver responded. He knew Felicity understood Oliver also relayed to her he wanted to be home before Moira became too tired.

“Oh, yes. Felicity, it was incredibly kind of you to have us here,” Moira said. Moira stood up slowly and Oliver stood to move the card table out of Moira’s way before she knocked it down. Felicity managed to stand up again with some effort and hug Moira.

“You’re welcome here anytime. But I’m sure you’ll be glad to get back home.”

“Yes, I am more comfortable back home. Oliver, I think I’m more tired than I thought I was.”

“Okay, we’re going home. I just need to text our driver so he can pull up front to meet us.”

Moira went and stood by the door with Hank by her side and waited. Oliver and Felicity didn’t try to talk her out of waiting right by the door, as they knew it would just cause Moira to be upset. Hank was there to ensure Moira stayed upright.

They stood a few feet away from Moira while waiting for a text back from the Queens’ driver. “Is everything ready for Applied Sciences’ pre-launch party?” Felicity asked.

“No, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Going well, huh?”

“Anything new with your business?” Oliver asked. He realized Felicity hadn’t talked much about her work or company in a while.

“Oh, it’s fine. I’m meeting with a new client tomorrow. I think they need a lot of help, but not necessarily of the IT kind.”

“Financial?”

“Among other various things.”

“What company is it?”
“You probably haven’t heard of them. They are small and still trying to make a name for themselves. Box Hill Winery?”

“Nope, never heard of them. Are they local?”

“Sort of. They’re in the state. Anyway, I think they just want me to set up a firewall and a shared drive. Easy enough.”

“Why are they hiring you then? You usually take on bigger jobs with bigger clients.”

“I’m not sure yet. I got the impression they are pretty paranoid about their competitors hacking into their system. I’ll take a look and make my recommendation.”

Oliver laughed. “Is the wine business cutthroat?”

Felicity laughed too. “Probably not, but if they want to pay me, I’ll set up some security for them.”

The smile Oliver had turned into a mock frown of concern. He asked, “They’re not going to pay you in wine, are they? Because I know you’ve said in the past wine would be a valid currency for you, but you should only take money. Actual U.S. dollars.”

“Ha, ha,” Felicity laughed and tapped him on his abdomen with the back of her hand.

“Ow.”

“That does not hurt. Stop pretending it does.”

“You don’t know,” Oliver accused with faux hurt in his voice. They both laughed. His phone beeped and it was time for Oliver and Moira to leave.

“Have fun with your new client,” Oliver said as he hugged Felicity goodbye. “Just don’t have too much fun.”

“Are you telling me not to drink while I’m working?” Felicity scoffed. “I’m at my peak performance after a glass or two of wine.”

“Are you here or with clients when this said drunk working happens?”

“Get out of my condo!” Felicity extended her arm out and pointed it toward the door.

“I’ll see you later.” He, Moira, and Hank walked out into the hallway and onto the elevator.

As they descended, Hank observed, “You two are always teasing each other.”

Moira replied to Hank, “You’d think one day one of them would get tired of it.”

“You’d think,” Oliver said. “But I don’t see that day happening any time soon.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Applied Sciences has its pre-launch party. Oliver is cruel and Felicity calls out on it.

9 Years Ago

Hunched over from the weight of her backpack, Felicity speed-walked toward the library. She had reserved the large study computer room, but Brie Larvan had managed to steal it the day before and Felicity wasn’t taking any chances. The final for Computation Structures was a massive group project Felicity was capable of doing all on her own. Unfortunately, the professor had shut that idea down and was checking in on her group to ensure she wasn’t the only one doing the work.

Essentially, torturing Felicity.

And Felicity would not allow Brie Larvan to add to said torture.

The steps to the library were 50 feet away when she heard someone call her name. And not just someone. Oliver.

Frak!

His finals were over. He was supposed to leave her alone now. That is what she told herself. Two months of tutoring and then it’d be over. Oliver would go on with his life and quickly forget her. Felicity would go back to being a computer nerd hermit, where she would do her best to not think of the way his voice sounded when it was soft and warm.

Except Oliver was calling out to her and, as Felicity turned around she could see, running toward her. Her breath caught in her throat. His blinding smile made him even more hot.

Frak! The arrogant billionaire would be the death of her. Or at least her heart. Her stupid, stupid heart.

“Oliver, I need to get inside,” Felicity pointed her thumb back toward the library. “I have to make sure I get my reserved room.”

“It’ll just be a minute, I swear,” Oliver promised. He was barely out of breath though Felicity knew he had run across half the campus from the bead of sweat trickling down the side of his face. “I had to tell you right away.”

“Tell me what?”

“Guess.” Oliver smirked.

Felicity tightened her hands around the shoulder straps of her backpack to keep from hitting him. “Just tell me or I’m leaving.”

“Okay,” he replied with a chuckle. With a huge smile his face could barely contain, Oliver cheered, “I passed. I passed everything. All my classes.”
“That’s amazing. Congratulations!” Felicity knew she would be proud when Oliver passed all his classes. What surprised her was she wasn’t proud of herself and her tutoring skills. She was proud of Oliver. He had put in so much effort and time to improve his GPA and Felicity was happy, and relieved, he was successful.

“Thanks,” Oliver look down at the ground and scuffed his shoe across the pavement. Felicity smiled to herself. As he looked back up, Oliver said, “We’re going out to celebrate my passing and therefore my father’s permission to stay here next year. We are going out.”

“Uh, what?” Felicity’s breath quickened.

“This deserves drinks. Lots and lots of drinks. Don’t worry, I’ll get you into any bar we go to.”

Oh. “You know I don’t like your frat friends.” Internally, Felicity added, or who you become when you’re around them. She crossed her arms. “I shouldn’t be tortured for being the best tutor there has ever been.”

“Careful,” Oliver warned. “You don’t want to get a big head. I didn’t get straight A’s.”

“I’m your tutor not your fairy godmother who can make the impossible happen.”

Oliver barked out a laugh. “Fair enough. And you’re right.”

“I usually am.”

“Shh. I won’t invite my frat brothers. But that does mean you will have to sing karaoke as none of them will be there to do it in your stead.”

“Ha. I don’t think I could ever get drunk enough to sing in front of strangers, or anyone really.”

“That sounds like a challenge, Smoak,” Oliver grinned back at Felicity. “One I am willing to take on tonight. Nine p.m.”

“Oliver,” Felicity’s smile dropped and her eyes narrowed. “I have my own finals that I have not taken yet. I have to study.”

“But, you’re a genius,” Oliver whined. “You can pass all your finals standing on your head with an arm tied around your back and both eyes closed.”

“No, I can’t. I need to study.”

“Fine. We will postpone our night of celebration with drinks and karaoke until after you’re done with your finals. Your last one is next Wednesday, right?”

Felicity blinked at Oliver’s knowledge of her schedule. She had been certain he never listened when she talked about herself. “Yeah. Wednesday.”

“Okay, Wednesday night it is. You’ll have plenty of time to pick out the songs you want to sing.”

“Songs?” Felicity questioned. “Plural? Now I know why you never studied before. You knew it would make you lose your goddamn mind.” Oliver laughed. Felicity continued, “You won’t get me to sing one song. Don’t aim too high, you’ll only disappoint yourself.”

“Let me worry about the level of my hopes and possible disappointments. You focus on warming up your voice. And your finals, too, I guess.”
“Finals!” Felicity jumped in alarm. “I have to go. Shit. I’ll talk to you later.” Felicity turned around and ran up the stairs to the library’s entrance.

Behind her she heard Oliver laughing. He then yelled, “See you later. Get your liver ready.” Felicity’s cheeks warmed as the other students nearby stared at her with judgmental scowls. She told herself she didn’t care. Oliver passed his classes with her help and they were going out to celebrate. Platonically going out, but whatever, there would still be drinks and terrible music.

And Oliver Queen would be in her life for another year. Felicity ignored the skip her heart made and told herself she was only happy because it meant she would continue to get paid to tutor him.

Present Day

“Have you finally run Gladys off?”

Oliver looked up to find Felicity at the door of his office. “Hey, stranger.” Oliver waved her in and turned away from his computer. Felicity came in and sat across from him. “Gladys had a massage appointment.”

“A massage appointment?” Felicity asked, clearly amused. She leaned back in her chair.

“Yes,” Oliver confirmed. “I found it’s better, for both Gladys and me, if she has a way to relieve the stress I cause her.”

Felicity laughed. “That sounds like a wise decision. I have to give credit to Gladys. She’s smarter than I already thought she was.”

The indignant face on Oliver didn’t last two seconds before it morphed into him smiling.

“Do you provide this service to your contractors as well?”

“Just employees who have daily contact with me,” Oliver said.

“I have daily contact with you. Usually.”

“Daily contact in a professional capacity. Sorry, you’re going to have to get a massage on your time.”

“Damn!” Felicity snapped her fingers and smiled. Oliver smiled back then looked down at his computer screen and the blinking cursor.

“Are you checking on the servers?” Oliver asked, bring the conversation back to business. “I didn’t think you were due back here for another two weeks.”

“I’m not, but if you want me to check them while I’m here, I can.” With a slightly timid voice, Felicity said with a hopeful smile, “I actually came to ask a favor.”

“Did you just offer to look at the servers so I’d be more inclined to say yes to your favor?”

“…No?” Then, as she sat up straight, she added in an annoyed voice, “I’m a professional. Ensuring QC’s happiness with my work is my number one goal.”

“What do you need?” Oliver said, chuckling.
“It isn’t me who needs the favor so much as one of my clients do. You remember when I told you about Box Hill Winery?”

“The paranoid wine company,” Oliver recalled. “Yes, I do.”

“They need QC’s help.”

Confusion filled his voice when he asked, “Why does a winery need a favor from QC?”

“They are just starting out. They need a way to put themselves out there. Make a name for themselves.”

“Okay,” Oliver drew out the word, unsure what Felicity would ask for.

“They are marketing to high-end customers. Customers who could be found at the pre-launch party for Applied Sciences.”

“Felicity.” Oliver tilted his head back. He wasn’t sure he could help her.

“Oliver, they can’t get their feet in any doors because suppliers around here are loyal to the wines they already have. Or at least they are loyal to the money the other wine companies pay to keep competition away.”

“Woah. They might have a reason to be paranoid.”

“Their lawyer is already on it. But it could take months, at least. They’ll go out of business by then. Unless customers requested Box Hill Wine. Then the suppliers would have to listen. Or they could simply supply their wine themselves if it came down to it. But they need customers first.”

“Enter the party,” Oliver guessed. Felicity nodded.

“I had mentioned the party to them.”

“Were you bragging about me?” Oliver’s smile turned wide and toothy.

Felicity’s eyebrows arched. “I was under the impression QC hired a party planner.”

“You know I was talking about Applied Sciences.”

“Anyway,” Felicity changed the subject, refusing to answer Oliver’s question. Her cheeks pinked. Oliver decided to leave her off the hook for now. “I know it’s late and your planner probably already has the wine all picked out from the caterers, but would you call and ask?”

“So, Box Hill wants Queen Consolidated’s Applied Sciences Division pre-launch party to use their wine? And only their wine?”

Felicity nodded.

Oliver had some apprehensions. Oliver didn’t want to tell Felicity no. But the responsible part of his brain yelled loudly.

Oliver tapped his thumb on his desk to some random beat. He knew QC could afford the loss they would have from having to pay two wine companies. What Oliver wasn’t sure about was how the QC board would feel about that. Actually, he was sure. That was the problem.

“Mr. Dennis won’t go for it. It’s twice the expense for the same amount of wine. I’m trying to prove
to him and the rest of the board I’m fiscally responsible.”

“You wouldn’t have to pay them. They are all ready to go. They will deliver when is best for you. And they are willing to pay the hotel’s corkage fees.

Silence stretched. Oliver studied Felicity. She had her lower lip between her teeth, which meant she was worried. “Why does this mean so much to you? They can’t be a very big client for you.”

A puff of breath escaped her lips. “The winery isn’t a big client. But the two owners are friends with Kord from Kord Industries. I’ve been trying to get a contract with several of Kord Industries’ divisions for a couple of years. Obviously, I’ve never gotten it. But those they do contract with never last more than four months. If I could get a meeting with Kord, I know I could sell him on me.”

Oliver connected the dots. “Felicity, did the winery guys say you had to find a venue for them to debut their wine for them to talk to Kord about you?”

“No,” Felicity answered quickly. “But I would be someone they owed a favor to if I got all those rich, snobby people who will be at the party to try their wine.” Felicity’s eyes went big, and Oliver was fairly sure she blinked more than she normally did. Oliver didn’t care about these wine guys and would have said no in a second. If Felicity didn’t have a chance to benefit from this at all, he wouldn’t even consider it. But it had the potential to help Felicity.

Resigned, Oliver said, “I will call the party planner.” Felicity’s face scrunched up and she emitted a soft high pitch noise of excitement. Oliver held up a finger to her and added, “But the party planner has been stressed with the number of changes that Isabel has insisted on. I can’t promise anything. And any promotion Box Hill does at the party better match whatever else is planned.”

“Yes, for sure.” Felicity became serious again, though Oliver felt she could easily go back to excited squealing. “You want me to have Box Hill call you or the party planner?”

“Me. I need to discuss terms.”

“So business-like. What would frat boy Oliver say if he could see you now?”

“He’d probably scream and run away in fear. He really didn’t know that much.”

“Oh well, he had potential,” Felicity said and then winked. “Thank you, Oliver. I appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Oliver said sincerely. Then with a look of mirth added, “Besides I can’t wait to come up with how you’re going to repay me.”

Felicity tilted her head and asked, “Has anyone ever told you you’re infuriating?”

“Just you.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

Oliver shrugged.

“I’ll let you get back to work. Thank you, again,” Felicity said. She stood up and pulled her purse up to her shoulder. She stopped at about the halfway point between Oliver’s desk and the door. “I am proud of you, Oliver.”

Oliver felt his face grow warm. The conversation became too serious and focused solely on him; Oliver felt the need to lighten the mood. “Damn! I was going to tease you about that sometime in the
With mock sincerity, Felicity said, “Oh, that’s too bad. Maybe next time.” She spun around, her hair followed and landed gently back on her shoulders, and Felicity left his office.

Oliver stared for a moment at the spot where she had stood. Then he shook his head to escape his pondering and picked up the phone to call the party planner. He realized he didn’t have her number and looked up to ask Gladys to connect him. When he saw her empty desk, he remembered her massage. He sighed as he stood up and walked out to her desk in search for the number.

Felicity better appreciate the effort he put into her favor.

Oliver ran his hand through his hair as he stepped out of the limo. As he stood up, he buttoned up his tuxedo jacket. Isabel waited for him with her arms crossed and a snarl on her face.

“Where have you been?” Isabel charged for him despite her heels when he appeared to ignore her. “And why are you such a mess?”

“No, I’m not.”

Isabel leveled Oliver with a look, which Oliver considered impressive given her lack of height. “Your tux is ruffled and your hair is standing on end.”

“My tux is fine.” Oliver responded. It was automatic for his hands to reach up and tame his hair. “And I’m not that late.”

“You are over an hour late. For your own company’s pre-launch party celebrating the new division you created. Tough shit if you didn’t get the celebration outlet you wanted. Be an adult for once in your life.”

The QC board and Isabel knew a stuffy, rich-person-filled party was not the celebration Oliver wanted. But he’d rather have her believe he behaved insolent about the party than know the real reason for his tardiness. He didn’t want to admit Moira hadn’t remembered James. He was the CNA who had cared for her the longest. Oliver didn’t want to describe how Moira had pled with Oliver to not leave her alone with a stranger. He especially didn’t want to think about how he had to pry her fingers off his jacket to leave the manor with her crying behind him.

“Is the press still here?” Oliver asked as he looked over Isabel’s head to the red carpet 50 feet away. He was thankful he remained in the shadow of the glaring spotlight on the trampled rug.

“Yes.” Irritation filled her voice. “I made them. It cost me several favors.” Oliver shook his head and walked toward the press line. Isabel stepped backwards to stop him. “Wait.” Oliver glared down at her. “Remember you’re excited for tonight’s celebration, so smile. Applied Sciences is going to be a huge—no wait—major success. Say major. You’re confident you have the best team. Applied Sciences will secure QC’s continued place in the forefront of technology.”

“I know. You’ve briefed me before. Several times.”

“Then why aren’t you smiling like I prepped you?”

Oliver forced his lips to curve upwards and stalked off to be interviewed and photographed.

The press line wasn’t as congenial to Oliver as it usually was. The constant flashes he was used to.
Though each flash caused a sharp pain in his head. The grilling questions regarding his lack of leadership experience, Barry’s lack of any experience, or how he planned on financial success when the market was flooded with new tech devices, were new to Oliver. His award-winning smile (Starling Life and Times, May of the previous year) beamed, and his answers stayed light and jovial. When a reporter pressed for more concrete answers than he was prepared to answer, Oliver would move down the line to the next infectious parasite.

Once inside the hotel ballroom, Oliver thought it’d be less claustrophobic and have fewer attacks in wait for him

He was mistaken.

It seemed the hotel’s air conditioner couldn’t work with so many people in the ballroom, though Oliver knew the number of RSVPs were 22 people shy of the maximum occupancy level of the room. The heat of the room hit him in the face when he opened the door. Oliver left the door propped open and asked the hotel manager who escorted Oliver to the ballroom to open the doors that led outside to help circulate the air.

After the manager nodded and scurried away to the veranda doors, Oliver hoped he wouldn’t have to continue to problem solve for the event. The party planner did expect to get paid, didn’t she?

As he navigated his way to the bar, Oliver was waylaid by nearly everyone he came across.

“Oh my god!” A woman stood 20 feet in front of Oliver called out when she saw him. She must have been in her mid-fifties. “You’re Oliver Queen!”

His smile faltered and a sigh escaped. Oliver looked for a quick exit from the woman’s sight, but Oliver soon realized he couldn’t avoid the encounter. She ran in small steps up to him and grabbed Oliver’s hand from his side to shake it.

“Yes, I am,” Oliver confirmed. Being told his name topped his list of most irritating things people did when they first saw him.

“I wasn’t sure you would make it.” She kept a hold of his hand and drew a random pattern on his wrist. Oliver gently extricated his hand from her grip. She took this as an invitation to step closer to him. “Don’t tell my husband I told you this, but I find you extremely gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” Oliver nodded along, but kept looking for a way out of the conversation.

“Of course, you know that, being Starling City’s most eligible bachelor. And a billionaire to boot. God just handed you the cookie-cutter perfect life, didn’t he?”

He would have scoffed if he could have gotten away with it. But that would have angered the woman, who probably invested a large amount of money into Applied Sciences. Instead, Oliver refused to answer and looked over her for a less friendly face.

“Actually,” the woman said in a lower tone. She managed to step closer and her hip hit his. Her voice became breathier. “You’re on my list of five.”

“That’s flattering,” Oliver said in a flat voice. “I have to go.” Excusing himself, he stepped around her, giving her a wide berth to avoid her hand on his ass. Why did people think that was acceptable behavior? Were they not aware he had an actual life outside the tabloids?

Oliver took four steps when a hand grabbed his elbow to stop him. He turned around, ready to tell the person to keep their hands to themselves, only to find it was Mr. Dennis from the QC board.
“Mr. Dennis. Good to see you.” If lying gave a person a free pass to hell, Oliver further cemented his place in the fiery depths of Satan’s summer home.

“You’re late.” Mr. Dennis stated the obvious. Oliver noticed he liked doing that. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I had a little trouble at home.” Oliver hoped no further explanation would be necessary and Mr. Dennis would understand.

“I am not your high school English teacher, Mr. Queen. I don’t accept excuses.” So much for understanding. “QC needs a present and skilled CEO. I still don’t see that in you.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Dennis,” Oliver said. He managed to smile as he pictured squeezing the board member around the middle and Mr. Dennis’ head popping off and sailing to the ceiling like a balloon. His thumb and forefinger circled rapidly against each other. “Applied Sciences is going to be a major success and you’ll be stuck with me for a while.”

“I find it more encouraging when the CEO knows the party line is just that, and doesn’t take too much stock in them.”

A bright light flashed on the two as the event photographer captured the two men.

Taking a deep breath, Oliver attempted to remember he needed Mr. Dennis’ support. Eventually. “And I find it more encouraging when board members don’t question their CEO’s qualifications in a large party for their company, which is full of investors.” With that, Oliver turned and walked away from a gaping Mr. Dennis.

Oliver heard a few notes of music over the cacophony of conversations occurring in the room. The music came from the small string orchestra who was hired for the event. Oliver wanted something different, but different scared everybody else at QC. Oliver had heard this particular orchestra three times in the previous year at charity events and a product launch party he had been forced to attend.

As Oliver caught his first sight of the bar, a young woman in her twenties stepped in front of Oliver. Her face was heavily made up and her cleavage was more visible than her dress. A diamond rock, the size of a baby’s fist, rested on her ring finger. Oliver wagered her husband was an investor whose age was between 50 and 80.

Not that Oliver judged.

Everyone had to eat. But the sultry look she gave Oliver made him think she considered trading up from a millionaire to a billionaire. Oliver figured he should be flattered she’d think about marrying someone who probably wouldn’t die in the next decade.

“Mr. Queen,” she greeted. Her voice sounded as if she swallowed a cat. “I’m so happy to meet you.” She shook his hand in a gentle way Oliver assumed she meant to be soothing, but her other hand trailing up his arm caused him to shudder. And not in a good way. “I’m Grace and I find you fascinating.”

“Thank you, uh, Grace,” Oliver said. “I’m glad you and your husband could make it. I hope you enjoy your evening.”

Oliver continued to nudge his way through the crowd and was stopped every couple of feet by an investor, employee, or someone who found him attractive. When he finally made it to the bar, he groaned when he realized only wine was being served.
“That sounds like a man who forgot he did a favor for a friend and now can’t have the hard liquor he wants to help him through the evening.” Oliver turned to see Walter chuckling at him. Normally Oliver would object to being laughed at, but Oliver felt so relieved to see someone familiar he forgave Walter instantly.

“Who knew I’d be foiled by my own generosity?”

“How’s Moira?” Walter asked with genuine concern.

“Ah, there you are,” A man in his late-thirties, early-forties said behind the bar. He held out his hand. Oliver tried not to show his irritation at his conversation with Walter being interrupted. “I’m Greg. I’m one of the owners of Box Hill Winery.”

“Ah, nice to meet you,” Oliver responded automatically. Walter clapped Oliver on the back of his shoulder and walked away to mingle.

“I just want to thank you for being our savior! Dan and I ran out of ideas on how to get the word out about us.”

“You’re welcome.” Oliver tried to keep his focus on Greg, but Oliver did occasionally pivot his head around to find even one of his friends.

“And the night has already gone really well. If everything goes well tonight, do you think you might have us serve our wine at another QC event?”

Oliver took a glass of something red from Greg. Oliver took a sip to provide himself with extra time to answer. He didn’t like the presumption Greg took to ask Oliver for another favor within two minutes of meeting. Greg also made it difficult for Oliver to say no by asking in such a public setting. Oliver settled on, “We’ll see.”

“That’s wonderful,” Greg cheered in a polite voice. Oliver felt the celebration was premature. “Let me tell Dan. Dan. Dan.” And then a little louder, “Dan.” Dan finally heard Greg and turned toward Greg. “Come here.” Dan surreptitiously pointed to the couple he was talking to and mouthed the word important. Greg turned back to Oliver, “One moment. I know Dan wants to thank you, too.”

Before he had a chance to reply, Greg walked off to grab Dan. Oliver rubbed his hand against his brow. He calculated his chances of slipping away unnoticed when Greg, with Dan, appeared at Oliver’s side.

“Mr. Queen, so nice to meet you.” Dan stuck his hand out. “I want to thank you so much for allowing us here. You saved our asses.”

“Happy to help,” Oliver replied, less earnestly. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to find my friends.”

“Of course,” Dan answered. “I believe I saw Ms. Smoak at one of the few tables on the other side of the ballroom, closer to the orchestra.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said, sincerely grateful. Oliver wasn’t sure if he would have found her by himself. He took another sip of wine and turned back around toward the crowd.

He managed to walk eight feet before Oliver was stopped again.

“Mr. Queen,” a baritone voice called out. Oliver turned to toward the voice and masked his irritation. A middle-aged couple offered their hands and introduced themselves.
“My wife and I have invested in Applied Science.” The man’s hair had thinned and his belly poked over his pants.

“Thank you,” Oliver smiled. “I appreciate the support.”

“The question we have,” the woman jumped in. Her makeup was heavy. Her hair was stiff. “We want to know why we should invest more money when, by the looks of things, the return on our money will be nonexistent?”

“I can promise both of you, your return will be quite healthy.”

“Can you explain your confidence?” The man asked. “Barry Allen as your director doesn’t inspire anything in us but pessimism.”

“Barry Allen is beyond intelligent and will lead Applied Sciences to unparalleled success.”

“How?” The woman asked with an arch of her left eyebrow and a purse of her lips.

“I can’t go into details here, but set up a meeting with me through my assistant Gladys. I’ll be happy to discuss specifics with you. I hope you enjoy your evening.” Oliver turned and walked away before the couple could press him further.

The indirect route to Felicity’s table Oliver was forced to take was filled with similar pit stops. He had to reassure more investors. Also, a few board members needed to be reminded to talk up the new venture and their confidence in him.

“Excuse me,” Oliver said to another couple as he tried to get past them. The tall woman looked at him and gasped.

“I have to take a selfie with you,” she informed him. She then went about looking for her phone in her large purse.

After a few moments of the tall woman swearing and panicking, the shorter woman offered, “Just use my phone.

“Okay.” The tall woman took the offered phone and stood closer to Oliver. Her back was to him and she raised the phone above their heads. “Smile.” She smiled wide and Oliver managed a small grin. She looked at the picture and pouted. “Ugh, this isn’t good. I look horrible. Do you-”

Oliver walked away with speed he didn’t know he possessed before he found himself in a photo shoot.

After several more minutes of shop-talk, Oliver stumbled upon the table where Digg, Lyla, Nyssa, Slade, Sara, and Barry sat. Felicity stood a few feet away chatting and laughing with a board member and two investors. Oliver collapsed into an uncomfortable chair next to Barry.

“Look who decided to show up?” Sara rhetorically asked as she lifted up her wine glass in salute. She leaned way back in her chair and slumped down. Barry spun toothpicks on the table. Oliver could only assume the toothpicks came from appetizers. He turned and looked for any food servers or stations and found none. Oliver had missed the appetizer portion of the evening. He picked up his glass, saluted Sara back and drank a big gulp of whatever red wine was in his glass.

“If you couldn’t tell,” Sara said, “this is boring as hell. I should punch Digg for making me come.”

“It is not my first choice on how to spend my Saturday night either,” was all Oliver was willing to
concede. As CEO, he had to play the part of the social, charming guy who loved wooing investors.

“Right,” Sara said, irritated. “You’re not bored. Your fan club is here.”

Oliver furrowed his brow at her.

Sara added, “You must love all the woman fawning all over you. A couple of guys too.”

“I’d prefer it if I could go unrecognized.”

“Like have an invisibility cloak or polyjuice potion,” Barry suggested with a humorous smile.

“Yes,” Oliver said.

“It’s too bad we don’t live in Harry fucking Potter land,” Sara said.

The younger man grimaced and Oliver couldn’t blame him. Sara was clearly upset and taking it out on anyone in close proximity to her. But Oliver had thicker skin than Barry. Oliver gave Barry a small smile and Barry smiled back in thanks. “Did you come straight here from QC?” Barry asked as he noticed Oliver’s rumpled suit.

“No. It just took me awhile to get out of the manor.”

“Manor,” Sara huffed under her breath with an uppity accent. Then with a shake of her head at Oliver in mock pity, she added, “You have it so rough.” Silence settled over the table. Barry bounced his leg up and down rapidly.

A younger couple approached Oliver who were enthused about Applied Sciences and expressed their happiness it was near completion. Oliver tried to pull Barry in the conversation, but neither Barry nor the couple seemed to want to converse with one another. The couple soon left after Oliver’s third attempt and Oliver turned his focus back to the table.

He couldn’t help but voice his displeasure, “What are Isabel and Slade doing here at our table?”

Sara rolled her eyes and pursed her lips. “I don’t know. If you come up with a plan to get them to leave, I’ll help.”

“Uh, I know why they’re here,” Barry whispered, glad to have information Oliver wanted. “See, Isabel insisted she needed to be near you because she required it for her job and her job is really important. And she and Slade are a package deal apparently. Though,” Barry leaned his head down and whispered lower, “it is curious a PR consultant needs her fiancé with her at a job. One would think he would only distract her.”

“That seems like a reasonable assumption,” Oliver agreed in a low clipped tone.

Quietness once again fell on the trio. Between the ordeal with Moira, the press, the investors who all thought Oliver owed them a conversation of never ending numbers, and the wine; Oliver’s eyes grew heavy and his breathing slowed. He blinked rapidly and took a deep breath.

He stood back up and went back to mingling with the guests. It was more of the same, which made Oliver’s energy level stay low. Oliver hid several yawns.

A couple hours later, which seemed like eight, the guests slowly filtered out of the ballroom. The orchestra packed up their instruments. Oliver invited Felicity, Digg, Lyla, Barry, and Sara to stay later. Somehow Cisco, Nyssa, Isabel, and Slade received the invitation as well, though Oliver wasn’t
“Hello, everyone,” Oliver greeted loudly once everyone was sitting at the table. Everyone returned his greeting, though they lacked enthusiasm. He needed the entertainment, even if more than half these people always attacked Oliver’s nerves. He sat down himself and wished for a chair with more give. “Now that I’m surrounded by only friendly faces,” almost, Oliver added to himself, “we can actually enjoy ourselves. That’ll be better, don’t you think?”

“I do indeed, Ollie.” Sara seemed light years more energetic than even three minutes previous. “Now what?”

“Now, we talk,” Oliver stated as if it was obvious. “Converse. Share bits of ourselves with everyone else.”


“Not like that,” Oliver smirked at Sara.

“Are you sure?” Sara suggestively asked.

“We'll see where the night takes all of us,” Oliver answered with a wink. Sara laughed loud into Oliver’s ear as she tumbled onto his shoulder and arm. A small cough came from Slade and Isabel’s side of the table. Felicity took a sip of her wine and looked away from him.

“Some of us,” Slade said, “are trying to not make a spectacle of ourselves.”

“True, honey,” Isabel said, disdain coloring her voice. Nyssa sat straighter than normal. Her jaw and fists clenched. Oliver guessed Nyssa wouldn’t contribute to the group’s gaiety. Per usual.

After a moment, Sara commented, “No one is talking. I don’t think your plan worked.”

“Well, fuck!” Oliver took his wine and gulped the rest down. Barry and Cisco chuckled at Oliver’s expletive. Digg and Lyla smiled. Sara continued to snicker. It sounded a little screechy to Oliver, but as no one else responded to Oliver he decided to go with it.

“Are you bored, Ollie?”

“Desperately.”

“Okay, people,” Sara said in a loud voice as she slapped her hands down on the table. “We have a dangerous mission. My fellow soldiers, we must entertain the bored billionaire. Now, I know what you’re all thinking, and yes, this is very perilous. It won’t be easy. Some of us aren’t going to make it. But we must come together for the sake of the pandas or something. I don’t know.”

Collapsing in a fit of giggles, Sara fell a little more into Oliver. He laughed too. Though Oliver admitted, only to himself, he thought Sara acted ridiculous. And not in a good way. Oliver smiled because it was what was expected of him. Especially at an event where there had been a hired photographer. Oliver didn’t trust the photographer had left with the rest of the guests.

“Okay, I’m fine. I’m fine,” Sara said as she flipped her hair back with her hands, away from her red face.

“So, Sara,” Digg said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Is it too late in the evening to play a drinking game?”
“Yes, it is,” Felicity snipped. She looked as unamused as Oliver felt.

“Fine,” Sara said as she sat up. She placed her hand on Oliver’s thigh to help herself up. Sara teased Oliver in a voice supposed to be soft enough only Oliver could hear, but she was drunk and had less control of herself. “Ohh, Ollie has some muscles in those thighs. I bet the ladies enjoy the benefit of those.”

Oliver felt his cheeks heat up. He hoped to blame it on the alcohol in his system, but Sara’s comment flustered Oliver. If the others hadn’t heard it, Oliver would have been fine. He wouldn’t have been thrilled, but the embarrassment level would have been significantly lower. To act unconcerned about the comment, Oliver laughed. He wondered if it sounded as fake to everyone else as it did to him.

“I’m up for a non-drinking game,” Cisco chimed in. “I’m excellent in trivia.”

“How are we going to play trivia, Cisco?” Oliver asked. He tipped the last remaining drops of wine into his mouth, sad he couldn’t get a refill.

“You’re right,” Cisco said. “We don’t have any of the materials for trivia. Though there must be a million apps of trivia for your phone, right?”

Cisco pulled out his phone when Sara stopped him. “Cisco, we’re not going to play trivia. Some of us could only win if it was army trivia. But we can all play two truths and a lie.”

Oliver heard some grumbles. To compensate he amped up his enthusiasm. “Yes. That sounds perfect, Sara. Can I be the judge or decider person? I’ll tell each of you which one I think is your lie.”

“Whatever you want, Ollie. We are here to entertain you.” Sara said. She put her hands around his bicep and rested her head against Oliver’s shoulder. “Who wants to go first?”

The group held still with only their eyes darting back and forth to see who would volunteer first.

“I’ll go first,” Lyla volunteered as she shifted in her seat.

“I know you fairly well, Lyla,” Oliver said. “I think I’ll be able to read you easily.”

Lyla smiled, stared into the table’s centerpiece, and said, “Hmm. Let me think.” A few moments later she smiled. “Okay. One, Johnny and I are building a new patio all by ourselves. Two, I still have no idea how geometry works. Three, Johnny has an oval shaped birthmark on his left butt cheek.”

“Hey,” Digg exclaimed.

“Sorry, Johnny. All’s fair in love and war.”

“I’ll remember that.” The two shared a smile.

“Way more information than I ever needed to know,” Oliver said as he shook his head to get the mental image of Digg’s ass out of his head.

“Ha! I liked it Lyla!” Sara judged. “Though Oliver is right if number three is true.” Digg shrugged. She turned her eyes up to Oliver’s face. “So, which one do you think was a lie?”

Oliver pondered for a moment. He really had no idea. “I’m going to go with the boring geometry one. That’s a lie. Being in the army, you must have some knowledge of geometry. Right?”

Lyla’s grin stretched wide across her face. “Nope. I got away with it.”
“Damn it!”

“What one was the lie?” Sara asked.

“The first one. We are getting a new patio,” Lyla answered, “but we are hiring it out.”

“Sneaky. You are sneaky Lyla Michaels!” Oliver said.

She smiled and then suggested, “We’ll have to have everybody over when it’s done.”

“Sounds like fun,” Felicity said.

“Ew. Now we all know way too much about Digg’s ass,” Sara said. She turned her face into Oliver’s sleeve. “Does anyone have any eye bleach?”

“Eye bleach?” Oliver asked.

“You know, bleach for your eyes.”

“There is no such thing,” Oliver laughed.

“Shows how much you know.”

Oliver knew he and Sara’s voices were at a louder than normal volume. He decided he didn’t care. No one else had figured out what to do. The party itself had been tortuous, which made everyone in their group tired. And sad. Oliver didn’t want to feel the emptiness that tried to implode below his sternum.

“Can I go next?” Cisco asked.

Oliver steadied a serious look aimed at Cisco. With not being able to talk without laughing, Oliver said, “Sure. But you have to limit your normally long, boring rambles to three things. And I have to be able to understand every word you say. It would be nice if you and your boring-ass rambles didn’t put me to sleep for once.”

The silence that took over the group seemed to have a different edge to it. Sharper.

“Okay,” Sara said. She tried to boost herself up but found it too challenging and slumped back up against Oliver. “Since no one wants to play two truths and a lie, why doesn’t someone else suggest our next activity?”

“Maybe Oliver should entertain himself,” Felicity said coolly. Felicity’s glare shot machetes at Oliver, and Oliver wondered what he had done wrong.

The group talked low to their neighbors. Their tones were accusatory. Oliver heard Cisco whisper to Felicity, “What did I do to make him so upset? I can’t come up with anything.”

Before Oliver could hear Felicity’s response, Slade and Isabel stood from their chairs. “Isabel and I are going to say our goodbyes. Some fresh air is needed. Nyssa, you’ll come with us.”

“No,” Nyssa shook her head. Her face became more severe.

“Fine, suit yourself,” Isabel said and walked away.

“Goodnight,” Slade said with reprehension. He followed Isabel out of the ballroom.
“What are the odds their marriage lasts more than six months?” Sara said with a tilt to her head.

“Not even close to good,” Oliver said.

“Because how long did they know each other before they got engaged? Not even a month?” Sara asked. Not waiting for an answer, she added, “How can a person know if they love the other person, who the other person really is, if they can live with all their annoying habits, and if they actually work as a couple? The only thing that solves it is time. I give them three months. Anybody else?”

“They do have the benefit of being seemingly perfect for one another,” Oliver said. “They might be the only people the other could marry. Anyone else would run away, screaming, never to be the same again.”

Sara and Barry laughed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sara said. “Marriage is crap anyway. It never lasts. And if it does, the couple is miserable.”

“I think,” Nyssa spoke up then became apprehensive when every eye turned to her. She swallowed, played with the ring around her finger, and said, “I think that, yes, marriage is difficult. It takes work. Hard work. But it could be rewarding if the effort is made. But hard work won’t mean anything without trust. If Slade and Isabel trust they are with the right person, it has a chance to succeed.”

The group took in her words. Oliver noticed Sara stared at Nyssa.

Sara shook her head slightly and said, “Whatever. I’m a horrible judge in character. Someone else will need to choose a spouse for me.”

Oliver laughed. “Are you sure? Do you trust anybody enough to make that choice for you?”

“I trust you, Ollie,” Sara said, her voice bright. “You choose for me.”

“You just want me to keep my eyes open for you?” Oliver asked as he glanced at Barry. He could turn this in Barry’s favor.

“Sure. I’m not picky. Or maybe I’m super picky. But you would know if I would like someone enough to want to do the whole wedding and house and domestic-life-forever with.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Any preferences at all?”

The rest of the group stayed silent and barely paid attention to Oliver and Sara’s conversation. Oliver really couldn’t wait for this night to be over. He continued to feign interest in what Sara said, for Barry’s sake. Barry deserved to have Oliver actually help Barry and not have Oliver impose what he thought was Barry’s ideal life. Barry liked Sara. Oliver would help Barry see if there was a chance.

“Hmm,” Sara pondered. She swung her legs around onto Oliver’s lap. Oliver held them and waited for Sara’s answer. “Dark. But with a little charm. Able to be silly. And adventurous as I am.”

“That it?” Oliver asked. Barry fit the description. Mostly. Oliver could understand Sara not wanting to be too obvious. Standing up and pointing to Barry would be a little more than the group could handle at the moment.

“I just need someone who isn’t afraid to live life. Someone who is willing to take some risks.”

“I think I’m ready to go,” Nyssa said in a tighter voice than usual, and she stood up abruptly. “Cisco,
are you ready?”

“Yes,” Cisco agreed. “I think I’m ready for the night to be over.”

“I’m pretty tired myself,” Lyla added.

“It’s a good time to call it a night,” Felicity stated. She was still distant and wouldn’t look Oliver in the eye. Oliver decided the party was over. He removed Sara’s legs from his lap and stood up with everyone else. Sara stumbled up.

In several clumps, the group walked out the ballroom through the lobby of the hotel and out the front doors. The warmth of the summer breeze felt too hot. Oliver took a deep breath but felt restricted.

The others all got into their cars, once the valet parked them on the curb, and drove off. Oliver texted his driver when he heard Felicity come up next to him. “Oliver, we need to talk.”

The dress Felicity choose for the gala was less colorful than her usual attire. The high waist was defined by a black skirt below and a white top above it. The neckline plunged low between her breasts and met at the high waist line. The alcohol and fatigue made it difficult for Oliver to keep his eyes on Felicity’s face.

Oliver opened his eyes wide and forced them to Felicity’s face. Her lips pursed tight and her eyes narrow. Felicity was angry, but Oliver didn’t know why. Yet. The look Felicity directed straight at Oliver didn’t bode well for him.

His fingers twitched.

“Oliver, I need to talk to you about tonight,” Felicity homed in on the point she wanted to make. She looked around the entrance of the hotel and walked to a more deserted area of the sidewalk, away from the valet.

“Okay. What about tonight?” Oliver asked. “I met Greg and Dan. They seemed nice and thankful. Their wine was good. I can tell you though I never want to do this again. I doubt it did any good for QC or Applied Sciences. I don’t know why I let Isabel talk me into it. Did you see them tonight?”

“I’m not talking about Slade and Isabel.” Felicity paused and then, with a forced calm, said, “I’m referring to your behavior.”

“What? I was fine.”

“You were horrible. Oliv-”

“Excuse me?” His voice raised slightly. Oliver felt offended. He heard blood rush to his head.

“Stop interrupting me. Let me get this out there before you get all defensive. Because let me assure you, you are not the injured party tonight.”

“How did I injure you?”

Felicity took a deep intake of air. Oliver could see her counting to ten in her head. She only reached six when she answered, “I’m talking about Cisco.”

“Felicity, I don’t remember anything.” Oliver hoped denial would stop Felicity from pointing out his
embarrassing words. His thumb and forefinger made rapid circles against the other’s pad.

“What you said to him, Oliver.” When Oliver showed no signs of admitting his behavior, Felicity added, “During Sara’s game? Calling Cisco out, in front of everyone? About saying too much incomprehensible crap that he makes you sleepy?”

He winced. He was more embarrassed Felicity witnessed it. He had hoped when Sara glossed over the moment, everyone would forgive and forget.

Apparently not.

“You remember now?” Felicity asked, she crossed her arms in front of her.

“Yeah,” Oliver replied. If he made light of it, maybe Felicity wouldn’t think it was as bad as she claimed it was. “But it wasn’t a big deal, Felicity. Cisco didn’t notice, or if he did, he certainly didn’t care.”

“He noticed. He cared.” Felicity’s voice became louder, Oliver looked around and saw the valet turn his head toward the two of them. “He couldn’t stop asking me what he had done to make you angry. I tried to assure Cisco he hadn’t done anything. But the only alternative for him to believe is he’s always gotten on your nerves and you finally had enough.”

“Oh, come on, Felicity.” Oliver tried to move them further away from the hotel’s entrance, but Felicity threw off Oliver’s hand on her arm and rooted herself on the sidewalk. Oliver sighed. “You know Cisco can be ridiculous. He never tailors his tech language to the person he’s speaking to. And he talks a lot. You know that.”

Felicity shrugged her shoulders. Her voice short. “I talk a lot. I speak tech.”

“You’re different and you know it.” Oliver ticked his head to one side.

“Do I?” Her eyebrow arched in challenge.

“For one you have self-awareness of your babbles. And you usually catch yourself in the middle of a babble and stop. Not once has Cisco stopped himself from babbling.”

“That doesn’t matter. You insulted him. In front of everyone.”

“Cisco considers all those people friends.”

“You obviously don’t consider Cisco a friend, since you had the ability to treat him like crap. Though Cisco has always treated you like a friend. He has helped you understand Applied Sciences with his ‘incomprehensible babbles.’” Felicity made air quotes with her fingers. She then gestured toward Oliver with one hand. “Hell, Applied Sciences wouldn’t even be possible without Cisco. And that brings me to my other point, which makes your behavior worse. You are Cisco’s employer. You are his boss.”

“How does that make it worse? I call out Sin all the time.”

“That’s Sin. In Verdant.” Felicity’s voice became higher, showing her exasperation at Oliver. She took another deep breath to calm herself down. With her voice lower and quieter, Felicity continued, “QC is on an entirely another level, and you know it. It was not appropriate to talk to an employee like that. And especially to talk to him like that in front of others, most of whom are not your employees.”
Oliver turned away from Felicity. Her words caused an ache inside of him and made his face burn, which had nothing to do with the wine he consumed. Shame was something Oliver rarely felt.

“I know being a CEO is still new to you, though that excuse is starting to get tired,” Felicity said. Her voice may have lost some of its volume, but it hadn’t lost its bite. Felicity brought her voice down lower, almost at a whisper. “But that was so badly done, Oliver. I don’t know what else to say to you.” Oliver’s car slowed and came to a stop in front of them. “And I guess I don’t have to figure it out.”

Felicity walked off in the direction of her car, and left Oliver standing in shock. Once the driver came around the car and opened the back door, the driver had to call out Oliver’s name at least a couple times for Oliver to move his feet and get into the car. He didn’t feel the air conditioner Oliver had been desperate for just a few minutes prior. He didn’t hear the car door shut.

Staring out the window, Oliver watched the lights go by without really seeing them. Felicity’s censure rang over and over his head. He had wanted to talk more to Felicity. Apologize. Ask what he could do to make it up to Cisco. To her. But the heat of her words kept Oliver from talking.

He hadn’t realized his rebuke of Cisco was as bad as Felicity said. Years of being told how and when to mind his manners should have been ingrained in him. So ingrained, that his comment, which was supposed to make Sara laugh, never should have crossed his mind. Let alone said.

And Oliver had said it in front of everyone. Cisco shouldn’t feel embarrassed by the comment. Oliver is the one who was humiliated. To treat anyone like that, but specifically an employee, was horrible. Felicity had been right in the use of the word. Oliver had been horrible.

The odds of Felicity and Cisco forgiving him seemed miniscule. And what about everyone else at the table? Were Digg and Lyla also upset with Oliver? Was Barry?

His behavior was so far over the line, Oliver wouldn’t be surprised if Cisco quit on Monday. Oliver couldn’t let that happen for two reasons. Cisco shouldn’t quit because of something Oliver said. Like Felicity said, Cisco was the injured party. Also, QC needed Cisco. Applied Sciences needed Cisco.

Instead of spending the rest of the night stewing in the mess he caused, like he would have done just months ago, Oliver made himself busy by planning how to make amends. And be a better boss. Because Cisco wasn’t the only one who deserved a better boss. QC had thousands of employees. They should have a boss who cares about them, instead of demeaning them. Oliver just had to plan how he would turn himself into the boss they deserved.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Oliver apologizes to Cisco and shakes up Applied Sciences. Felicity leaves town.

Oliver debated over waiting for Cisco in Cisco’s office, but ultimately decided Cisco would feel that was more of an ambush. Not the plea for forgiveness it really was.

The weekend saw Oliver in his office. He studied QC’s organizational charts and the personnel behind each department. Oliver then took a hard look at the proposed Applied Sciences organization and personnel. There were minor changes Oliver would implement within QC. Applied Sciences would be rebuilt. Top to bottom.

It had to if it had any chance to survive.

And Oliver knew it was not the best time to reorganize Applied Sciences; immediately after the pre-launch party and just weeks before it opened. It would undoubtedly make investors and the board nervous. But it would pay off in the long run.

Barry was in Central City for finals and would be back in a week. Oliver had been careful not to mention Barry not graduating early, as Oliver felt mostly responsible for it.

Oliver couldn’t wait a week to make the changes Applied Sciences needed. He just hoped Barry didn’t hear about it from another source. It’d be infinitely better if Oliver could go over the changes in person with Barry.

First thing Oliver needed to do was apologize to Cisco. Felicity had handed Oliver a mirror and what stared back at Oliver looked too much like the boy he used to be. Oliver had a clear view of that boy for once and Oliver felt disgusted. That boy, that selfish, lazy, asshole, couldn’t be anyone the people in his life needed or could be proud of.

His family deserved better. His friends, QC, Applied Sciences, his employees all deserved to have the man his father knew Oliver could grow up to be. Someone who would protect, rather than destroy, the Queen legacy.

And though he had known it was past time to take his responsibilities seriously, it had taken Felicity’s censure of him for Oliver to accept it.

It made him see Felicity deserved better from Oliver.

Oliver wanted to be someone Felicity would be proud to call her friend.

He didn’t want to be a liability. Nor someone Felicity, Digg, Moira, or Thea felt they needed to apologize for.

All the soul searching led Oliver to knock and carefully enter Cisco’s office at 8:15 on Monday morning, laptop in hand. If the shaking in his upheld hand indicated anything, he felt nervous. Being humble wasn’t something his prep or ivy league schools taught him.
“Cisco?” Oliver called out. He walked slowly around the large shelving units. “Are you here?” Oliver came around the shelves to see Cisco at his desk. Cisco wore a frown and look of fear at the same time. “Good morning, Cisco.”

“Good morning,” Cisco replied cautiously.

Oliver walked the rest of the fifteen feet to Cisco’s desk. He indicated another chair and asked, “May I?”

“Yes.” Cisco sucked in his lips.

With a clearing of his throat, Oliver said, “I want to begin with an apology. I was a prick to you during the pre-launch party, and I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to—”

“Yeah, I do,” Oliver interrupted softly. “It was beyond mean and completely inappropriate. Especially with everyone else there, but it would have still been bad if I had said all that to you alone.” Oliver paused. Though the apology was difficult, it wasn’t as bad as Oliver thought it’d be. Though it wasn’t quite over yet. “I’d like you to forgive me, but realize it’ll take time. So in the meantime—”

“I forgive you,” Cisco said. Cisco’s facial expression relaxed and he even had a small smile. “We all have our prick moments.”

“Unfortunately, I think I have a Ph.D. in prick moments.”

Cisco laughed quietly, “From what I understand, you’re way better than used to be.”

“Yeah, well.” Oliver looked down at himself. “Lately I’ve been backsliding. But I’m actively trying to be better. And with that in mind, I want to be a better CEO.” Oliver set his laptop down on Cisco’s desk and woke it up. “I went over Applied Sciences’ organizational chart.”

“After all the resumes we looked at, you’re going to gut it, aren’t you?” Cisco sounded depressed. “There are good people in the lab. The top of their fields. You can’t get anybody better than the team we assembled.”

“I agree. We assembled the team and, let’s be honest, you did most of the heavy lifting on that. And you’ve proven what you can do here in your office with no help whatsoever. I can’t imagine what you could do in a state of the art lab with people in the top of their fields working for you.”

“What?” Cisco looked confused. Oliver couldn’t blame him. One of Oliver’s failings as a boss was lack of clarity. Oliver would have to work on that.

“What I’m saying is I’d like you to run the Applied Sciences division. As liaison, you know everything anyway. And it is dumb to not have the director report directly to me.”

“Wait. You want me to—? But what about Barry?”

Oliver ran his hand across his forehead and sighed. “You and I both know Barry’s not qualified. He doesn’t even have his degree yet, much less any experience. Though Barry might make a fine director one day, he’s not ready for so much responsibility yet. I mean, really, Barry has been drowning in those meetings with employees who know ten times as much as he does.”

“Yeah. Well, I wasn’t going to say anything,” Cisco said as he tucked his hair behind his ears. “Never contradict the boss.”
“That’s another thing that needs to change,” Oliver said. “If you think I’m wrong you have to tell me. As you know my background isn’t in science. I promise I will listen to you.” Cisco smiled at that. “Before you get too excited, I don’t promise I will always follow your suggestions. I have profit and loss projections to deal with. Not to mention stockholders.”

“I can’t,” Cisco said, his voice a bit higher and louder. “I can’t believe I’m going to be the director of Applied Sciences.” He stood up and paced. “I have so many ideas for improvement.”

“Good, I hoped you’d say that. I’ll send you this new organization chart and we’ll complete it together. I also want to know about any other changes you want to make. When do you think you could give me an informal presentation?”

“Um…tomorrow afternoon?”

“That soon?” Oliver’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah. If I get started right away.”

“Perfect. We will have to present our proposed changes to the board, so keep that in mind.”

“I’m going to go in front of the board?” Cisco stopped pacing. He pointed to himself and his jaw dropped slightly.

Oliver smiled. “You are the head of QC’s newest department. Which reminds me, I’ll have HR draw up a contract for you to look over and sign. Just a standard employment contract.”

“This is so awesome! Thank you, Mr. Queen. Thank you.”

“Unless we’re in the boardroom, Cisco, you can call me Oliver.”

“Cool. Question: what is my exact budget?”

“I’ll send those numbers to you too. Once the board approves everything and everything is signed, you will have to move over to the Applied Sciences building. You know that right?”

“A new office in a state-of-the-art, brand-spanking-new lab? It won’t be a problem, Oliver.”

Oliver laughed. He really hadn’t given Cisco his due.

With that, Oliver marked off two things on his list of things to accomplish with Cisco this morning. He was extremely glad they had gone so well. Oliver wasn’t prepared for that. There was one last thing Oliver wanted to do. Though he wasn’t sure how receptive Cisco would be.

He had not been the most welcoming to Nyssa. Oliver had no reason for his bad behavior towards her. But it was unfair and Oliver wanted to correct it. “Cisco, if you don’t want to answer this, it’s fine. But how is Nyssa doing?”

Joy of Oliver’s curiosity about Nyssa swept over Cisco’s face and then a look much less joyful. In fact, worried would be the only word to describe his expression. “Thank you for asking. She actually isn’t doing too well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What’s wrong?”

“Saturday morning, Nyssa decided to take Slade up on his offer.”

Oliver’s brows narrowed. “What offer?”
“The offer of joining the Secret Service,” Cisco answered.

“Oh,” Oliver said in surprise. “I thought she didn’t want to take that job. That she had no interest in it, whatsoever? At least that’s the impression I got from her.”

“It’s what I thought too,” Cisco agreed. “She had said she didn’t want the job when I asked.”

“Is she at least happy about her decision?”

“No. Nyssa is miserable. She has had a migraine since she called Slade. And though I’m sure it will be good for her to do something productive, I worry it’s not the right time.”

“What does her father think of it?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure if she has told him. Between you and me, I think the reason Nyssa didn’t go to Gotham with Ra’s was to have some time away from him.”

Oliver didn’t doubt his speculations about Nyssa and Bruce had been wrong. And looking at Nyssa with a kinder eye, he couldn’t help but be concerned. It appeared as if an outside factor forced Nyssa to take this job. “Do you think Nyssa is better? I mean, with her PTSD? Do you think she’d be able to handle a law enforcement type job like this?”

Cisco sighed. “I have my doubts. I think she is better. She’s on medication and she is seeing an online therapist. But I just…it-”

“It has similar stresses she faced in the army.”

“Yes.”

“I felt certain she wouldn’t take the position. When did she make the decision?”

“Oh, well,” Cisco’s looked up to the ceiling as if seeing a calendar in his head. “She told me Saturday morning, after she talked to Slade. But before you got to the party on Friday, I had heard Nyssa tell Slade again she wasn’t interested. He has a hard time accepting no for an answer. After the party, she went straight to her room and I didn’t see her. At least not until late Saturday morning.”

“Hm. Well I’m sorry to hear she’s upset about it now.” It surprised Oliver a little to realize his empathy for Nyssa was sincere. Maybe he really was on a path toward being a better person. “Let me know if I can do anything.”

“Thank you, Mr.-I mean Oliver. Thank you, Oliver.”

“Sure. I’ll email those two things to you right away. And you can ask me anything you need to know. My door is open.” Oliver walked out of Cisco’s office.

He felt lighter than he had when he had entered his office. Oliver still had a thousand things left to do to get the company back in a position where it was as successful as when his mother was at the helm. It would take time. But Oliver had confidence, with the right people helping him, he could do it.

As he dragged his way into the manor, Oliver checked his phone one last time. Felicity hadn’t contacted him since the pre-launch party. He wanted to tell her what his plans were. Oliver wanted to say he apologized to Cisco. He wanted to apologize to Felicity for his behavior that night.

But Felicity hadn’t called. And she hadn’t texted. There were no emails from her. Oliver hadn’t had
any visits from the Pony Express either.

Oliver thought of calling her; but the fear of Felicity hanging up on him kept Oliver waiting for her to call.

Not that words would be enough. Oliver knew that. He didn’t want Felicity to think he just made pretty promises. He had claimed before to be more mature, but Oliver had still held onto the carefree, irresponsible life he led before. His actions now would prove Oliver’s commitment to being better. Oliver just hoped Felicity would give him a chance to prove it.

As he rounded to the stairs, Oliver heard a familiar voice coming from the sitting room. He heard his mother who should be asleep by now. And he heard Felicity.

He changed direction immediately and slowed himself down before reaching the doorway.

Felicity sat on the couch. She wore jeans, which was odd for her. Her blouse was her normal fare. Ruffled one-inch sleeves, white, with black cherries all over it. His mother sat in her usual chair. And Barry faced Felicity on the other couch. In a corner, Winn, Moira’s CNA for the night, sat unobtrusively.

“Barry,” Oliver said. “I thought you left for Central City.”

Felicity stood up at Oliver’s voice. They stared at each other. Felicity bit her lip. Oliver felt self-conscious and stared down at his shoes. He then felt ridiculous and looked back up only to find Felicity just diverted her eyes to her shoes. Oliver thought she looked melancholy. Felicity looked back up to him and Oliver didn’t want to appear rude, so he looked back down at his shoes. Barry said something about changing his mind. It was difficult for Oliver to hear Barry as it felt as if Barry stood at an opposite end of a tunnel from Oliver.

“Uh,” Felicity started and Oliver looked back up to her. She looked at her phone and then back up at him. “I really have to get going. I have to catch a flight.”

“Where are you going?” Oliver asked immediately. He tapped the toe of his shoes against the floor.

“National City,” Felicity answered. They both stared into each other’s eyes. She looked away and shook her head. “That’s why I’m here. I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.”

Fear froze his insides. She was leaving. Because of him. Because he had been an asshole. Oliver had to fix this. But maybe she needed this. Maybe Felicity needed a break from being his moral compass. Oliver cupped his right fist with his left hand. “What’s in National City?”

“A new client,” Felicity replied a bit louder than usual. She looked down at her fingernails and Oliver noticed she scratched off her nail polish. Felicity clenched her fists to stop and looked back up at him. “Cat Co. It’s a media company. The CEO is sure I have to be on site to complete the work. I tried arguing with her, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“How long will you be down there?”

“A few months if I can’t convince the CEO I don’t have to be on site.”

“Wow. A few months,” Oliver parroted as he stumbled back a step. His brain couldn’t process the information. His ears rang with a loud high tone. His eyes couldn’t focus. His breathing became heavy.

Oliver managed to sit on the arm of the couch next to him. He stared down at her mary-janes and
focused on taking deep breaths.

He looked back up at Felicity’s face. She looked concerned. Oliver forced a smile on his face to ease her mind. “This is sudden?” Oliver finally asked. He wondered how she felt about leaving.

“I get the impression when Cat Grant, the CEO, wants something, she wants it now. I’ll get to visit Thea and Roy when I’m there. That’ll be fun.” Oliver wasn’t sure if he imagined the fakeness in her upbeat tone. It didn’t matter. She was leaving.

Felicity was leaving and Oliver didn’t even have a chance to tell her about all his new plans. He stood up again, “Sorry, I was late. I was busy getting paperwork done on Cisco’s promotion.” Oliver closed his eyes in embarrassment. That was the exact opposite of playing it cool.

Opening his eyes slowly, Oliver looked at her. The smile on Felicity’s face was exactly what Oliver wanted.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Felicity said softly. “Not that you were working late at the office. Though that is good. Shows how dedicated you are. But you shouldn’t work too much, you know? Studies have proven too much time at the office can make you less productive. Diminishing returns and all.” Felicity shut her mouth tight and turned her face away. After a few seconds she said, “I’m happy about Cisco’s promotion.”

“That’s awesome,” Barry piped up.

Guilt flutter in his gut. Barry wouldn’t think it was awesome when Oliver told him Cisco got his job. But now, in front of everyone, wasn’t the time to share it.

“Anyway,” Felicity said, “I really have to go. I’m so late. I just wanted to say goodbye.” She walked up to Oliver and stood up on her tiptoes. Felicity brought her face closer to kiss his cheek when halfway there, she turned her head away and hugged him with the lightest of pressures. Oliver’s hands instinctively went to her waist, but his pressure stayed just as light. Though he sniffed, Oliver couldn’t smell her perfume. Disappointment at their sudden awkwardness ran through Oliver.

She went back down on her heels and fidgeted with her hands. Felicity said softly, “I have to go.” She gave Oliver a smile. The smile let him know she had forgiven him. Oliver gave a sigh of relief and smile of his own. She whispered, “Bye.”

“Bye,” Oliver whispered back.

Felicity turned and waved goodbye to Moira and Barry. She gave one more parting glance to Oliver and walked out.

Oliver continued to face the door. How did he already miss her? Damn, he had messed up. Felicity had never taken a contract that required her to be out of town for more than two weeks before. Now she had taken one, which would have her gone for months. What if she decided not to come back?

“She waited here forever to say goodbye,” Moira said. “She kept saying she had to go soon. And yet she kept sitting, watching the…circle tock. I don’t like she’s going. I told her I wanted her to stay. She said she was sorry, but she had to go. I don’t know why. I don’t like it.”

“It’ll be okay, Mom,” Oliver reassured her as he turned back around. “You’ll somehow manage with just me.”

“Oh, no dear,” Moira said, looking aghast. “I didn’t mean that. I’m so happy you’re here and I don’t know what I would do without you. You have to know that.”
“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. I know you’re appreciative of me.”

“Okay,” Moira said unsure. “I…I should, um…”

“It’s past bedtime, Mom.”

“Oh, look at that. It is. No wonder I’m…I’ll just say goodnight and be on my way.” She got up from her chair and walked to Oliver. She made him stoop and gave him a kiss on his forehead.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mom,” Oliver replied. He turned toward Winn who had already stood up to walk Moira to her new ground level bedroom. The two left quietly. Oliver was thankful she seemed okay tonight. Though she was agitated from Felicity leaving. Oliver knew he would have to tell Moira again as she wouldn’t remember in the morning.

“I should probably go, too,” Barry said, standing up.

“Barry, I do need to talk to you. Come by my office tomorrow morning?”

“Actually, I am going to Central City now. I just delayed my trip. Finals start tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Oliver said. Oliver felt uncertain if he should talk to Barry now or wait. Barry walked toward the door to leave, and Oliver let that be his decision. “Barry, let me know when you’re back in town.”

“Will do. Goodnight.”

“Night,” Oliver said.

He walked out and into the lounge so as to sink down into the comfortable couch. At least the most comfortable couch the manor held. Oliver needed to change that. The last thing he needed on top of everything was an out-of-alignment back. Oliver turned on Netflix and scrolled through the menu twice before he decided he wasn’t in the mood to watch anything.

Staring out the window, he tried to sort out his thoughts. Oliver didn’t know what to think about Felicity leaving. He was beyond confused. Oliver was sure he read her facial expression correctly and saw Felicity had forgiven him. But maybe he just saw what he wanted to see.

There had been a handful of times the two friends had been separated for any real length of time. Mostly in college during school breaks, summer being the longest. And when his father had been killed just before Oliver graduated from Harvard and Felicity had two weeks of finals still to go at MIT. She had come to Starling City immediately after. And soon she officially moved to Starling City.

Without Felicity, Oliver wasn’t sure he would have gotten through everything that came after his father’s death, at least not without coming out the other end with a chemical dependence. Felicity had been there for him, and Moira and Thea. She was there through the police investigation, the media literally pitching tents outside their gate, and eventually the trial and sentencing of Robert’s murderer.

The last time there was a lengthy separation between Oliver and Felicity was when Felicity’s mother died. But Oliver flew to Las Vegas frequently to help Felicity with everything.

Separation wasn’t something their friendship had to deal with. Oliver was worried about the distance between them. Not just physically. But emotionally as well. If only Oliver had been able to explain everything to Felicity. Yet, hadn’t he said he needed his actions to speak for him?
He felt frustrated. He would usually talk to his best friend about it. But Felicity wasn’t an option at the moment, as she was who he needed to discuss. Oliver could talk to Digg, but it was too late. Digg woke up early for the bakery. Besides, he didn’t want to add more people to the discussion of his humiliating behavior at the pre-launch party.

Also, rattling around in his brain was what he was going to say to Barry.

Oliver was afraid he hadn’t done any good where Barry was concerned. Oliver would call Harrison Wells tomorrow morning and see if Dr. Wells was open to taking Barry back. Star Labs seemed the best fit for Barry. Oliver should never have stolen Barry away from that place.

Felicity knew that. Oliver should have listened to Felicity more. It was his downfall.

Oliver pledged when (not if, Oliver refused to think if) Felicity came back, he would listen to everything she said. And take every one of her suggestions.

His life would be so much more simpler now if Oliver had done that in the first place.

He somehow managed to fall asleep on the couch, and got a kink in his neck for it. It only added to his frustration. But Oliver knew the person he was frustrated with was himself.

Oliver reached for his coffee without looking up from the financial projection on one of the projects Applied Sciences was slated to work on. Ever since he started coming into the office early and staying late, his coffee intake increased. Gladys cut him off after three cups. Then Oliver had to sneak down to the coffee shop in the lobby.

He was surprised to realize he liked coming in early. When the sun rose, his view outside his window slowly illuminated. The other buildings’ windows reflected the sunlight and the morning fog dissipated more and more after each minute passed.

The job was more enjoyable to Oliver now. It had taken a bit of time, but he thought he might be good at it. After Oliver took the CEO job more seriously, learning the specifics of the company, and actually spending time at QC, Oliver realized it was not knowing the job and possibly failing he didn’t like. He was terrified he would do his best and still ruin his parents’ legacies. Yet, Oliver not trying almost did exactly that. Though he was not the smartest Queen, he had many people he could ask for help.

Oliver continued to work on the financial sheets and updated the presentation for the board. He had no idea how much time had passed until Cisco entered his office looking disheveled and out of breath. Oliver looked at the time and realized Cisco was more than an hour late.

“I’m so sorry, Oliver. I got caught up with something at home. It won’t happen again.”

“Relax, Cisco. We’ve been working long hours and I don’t see that changing anytime soon. You’re more than making up for it.”

Cisco blew out a breath. “Thank you. Today has been crazy.” Cisco sat down opposite Oliver and scrubbed his face. It was then Oliver noticed the dark blue circles under Cisco’s eyes.

“What’s going on?” Oliver asked.

“Just some stuff at home.” Cisco waved Oliver off. “It’s fine.”
“Cisco,” Oliver continued to press, “is everything okay?”

“Um,” Cisco looked at Oliver and then sagged down. “Early this morning, Nyssa’s father, Ra’s, died.”

“Oh my god,” Oliver exclaimed. “What happened? How is Nyssa?”

Cisco seemed as if he didn’t know which question to answer first. “Um, Ra’s had a heart attack. He woke up in the middle of the night and screamed out. Talia and Bruce rushed in, but once the ambulance got to the emergency department, it was too late.”

“Fuck. I know how rough that is. Let’s go over to the couch and talk,” Oliver said as he stood up. Oliver didn’t want to be “boss” Oliver. He wanted to be “friend” Oliver. It was easier if there wasn’t a desk between them. Cisco sat down on one end of the couch, Oliver sat on the other end. “How is Nyssa dealing with it?”

“Surprisingly good. She was shocked at first as it was completely unexpected. As far as I know, Ra’s had never had any heart issues.”

“The first one can get you,” Oliver commented, remembering his mother’s stroke and subsequent dementia.

“Yeah. But once Nyssa got used to the idea she… shrugged it off? No, that’s not the right descriptor. She just accepted it, like she had just gotten the weather forecast,” Cisco continued. He gnawed on his lip for a moment and then said, “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this. But you won’t tell anyone, right?” Oliver nodded his assent.

Cisco sighed and paused as he gathered his thoughts. With his fingers tapping a fast rhythm on his thigh, Cisco relayed, “Talia was always his favorite. Ra’s expected a lot from Nyssa. And though it didn’t impress Ra’s, she had always been able to meet those expectations.

“Until she came back from Afghanistan.” Cisco’s voice took on a hard edge and his jaw clenched. “Ra’s had no patience for her PTSD. He didn’t understand how difficult school was for her. When Nyssa was forced to drop out, he was angry. Apparently, there were quite a few yelling matches between them. He told her she would complete school if he had to drag there himself.”

“That’s awful,” Oliver replied. Robert had once threatened the same to Oliver, but Oliver caused it due to his laziness and irresponsibility. Oliver didn’t have any mental illness he dealt with. Then Oliver met Felicity, and Oliver’s school habits changed. He actually went to class. And did his homework.

“Then Ra’s went back to Gotham with Talia and Bruce. They had been visiting at the time. Talia mocked Nyssa for failing school. Nyssa told me Bruce was the only one nice to her.”

Guilt twinged in Oliver’s stomach at the mention of Wayne.

“Nyssa convinced Ra’s to let her come here instead of Gotham. She thinks he was angry enough to not want to see her for a while and that’s why he allowed it.”

“How generous of him,” Oliver said sarcastically. Oliver really didn’t have any idea what Nyssa had gone through. Because sympathizing with her might be inconvenient to Oliver and he wouldn’t be able to talk about her behind her back.

“The one condition on her coming was when they both arrived back in Nanda, Ra’s would pay for her to go to school. And either he or someone he hired would go with her to each class.”
“That would be horrible.”

“Yeah. She wasn’t looking forward to it. But, at least until recently, she preferred that to Slade’s offer. I mean, Slade’s offer is great. But Nyssa had really wanted to be a paramedic. She was willing to go through all of Ra’s hoops.”

“She’s really okay?”

“She seems like she is. I don’t know how long it will last. You know?”

“I do,” Oliver agreed. “I can’t help but wonder what Nyssa’s situation would be if she didn’t take Slade up on his great,” Oliver fought hard not to roll his eyes but he couldn’t help the sarcasm in his voice, “offer. Would her inheritance cover school?”

“I don’t know. Knowing what I know about Ra’s, which, admittedly, is just what Nyssa and Sara have told me, I’m not even sure Nyssa will get an inheritance. I wouldn’t be surprised if Talia got it all.”

“Not like Talia needs it, considering she married Wayne,” Oliver said. Oliver felt for Nyssa. It wasn’t too long ago he was the family’s black sheep. His family treated Oliver a solid ten thousand times better than Nyssa, from what Cisco had just told him. But Oliver had often felt he didn’t belong in his family. If Felicity, and later Digg, hadn’t been there for Oliver during those hard times, Oliver knew he would have landed face-first on the concrete of life. And the press would have loved to capture every moment of it. “Cisco, why don’t you take a couple of days and go to the funeral with Nyssa?”

“That’s really nice of you, but I’m not sure Nyssa is going to the funeral.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She told me. Talia and Bruce are planning it. I think Talia may have told Nyssa not bother coming. Nyssa didn’t seem angry about it though.”

“Given her complicated relationship with her father, I understand. Probably relieved the decision to go or not go was taken out of her hands.”

“Oh,” Cisco said. His eyes got wider. “I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Why don’t you still take a couple of days? Starting now,” Oliver suggested. “I’m guessing Nyssa needs a friend right about now.”

“But what about the presentation?”

“I can work on it while you’re gone and we’ll still have plenty time to finish it after you get back.”

“Are you sure?” Cisco asked. “Cause you just gave me this promotion and seems like a really bad idea to just up and leave before I have even started.”

“It’s fine,” Oliver reassured with a smile. “I appreciate your dedication, but your friend needs you right now. Let me know if there is anything I can do for Nyssa.”

“Sure. She’ll appreciate that,” Cisco stood up and turned toward the door. He stopped two feet away and turned back around. “Oliver, thank you.”

“Of course.”
With that Cisco left. Oliver got his phone out and sent a text to Nyssa expressing how sorry he was for her lost. He stood up and walked to his door.

“Gladys?” Oliver got his assistant’s attention quietly as to not spook her. She looked up at him and Oliver continued, “Condolence gift? Flowers or something else?”

“Food, Mr. Queen,” She answered. “No one wants to bother cooking in that state.”

“All right. Can you find me a couple of options to pick from? And then send them to Nyssa Ratko? She’s staying with Cisco.”

“Yes, sir. I can do that.”

“Thank you, Gladys.”

Oliver walked back to his desk and tried to get his head back into the financial reports. It was difficult with images of his own father’s funeral surfacing. Oliver had felt lost, scared, regretful of the time not spent with Robert, angry at Robert and Robert’s killer, and unprepared for a future without his father.

He hadn’t known the extent to which he depended on his father until Robert was no longer there.

As Oliver had walked over to the grave, holding an umbrella in one hand and a white rose in the other, a part of him wanted to run away. Leave the grief and the responsibility that had just been placed on his shoulders. Leave the celebrity of his last name. Let the rain wash away who he was and find an entirely different life.

If it had not been for his mother and his sister anchoring him to his life, Oliver may have fled at that moment. But he stayed for them. Oliver couldn’t make them grieve for him whilst also grieving for Robert. Even Oliver wasn’t that selfish.

And though he stayed for Moira and Thea, it was Felicity that kept Oliver there. Felicity had listened to every rant about the unfairness of his situation. And it was Felicity who had held Oliver as he cried the couple times he had allowed himself. She helped take care of his mother and sister those first few days after and became a shoulder Moira could lean on. Felicity had even been the one to suggest Moira take over as CEO while Oliver had a chance to learn the ins-and-outs of QC. Having his own small business to practice on had been Felicity’s idea as well.

Felicity’s friendship had been one of the few bright spots in his life then. The contrast to his life now with Felicity hundreds of miles away, made Oliver miss her even more.

Nyssa deserved to have a kind of friendship to help her through whatever her father’s death could stir up in her. Giving Cisco a couple days off was easy. And it helped ease Oliver’s conscience regarding Nyssa. Though that wasn’t his primary motive, which felt odd. New.

He just hoped whatever little things Oliver did, they could help Nyssa.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Digg has shocking news. Oliver realizes he and Barry had a huge misunderstanding. Oliver is floored by his own feelings.

Oliver was so focused on Applied Sciences succeeding, he did some work from home. On a weekend. He made use of the manor’s office. Oliver had told the head housekeeper he would start using it, so when he entered there wasn’t any dust. He knew dust had built up since Moira had stopped using it two and a half years ago. The housekeepers would occasionally clean it, but the office wasn’t in their normal rotation.

He had difficulty concentrating on the Excel sheet up on his laptop. Gladys had found two nice baskets of assorted foods for Nyssa. One had cheeses, crackers, and salami. The other contained chips, caramel corn, and different chocolates. Oliver chose both and had them delivered the same day.

A few hours later, the delivery service called and stated Nyssa had refused delivery and requested the items be sent back to Oliver. There was no note or explanation. Oliver had asked Cisco about it, when Cisco returned to the office. Cisco gave a sheepish answer, admitting Oliver’s gift was the only one Nyssa returned. Cisco then apologized as Nyssa hadn’t said anything about her reason for doing so.

Accepting Nyssa would never like Oliver wasn’t easy. Though Oliver hadn’t been welcoming or friendly to Nyssa, he had believed he could make up for it. The returned baskets said otherwise.

The numbers on the Excel sheet blurred together when his phone chirped from an incoming text.

Are you going to be around today? It was from Digg. Oliver hadn’t heard a lot from Digg recently. Applied Sciences had kept Oliver busy. Oliver admitted he was worried about Digg’s reaction to Oliver’s behavior at the pre-launch party.

Oliver responded. Yeah. What’s up?

If it’s all right, I’m going to come by.

Sure. Despite his concern about Digg’s reaction, Oliver felt frankly happy to have a break to look forward to; or at least a distraction from Oliver listing every time he was unfair to Nyssa.

Less than an hour later, the doorbell rang. Oliver answered the door to find a pacing and jittery Digg behind it. “Hey, man. Come in. What’s wrong?”

“Where’s your mother?”

“She’s out in the garden with Mike,” Oliver answered. “Is everybody alright? Lyla?”

“Lyla’s fine,” Digg said, with continued antsiness. Digg requested, “Let’s go in here.” Digg walked into the sitting room without waiting to see if Oliver followed. Fear chilled his system and panic raced through his heart. Worse case scenarios flew through Oliver’s head, but he was too terrified to
hold onto one image for too long. Oliver stumbled a few steps after Digg and then rushed to catch up.

“Digg, tell me. Is Felicity okay? Thea and Roy?”

“Everyone is fine,” Digg reassured in a soothing tone. Digg sat down on a couch and Oliver sat in the opposite couch; they both leaned toward one another. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You promise everyone is okay?” Oliver’s leg bounced up and down.

“I talked to Felicity a couple of days ago. She was fine and she had said Thea and Roy were helping her find an apartment.”

“An apartment?” Oliver asked. “I know she could be down there for a few months. But…is she staying down there?” Oliver’s mouth went dry. His brain still filled with static. If Felicity looked for a place to live in National City, everything wasn’t fine.

“It’s just temporary housing. But Felicity doesn’t want to live in a hotel the whole time she’s there. She said she wanted something homier.”

“Okay,” Oliver said slowly, as if Oliver had difficulty believing Digg’s reassurances. Oliver took a deep breath in an attempt to calm his racing heart. “Then why are you so worried?”

Digg sighed loudly and scratched his scalp several times. “I just found out something. This morning in fact. Oliver, I swear I had no idea.”

“Digg, will you please just tell me.”

Digg nodded. “Sara and Nyssa are married.”

“What? They got married? Ho…when…How?” The information refused to compute in Oliver’s mind.

“Apparently, they’ve been married this whole time. Since before either of them came into town.”

Oliver’s jaw dropped. After several moments of Oliver blinking at Digg to ensure Oliver wasn’t dreaming, Oliver argued, “But Sara doesn’t even like Nyssa. And I was under the impression it was mutual.”

“They had to keep it a secret. They felt, Sara more than Nyssa if I understand correctly, they had to divert people’s attention from them as a couple.”

“That doesn’t even make sense, Digg. Why did they have to keep it a secret at all?” Oliver was confused; it felt like he found out two and two didn’t make four or green no longer existed. With everything Sara had said about Nyssa to Oliver, the puzzle pieces didn’t fit together.

“Nyssa’s father wouldn’t have approved.” Digg’s voice was soft and compassionate. “And Ra’s paid all of Nyssa’s bills. She completely depended on him financially.”

Oliver blinked rapidly a few times. “He was homophobic? So much so, he’d disown his daughter because of it?”

“Yes,” Digg nodded.

“Then why,” Oliver massaged his forehead as he gathered his thoughts, “didn’t Nyssa just move in with Sara? Wouldn’t that have made more sense than this charade they played?”
“Nyssa really wanted to go to school. Sara couldn’t afford to put Nyssa through college. From what I gathered, they were going to wait to announce everything until after Nyssa graduated.”

“Four years?” Oliver exclaimed in disbelief. He stood up. His body couldn’t stand being at rest. It needed movement. Oliver soon circled the room behind the couches.

“It would have been two years if Nyssa could have gone back to school full-time.”

Oliver stayed silent for a bit. He let the information work itself into his brain. Oliver replayed his interactions with both and looked at them with this new filter. He was forced to admit, with this new information, Oliver looked bad.

All the times Oliver had talked with Sara behind Nyssa’s back. Nyssa had to know about it. No wonder Nyssa didn’t like him. Sara had openly flirted with Oliver in front of Nyssa, though both he and Sara knew it didn’t mean anything. But did Nyssa?

Oliver never had a shot of friendship with Nyssa.

“I am sorry, Oliver,” Digg spoke up. “Both Lyla and I saw how close you got to Sara. We even liked the idea of you two together. That’s the part I’m most mad about with Sara, that she hurt you.”

“Digg, I’m not hurt.”

Digg stared at Oliver to assess the truth of his statement. Oliver stood still behind the couch he vacated and let Digg study him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I had fun flirting with Sara but I never thought seriously about her,” Oliver assured his friend and eased any guilt. He took his seat again and thought about the one time he thought he might have feelings for Sara. Oliver’s voice became harsh. “But if I had known, if Sara had given me an inkling of an idea of her and Nyssa, I never would have flirted with her. Certainly not as brashly as we did.

“And how did Sara know I didn’t have any feelings for her? How could Sara have known I never would?” Oliver’s brain flashed to Barry and Oliver inwardly groaned. Barry would have to face the loss of another woman he was attracted to. Damn it, Sara! “I believed she was single. Everyone did. And how did Nyssa deal with Sara’s flirting? Nyssa must have hated it. Sara’s behavior toward me must have hurt Nyssa quite a bit. It was all borderline cruel of Sara.”

“The two of them,” Digg explained, “really did have to hide their relationship, and the extent of it, from everybody. They feared telling anyone would cause it to somehow find its way back to Ra’s.”

“So, he’s dead, so now they can be open? I don’t understand. Cisco was almost certain Nyssa wouldn’t receive any inheritance, so Nyssa will still be unable to pay for school. And,” Oliver suddenly remembered, “Nyssa took Slade’s offer to train for the Secret Service. How’s that going to work?”

“That I do know. Ra’s will leave everything to his married daughters. Emphasis on married. Talia knew about the clause but didn’t tell Nyssa. It was Ra’s way of writing Nyssa out of his will. But the stipulation never specified their marriages had to be with a man. So…”

“Because Nyssa is married to Sara, she gets half of Ra’s inheritance,” Oliver surmised.

“Yes.”

“I bet Talia was thrilled with that development.”
“She has Wayne’s money, who cares?”

At the mention of Bruce, Oliver covered his eyes with both hands as if to shield himself from the embarrassed mist of speculating Nyssa and Bruce had had an affair. Speculated with Sara! Oliver wasn’t sure he’d ever get over that humiliation. He had acted like the asshole Oliver hoped to never be again. Oliver couldn’t help but think Sara had enjoyed that part of the secret.

“I’m glad things worked out okay for them. But if I were Nyssa, I’d have a difficult time forgiving Sara. How did she treat someone she loves, her wife, like this?”

“You’re the expert on love, now?” Digg asked jokingly.

“I’ve seen enough movies to get the gist,” Oliver replied.

Digg’s voice became serious again. “Oliver, I…” Oliver looked at Digg. “I hope, someday, you are able to forgive Sara. She still means a lot to me and Lyla. We still want our best friends to get along.”

“I will probably forgive her. And it’ll probably even be soon. But she really should apologize herself. In person.”

“I agree,” Digg said. “I told her as much. Though she’s pretty stubborn so I’m not sure my advice will stick.”

“It’s not your responsibility to do it for Sara. She’s responsible for her own decisions. And if they love each other, and this is what they want, I’m happy for them.” Digg smiled at that statement. “But there were better ways to do it.”

“I am sorry, as your friend. I’m sorry you had to go through it.”

“I don’t think it’s a mortal wound to my pride, so my ego will probably survive.” Oliver laughed at his own weak joke and Digg joined in.

“I have to get back to the bakery,” Digg said as he stood up. “You’re really okay?”

“Yes, I’m really okay,” Oliver replied. He stood up as well and they both walked toward the door. “Thanks for telling me yourself, John. It was better coming from you.”

“Of course,” Digg held his hand out to Oliver. Oliver took it and Digg pulled Oliver into a hug. Oliver laughed and hugged his friend back. Oliver was lucky to have such amazing friends.

Digg opened the door. Lyla and Barry walked and were almost at the entryway. “Hey,” Digg called out. “It’s my favorite person.”

“That’s so sweet,” Barry said.

“Get out of here, Allen,” Digg commanded. “I was talking to my wife.” Digg bent down to give Lyla a small kiss. Oliver had a feeling the couple communicated without words about Oliver. It was a bit unnerving. He was surprised by the jealousy he felt at the couple’s connection. Oliver sighed. Even Sara and Nyssa had a connection.

Barry’s presence also rattled Oliver. Oliver would have to tell him the truth about Sara and break Barry’s heart. Again. Oliver thought of the guilt trip he planned to take Sara on when Oliver saw her next. How dare she lead Barry on. Especially after seeing how cruel Isabel and Slade were to Barry.

And Oliver still had to tell Barry about his position at Applied Sciences. Or lack thereof.
Oliver’s stomach dropped.

Fuck!

Digg and Lyla said goodbye. Barry waved and smiled as they drove off. Guilt sharply impaled Oliver.

“Barry,” Oliver said, wearing the same worried face Digg wore when Oliver let him into the manor. “Come in. I have things I need to tell you.”

Barry happily followed Oliver into the manor as if Barry didn’t have a care in the world. Oliver couldn’t help but pity Barry. Once again, Barry would have to deal with the rejection from a woman Barry had strong feelings for. Oliver had sworn to himself to never let himself get in this situation again. Or Barry.

As they entered the sitting room, Barry asked in a light, knowing tone, “You already knew, didn’t you?”

“Knew what?” Oliver turned around and indicated the couch for Barry to sit. Oliver sat opposite him on the same couch Digg had occupied. He tapped his fingers against the cushion next to him as he wondered what Barry could be talking about.

“About Sara and Nyssa,” Barry answered with a smile, clearly excited to discuss the newest gossip.

Oliver stared at Barry as Oliver tried to think what else could involve both Sara and Nyssa. “What about Sara and Nyssa?”

“Don’t worry. Lyla told me. Can you believe they’ve been married this whole time?” Barry asked, happy to be one of the first to know the newest piece of gossip. “Well, I guess you can believe it because you had to know before they told the Diggles. Right?”

With what, Oliver assumed, was a dumbfounded look, he asked, “Lyla just told you? Outside? Just a few minutes ago?” Oliver had no idea how Barry accepted the news so quickly. And he seemed delighted even. Oliver had been certain many hours of comfort and sympathy were in their future, as Barry would need it.

“Yeah. I promised I wouldn’t tell anybody. But Lyla said I could talk to you about it,” A smile remained on Barry’s face. “Actually, she said you might need to. Do you? I have no idea what she meant by it.”

“I’m fine with the news and, no, I didn’t have any idea about it before Digg told me.” Oliver answered and scratched the back of his head. Then he admitted, “I have to say, Barry, I’m fairly shocked you are taking it so well.”

“Why?” Barry’s brows pinched together.

As he sat straighter, Oliver held his hands slightly out with his palms facing up, in question. What was going on? Was Oliver losing his mind? “Because, Barry,” Oliver finally said in a tone, which clearly stated his answer was obvious. “Of what you told me about Sara. Not that long ago.”

“I didn’t say anything about Sara.”

“Yes. You did, Barry,” Oliver felt exasperated. “You said you had developed feelings for Sara. You
“Wait, what?” Barry asked, confused. Oliver watched Barry look up to the ceiling as he thought back to the conversation Oliver referenced. Realization hit Barry like a lightning bolt. “Oh! No. You thought I was talking about Sara?”

“You were talking about Sara,” Oliver insisted. Oliver’s tone took on a quality as if he thought Barry was daft. “You talked about her saving you? When you were almost mugged?”

“Ohhhh,” Barry said as he leaned back against the couch. “That wasn’t what I meant when I said she saved me. I was talking about the sock hop.”

Oliver sat very still and felt his heartbeat speed up. With trepidation, afraid of the answer, Oliver asked, “Who were you talking about?”

“Felicity,” Barry replied simply.

Felicity?

Oliver’s stomach dropped.

Oliver had to grab hold of the arm of the couch as it felt like the room spun.

Felicity.

A wide, goofy smile accompanied her name, as if Barry had animated popping hearts around his head. Oliver had the sudden image of him ripping the smile right off Barry’s face.

He shook his head to rid his mind of the image.

“How did—” Oliver stopped and cleared his throat.

Taking a breath, he started again, with skepticism, “How did Felicity save you at the sock hop?”

“The dance. She asked me to dance? After Isabel set out to snub me in front of everyone? Remember?”

“Yes,” Oliver whispered. Oliver replayed Felicity asking Barry to dance and then Felicity doing most of the leading. He became smug when he remembered how Felicity had let Oliver lead when the two of them danced later that night.

Thinking back to his conversation with Barry, Oliver had been sure Barry talked about Sara. Barry had mentioned his crush was comfortable in formal settings.

Oliver remembered Felicity’s first black-tie fundraiser. She had babbled to the mayor and accidentally insulted his entire policy. Felicity had also spilled shrimp cocktail sauce all over the PTA’s state president’s beige lace gown. And then her phone Felicity had sworn she silenced, rang during a particularly emotional portion of the keynote speech.

After that Felicity swore she would never go to another high society function again. When she eventually did, it took a while before Felicity felt comfortable at them. She said she needed to realize she was equal to the typical attendees. Though Oliver believed Felicity was far superior to them.

Barry worried Felicity was better than him. He was right to worry.

Felicity was better and deserved better.
The skittish little boy in front of Oliver could never be good enough for Felicity. He could never be what Felicity needed.

“Are you sure,” Oliver had to be certain he wasn’t on an acid trip, “you don’t mean Sara?”

“Oliver,” Barry said with a smug grin. “Felicity and I have way more in common than I do with Sara.” The tone in which Barry said Sara’s name was the same tone Oliver used when someone suggested a cheaper vodka to Oliver. “Felicity understands everything I talk about, I don’t have to dumb anything down. You can’t imagine how nice it is. And I understand about eighty percent of what she says. Since my field isn’t cyber security, I think it’s pretty good.”

“I guess.”

“And Sara just teases me. Felicity really cares. She asks me about my day, my opinion, and my preferences. All the time. I can tell she doesn’t just think of me as a kid, like Sara does. I mean, Sara literally calls me ‘kid.’ You know how annoying it is. Slade does it to you all the time.”

“Let’s not bring Slade into this, please,” Oliver pleaded as he held his hand up to Barry, to halt Barry’s line of thought. Oliver’s stomach felt sick enough without bringing that asshole into the conversation.

“I’m surprised about us misunderstanding each other so completely,” Barry said with a laugh. “You usually read people so well.”

“I think my ability to read people is like the Loch Ness Monster. There have been some blurry pictures taken of it, but no one has found solid evidence of its existence.”

Barry laughed. Oliver carefully stood up and made his way to the drink cart. It was still early, though Oliver felt it had taken torturous days just to get to noon. Oliver poured himself a glass of water, instead of the vodka he felt he sorely needed. He gulped down the water and then breathed heavily.

“Oliver,” Barry said, the excitement in his voice dimmed. “Are you okay with this? I know she’s your best friend, but you know I’d never hurt her.”

“I…” Horror struck Oliver again. He leaned down on the drink cart.

Before he had an anxiety attack, Oliver needed clarification.

Get the whole story.

Barry’s words indicated the frightening situation could get infinitely worse.

“I always thought you respected Felicity enough to respect her choices.” Barry’s word sliced into Oliver a couple more dozen times.

“Barry,” Oliver said. He stood up straight and faced the kid. With a scratchy voice, Oliver asked, “Do you think Felicity feels the same way about you?”

Without breaking eye contact, Barry said, “Yes.”

Oliver made it back to the couch and sat down. He turned around away from Barry and stared at the fireplace. He felt as if he sat in a car that had driven over a cliff. Any second Oliver would hit the ground. He almost wished for the impact to happen sooner, as the fall was killing him.

After he calmed himself enough so he didn’t stumble over his words again, Oliver asked, “How do
you know Felicity feels the same as you do?” He was proud he got the words out. Though Oliver wasn’t sure he wanted the answer.

“Oh, I did what you said to do,” Barry replied easily. “I watched how she interacted with me compared to others. And I noticed for one, she is much more friendly to me than she used to be. And two, Felicity isn’t as interested in others as she is me. I mean, she always seeks me out when everyone gets together and makes sure I’m okay.”

The impact ended with an explosion. Oliver didn’t know why he reacted this way. He was fine when he thought Barry liked Sara. And when Oliver believed Sara returned those feelings.

But this was Felicity. And the thought of Felicity and Barry together wrecked Oliver. A moment of clarity cleared his cloudy, confused brain.

It darted through him with the speed of an arrow.

Oliver loved Felicity.

Oliver.

Loved.

Felicity.

The shock from this realization knocked any other coherent thought out of his mind. Oliver loved Felicity. He had loved Felicity for a while, only Oliver’s dumb brain had never pieced it together before.

He loved her. It wasn’t lust. It wasn’t a little crush or a wish to combine how well Oliver and Felicity knew each other with intimacy. Oliver loved Felicity like he was within thirty seconds of finding his mother and asking Moira if Oliver could give Felicity Moira’s engagement ring.

Oliver knew he should be terrified he just realized he loved Felicity and had no qualms about wanting to spend the rest of his life with her.

Except he wasn’t.

It felt right. Natural. With Felicity was where he was meant to be.

Suddenly it was so simple.

Barry’s presence came back into Oliver’s focus. Oliver turned around and saw a frown on Barry’s face and Oliver knew his reaction was not what Barry thought it’d be. In fact, Oliver behaved borderline hostile. Though, if Felicity really did have feelings for Barry, Oliver surmised Barry would be just fine. That thought coursed anger through his veins and Oliver clenched his fists together. He took a deep breath. And then another. After the third he appeared more like his normal self.

“Tell me what made you realize you like Felicity?”

A smile slowly came back as Barry said, “I guess ever since the sock-hop, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her. I mean she’s gorgeous. But also, I can talk to her about all kinds of nerdy stuff. And her smile, when it’s wide and directed only at me? Man, that’s amazing! I’ve noticed she has been spending more and more time with me. And I haven’t initiated it. Felicity has. She even asked about Isabel and Iris. She said she just wanted to know how I was doing, but I could tell she was
trying to see if I was seeing anybody. I think I might be in love with her.”

Regret instantly hit Oliver’s body. Oliver did not want to hear how amazing Felicity was from Barry. Oliver did not want to hear how Barry thought what he felt for Felicity was love.

Oliver knew, without a half of a half of a percentage point of doubt, he loved Felicity. And he also knew he would do anything for her.

At the moment, the best way Oliver could love Felicity was to support her relationship, even if she wasn’t with him. More than anything Oliver wanted Felicity to be happy. Even above his own happiness.

That had never happened before.

Ever.

The feeling was daunting.

It was also the single most agonizing thing Oliver would ever experience. Because just as he discovered his love for Felicity, he had to let her go.

Like he had had to let her go to National City. Without an opportunity to tell Felicity all the changes he made. To QC. To Applied Sciences. To himself.

Thinking of Applied Sciences reminded Oliver of the other other news had to deliver to Barry. At that particular moment, Oliver had no idea how he felt about the other news.

Oliver cleared his throat. “Off topic. Barry, I have some bad news.”

The younger man’s face instantly looked concerned and he leaned forward. “What? What is it?”

“It about QC and Applied Sciences.”

“Oh, it’s just about work?” Barry asked. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. You know, you worry too much about your company.”

“Funny,” Oliver said without a trace of humor. “I was thinking I just started to worry about it the exact right amount. Barry, I looked over Applied Sciences’ information. Your reports. Cisco’s reports. The reports from other Applied Sciences employees.”

“I bet that provided good sleeping material,” Barry tried to joke. Oliver felt comforted by Barry’s nonchalant attitude about Applied Sciences. It confirmed to Oliver he had made the right decision. Though the comfort didn’t come guilt-free. Did Oliver cause this nonchalance? Did Oliver stress an unimportance to Applied Science?

“Actually,” Oliver cleared his throat. “It made something abundantly clear. I was wrong.”

“When?”

“When I hired you to be the director of Applied Sciences.”

Barry sat up straight and braced himself for the ax he saw, if not a mile away, at least five hundred feet away. He had to suck the guilt up. It was his company, his mistake, and his responsibility.

“You’re not experienced enough to run a lab. You’ve never managed people. And you’ve never set up your own thousand dollar lab, let alone a multi-million lab before. I should have known that
before I gave you the position.”

“But I can learn. I mean who is going to do it? Frank? Nobody likes Frank. He never listens to me,” Barry accused. Oliver remembered the name as the person in Applied Sciences with a Ph.D. in chemistry. Barry stood up and angrily paced back and forth in the room. “And Elise? Elise makes way too many personal calls. Joanne. Joanne just does whatever she wants to do.”

Oliver worked hard to be nice. Not just because he had caused this, but because it would be what Felicity wanted. “Barry, all those things could be fixed by someone who has experience managing people. I’m not saying you’ll never be good enough for a head of a lab department. I’m saying you need experience first, before you get there. I’ve talked to Harrison Wells.”

“Oh, you talked to Dr. Wells? How many other people know about me being fired before I did?”

“I wanted to help find you another position. Wells said he’d give you a trial run at Star Labs. As an entry level lab assistant. What, a person, who is fresh from college, is qualified for. At least talk to Wells.”

“Who is replacing me at Applied Sciences?” Barry stopped and asked insolently, his arms crossed in front of him.

“Who I should have hired for the position in the first place. Cisco.” Barry’s mouth gaped open and then he paced the room again. “He knows both QC and Applied Sciences. He is liked by almost everyone. And the Applied Sciences employees respect his knowledge.”

Barry’s pacing turned into walking around the room over and over and Barry muttered under his breath. “Selfish friend” was all Oliver made out.

“I’m sorry, Barry. This is my fault. I shouldn’t have tried to swoop in and create, what I thought, was the perfect life for you.”

“Whatever,” Barry spat out. He stopped walking behind the couch he sat on and faced Oliver. “I know you’re just doing this, so I will have to move back to Central City.”

“What?” Oliver asked incredulously.

“I tell you I like Felicity and she likes me too, and this is your response?” Barry’s face flushed. The tone of his voice remained high, but Barry’s volume became loud. “You’re just afraid I’ll take Felicity away from you. And then she won’t be there whenever you need her, wherever you are.”

“Barry,” Oliver stood up.

“No! Don’t ‘Barry’ me. Don’t expect me to just fall in line and continue to follow you like a lost puppy dog.” Oliver knew it was not the time to admit all the times Barry reminded Oliver of a puppy. “You are afraid once Felicity is in a real, solid relationship, she’ll see she deserves so much better than her selfish, self-centered, narcissistic best friend.”

“Woah,” Oliver stopped Barry. “First of all, those descriptors mean basically the same thing. Second, I didn’t know the person you liked was Felicity until today. Since I’ve already talked to Cisco and Wells, I couldn’t be doing it in retaliation. Third, I think it’d be better for both of us, if you leave before you continue to say things you’ll regret later. And we both should probably give the other some space right now.”

“Whatever, man,” Barry said as he turned around toward the door. “Thanks for nothing.”
Oliver listened to Barry slam the front door before Oliver sat back down.

He huffed out a breath of air he had held. Oliver was grateful for the much needed time alone. He had a lot to think about. And he had to re-access and re-center his whole world.

He loved Felicity.

How in the world did he miss that?

Looking back and being honest with himself, Oliver realized there was never a time since he met Felicity, that he didn’t love her. From the moment she chastised him in that Vegas hotel hallway. She reamed him about treating women better and how he deserved to literally be pushed out of his room naked. Then she turned around and rescued him when hotel security arrived. Oliver loved Felicity since then. And that love had only grown more the longer he’d known her.

She fascinated him.

Felicity had been there for him so many times. Yes, she helped during the big tragic moments in his life. And Oliver knew there was not a way for him to have survived those moments without her.

But it was also the small moments he cherished.

The one time Felicity bought Oliver coffee when he pulled an all-nighter, studying for an economics final.

Her babbles that almost always had her admitting something she hadn’t meant to.

When Felicity set aside a day for Oliver to mope about his sister moving out of state, but then the next day she expected him to get back to living life so Oliver could find his new normal life without Thea constantly there.

How she instantly befriended Digg and proved to Oliver that Digg was the brother Oliver missed in his life.

Felicity made Oliver laugh the first time after Robert died.

And she believed Oliver could exceed what was expected of him from Moira and Thea, and even the press.

Felicity had never let Moira intimidate her. And had even, somehow, in her Felicity way, befriended Moira.

When Oliver had gone to Las Vegas to help Felicity plan her mother’s funeral, she held onto Oliver so tight. She fell asleep on his chest despite the Vegas heat.

There were the occasional days which bruised Felicity, and she would call Oliver and demand wine and some tear-inducing movie.

The little jokes he made, that were not good, but she’d laugh anyway and make a dumb joke of her own.

Her little smile when Oliver complimented her.

Felicity’s ginormous smile when he found the perfect gift for her. Like a vintage Bangles t-shirt that was exactly like her mom’s, the cheap ten-dollar Leo constellation necklace Felicity wore until it broke, or the ten pairs of fuzzy socks in assorted bright colors for her to wear to bed in the winter
Oliver had no choice when it came to falling in love with Felicity. She came into his life and immediately did what she would continue to do throughout their friendship. Felicity made Oliver want to be the better person she knew he really was, and forgave him when he wasn’t that person.

Of course, Oliver loved Felicity. He would have been an idiot if hadn’t fallen in love with her.

He sarcastically laughed at the situation he found himself in. Oliver finally fell in love with someone and she fell for someone else. Someone else Oliver had introduced Felicity to. It was too late for Oliver to tell Felicity he loved her or do anything about it. He refused to get in the way of any happiness she could have. If Felicity was happy with Barry, he would support them.

But Oliver grieved for what could have been between Felicity and himself.

Oliver sincerely wished he had never met Barry Allen.
Chapter Summary

Digg reveals what he has known about Oliver. Felicity comes back into town and has an amazing confession.

Since Jax had the day off and Lena’s shift didn’t start until four; Oliver had to take care of Moira the next day. He didn’t mind. She had wanted to garden but the summer shower kept them inside. Instead she worked on a 250-piece puzzle of a garden. It would keep her occupied for a while.

With Moira busy in one part of the office, Oliver planned to work for a couple of hours in another part. But he couldn’t stop thinking of Felicity. And his feelings for Felicity.

Oliver tried to determine why he hadn’t recognized his feelings for her. The only answer he came up with, the only one that fit, was his idiocy.

He stared back down at his laptop determined to complete at least one task. The idea of even contemplating working on a Sunday used to be ludicrous to Oliver. He had been known to tease Felicity about it when she spent a Sunday working. Sundays existed for brunches so you could sleep in after a late night of drinking and then cure your hangover with more alcohol. Now, though Oliver knew it was very recent, it was nice to have a day to catch up on work at a slower pace.

If only Oliver could catch up on the work in front of him instead of thinking about Felicity.

Oliver had always known she was beautiful. To him, Felicity’s beauty was just a basic fact. Felicity was gorgeous like the sky was blue, Starling City’s seasons consisted of summer and rainy, and the paparazzi would always be interested in the Queen name. Oliver had just assumed everyone was as attracted to Felicity as he was. He had equated her beauty to an unattainable movie star he had never met.

Though he was correct in the unattainable part.

Felicity and Barry. Barry and Felicity. No matter how Oliver arranged their names, it didn’t sound right. Oliver couldn’t picture them together. It felt like a simultaneous punch to his gut and heart.

The worst part was that it was Oliver’s fault. If they got together, Oliver blamed himself. He had introduced Felicity and Barry. Oliver had encouraged Barry to be more confident. Oliver had even encouraged Barry’s feelings for Felicity, though Oliver had thought Sara was Barry’s crush.

Oliver had done this to himself. He was his own worst enemy.

The even crueler irony was Felicity had warned Oliver about taking Barry under his wing. Though she hadn’t been concerned about Barry taking her away from Oliver. Felicity worried Oliver’s ego would be more inflated than it had been already. Oliver let out a dark chuckle. An ego had never been popped as fast as his.

His only hope, his one thing he could hold onto, was perhaps Barry had been mistaken about Felicity’s feelings for Barry. Oliver’s hope dimmed when he realized Felicity would never willfully encourage Barry’s feelings for her. He had seen for himself Felicity talking to Barry and paying
attention to him. Oliver was too self-centered to think it was anything more than friendship because that was how Oliver saw it and Oliver was never wrong.

Felicity was one of the most honest people Oliver knew. Her intellect was higher, by far, than anyone he had ever met. Felicity’s compassion lit her from the inside out and drew people to her.

Because of this, and a thousand more reasons, it hadn’t taken long for Oliver to place Felicity’s opinion higher than anybody else’s. Oliver valued her friendship above anything else in his life.

Now Oliver stared at his powered down laptop and feared he would lose her to Barry. Feared he had already lost her to his own stupid, selfish actions. That was what hurt the most. The thing that threatened to buckle his knees and stop his heart from beating; the knowledge Oliver didn’t deserve Felicity.

With a stuttered breath, Oliver realized Felicity was the biggest source of his happiness and he was an annoyance, or, at best, a pet project for Felicity. Though her always calling Oliver on his shit made Felicity special. She never cared about his last name or the money that came with it. Felicity often felt disgusted with the fame Oliver carried on his back. She cared about Oliver, but she didn’t love him. Even Oliver wasn’t stupid enough to believe that.

How could Oliver have been so arrogant to believe he would never, could never, lose Felicity?

A loud sigh escaped him and his mother looked up from her puzzle. “What’s wrong, dear?”

“How’s anything wrong,” Oliver answered. He didn’t want to add to Moira’s worries. “Just stretching.”

“Oh, okay,” she replied. Moira turned her attention back to the puzzle.

As difficult as caring for Moira was at times, Oliver knew he helped her. He didn’t doubt his actions and efforts lessened her burdens. Even when Moira was at her most confused, Oliver was able to express his love for his mother.

Something he couldn’t do for Felicity.

Oliver had to show his love for Felicity in a way other than how he wanted.

Oliver tapped his fingers on his laptop’s keyboard base. It didn’t take him long to realize his friendship was what he could give Felicity. She already had it, but Oliver could be a better friend to her. He would be the best friend Felicity had.

He could love Felicity in whatever capacity he was able. Yes, it hurt she didn’t reciprocate his love, but he didn’t love her expecting anything in return.

In that vein, Oliver considered texting Barry. Oliver thought apologizing for his reaction to Barry’s, and possibly Felicity’s, feelings for one another, would help smooth his friendship with Felicity. It could also show he supported Felicity no matter what.

He pulled out his phone and opened his text conversation with Barry. As his fingers hovered over his phone’s keyboard, Oliver’s mind went blank. What could he possibly say to the man who Oliver just fired and who was in love with the love of Oliver’s life? Any conversation they had would be fraught with landmines.

Truthfully, Oliver resented Barry. It had been less than twenty-four hours since Oliver learned the truth and his wounds remained open. Oliver also doubted if Barry would respond to his text.
He pocketed his phone and turned on his laptop. Oliver needed to focus on work.

Just as Oliver pulled up his email, the doorbell rang. He looked up at the office door and questioned who came over without calling or texting first. Oliver moved the laptop over to the side of his desk. “I’ll get it, Mom.” Moira didn’t respond, too engrossed in her puzzle. Oliver groaned as he got up, which made him realize how long he had been sitting at his desk. As he walked toward the front door he stretched out his stiff muscles.

“Digg,” Oliver greeted in surprise when he opened the door.

“Hey, Oliver.”

“Come in.”

Digg took a couple steps in and took off his jacket which dripped from the rain. Oliver took his jacket and hung it over an empty coat rack. Digg stomped his feet on the rain mat and rubbed his hands over his arms.

The two men went back into the office so Oliver could keep his eye on Moira. They sat on the same side of the desk.

“Mr. Diggle,” Moira said over her puzzle. “It’s great to see you. Are you staying for food?”

“No, ma’am,” Digg’s military background had never allowed him to call Moira by her first name. “Lyla is cooking tonight.”

“That’s a shame. I guess it’ll just be the three of us for dinner.”

Oliver’s face fell at the mention of Felicity. “Felicity is in National City, remember?”

“Oh. That’s right. I forgot.” Moira looked side to side like when she didn’t remember what Oliver was talking about. “Mr. Diggle, it’s just been Oliver and me at dinner recently. It’s a bit lonely.”

“Thank you, Mom,” Oliver said on a little laugh. He appreciated Moira’s effort to ease any awkwardness created by her memory lapses.

“What? I spend all day with you and there is nothing for us to talk about. When Felicity sits at the table, I can get some gossip.”

“Ma’am, I can’t say I would help much in the gossip department.”

“I could pull some out of you if I had time, food, and wine,” Moira responded. She abruptly ended the conversation and went back to her puzzle. It was as if Digg and Oliver weren’t there. At least Oliver and Digg would have privacy without having to leave the room.

“I just wanted to check in with you,” Digg said in a concerned voice. “Make sure you’re okay after everything.”

For a moment, Oliver eyes widened as he wondered how Digg had found out about Barry. And Felicity. But then Oliver remembered the other bombshell that had exploded at his feet yesterday.

“Sara and Nyssa,” Oliver recalled. “Married. Right.” Oliver still thought of it as unbelievable. Though he allowed it would be easier if he could see them together and actually acting like a couple instead of barely tolerated acquaintances. “I’m fine, Digg. Really.”

“Oliver, I really don’t think it’s good for you to bury your feelings. It’s not healthy. You need to
work through them.”

“There’s nothing to work through,” Oliver reassured him. At least there was nothing to work through as far as Sara and Nyssa were concerned. Felicity was another matter altogether. Working through those particular feelings wasn’t an option for Oliver. So, he would funnel those feelings into his friendship with Felicity. Because they were just friends.

And that was all they would ever be.

He felt as if a sharp edge off a broken glass bottle sliced him with long strokes on the inside over and over. Oliver took a deep ragged breath.

“Are you sure?” Digg asked as if he could see all Oliver felt.

“Yes,” Oliver painted on a smile and held Digg’s gaze.

“Okay,” Digg finally said. He nodded. “Good. Uh, I’m not sure you want to hear more.”

“About Sara and Nyssa?”

“Yes.”

“I’m fine, Digg. Gossip away.” Oliver would appreciate the distraction. And he had some curiosity about the couple.

Digg gave Oliver a look that clearly meant Digg didn’t appreciate the word ‘gossip.’ Oliver wondered what else to call it. Felicity would probably talk about the word’s root, what it meant originally, and the purpose of it.

“I talked to Sara and Nyssa on the phone today.”

“Where are they?”

“They are at Ra’s’ house sorting through everything. Talia and Bruce are there, too.” It gave Oliver a kind of sick satisfaction knowing Wayne found himself smack dab in the middle of family drama he choose to marry into.

If Felicity were there and could read Oliver’s thoughts, she’d probably smack him. She never understood Oliver’s rivalry with Wayne. Oliver had never been able to explain the competition the two billionaires had since they first heard about the other.

“Anyway, they regret they had to lie to everybody,” Digg had continued to talk but Oliver’s mind had drifted to Felicity. Oliver blinked and focused on Digg. “But, obviously, they felt they didn’t have a choice, given Nyssa’s father. They asked if I could talk to you, specifically, to explain everything. I told them I would, but I wouldn’t apologize for them.”

“Hm,” Oliver replied. Though he hadn’t heard everything, Oliver thought he understood the gist of it. Oliver couldn’t help but think Digg didn’t really have any new information. Digg made for a terrible gossip.

“When they come back into town to pick up the rest of Nyssa’s things, they’ll go around and apologize themselves.”

“An apology tour doesn’t sound fun,” Oliver commented as his focus shifted to outside the window. He wondered how Felicity would react to Sara and Nyssa’s apology. Felicity would either accept it
gracefully or think Sara and Nyssa were simply crossing names off a list but not truly meaning their apologies.

“Oliver,” Digg said in a warning tone that made Oliver look back to his friend. “If they could have handled it any other way, they would have.”

“If you say so,” Oliver responded. He felt some resentment toward Sara and Nyssa, as they were together and nothing stood in their way anymore. As for Oliver, he had Barry Allen standing in his way. Though there were probably a whole host of other things standing between him and Felicity, namely his behavior and general asshattedness.

“I’m really happy for my friend. They seem like a perfect fit for each other. I hope you’ll be able to see that, too.”

“I’m sure I will, Digg,” Oliver reassured as he looked back to his friend. He thought if Sara hadn’t been so flirtatious with Oliver, Felicity wouldn’t be out of town on business at the moment. But Oliver was aware he played a major part in that.

God, he missed Felicity.

“Then call her, man,” Digg suggested. Oliver froze. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Oliver was becoming as bad as Felicity with his brain-to-mouth filter.

Oliver decided he had to answer Digg. “She doesn’t want to hear from me right now. I can’t say I blame her.” He went back to looking out the window. The rain hit the window hard and Oliver could see the trees whipping back and forth in the wind. They were lucky they still had power.

“Well, you look terrible. Calling Felicity will make you feel better. Nothing is stopping you from telling her you’re sorry over the phone.”

“She deserves better than that.”

“Just tell her how you feel and put all of us out of our misery.”

Shock.

It was all Oliver could feel. Again.

It was as if his body had been thrown through a brick wall. Oliver turned his whole body toward Digg. After a couple of failed attempts at speaking, Oliver finally managed to get out, “How do you know?”

“That you love Felicity? Man, it’s written all over your face whenever she’s in the room. And when you two speak to one another, it’s as if no one else is there. I’d have to be a potted fern in the corner to not notice your feelings for her.”

“I…I didn’t even know. Why didn’t you tell me?” Oliver couldn’t help but be a bit upset at his friend.

“Because you had to figure it out for yourself. And, until recently, I wasn’t sure you could be who she needs.”

“You could have given me a clue, Digg.” Oliver moped as he turned back around toward the window. “Maybe I wouldn’t be in this mess now.”
“You probably would anyway. Oliver, however you realized you loved Felicity, it was a journey you had to take. Otherwise you would have denied it and ran for the hills.”

“I might not have. This is Felicity, not some random girl I picked up at a bar. Feelings for Felicity wouldn’t have been as scary.”

Digg gave Oliver his don’t-bullshit-me look. “Or they would have been a million times more scary.”

Oliver acknowledged Digg’s point with a nod. The immature brat he used to be might have run away from Felicity and their friendship if he had had an inkling of his love for her.

“What took you so damn long?” Digg teased with a smile. “I was beginning to worry you’d never see your obvious feelings for one of the most incredible women on the planet.”

“Well, Digg, as you know, I am a dumb idiot.” Oliver sighed. “You can see my previous works in past issues of really any tabloid. Though not all those stories are 100 percent accurate.”

Digg laughed at Oliver’s self-deprecating humor. So did Oliver, but his joke made Oliver think Felicity needed a guy who was on par with her intellectually. That would never be Oliver. Again, he came back to the fact he wasn’t even close to what Felicity deserved.

“Back to the point,” Digg interrupted Oliver’s downward spiral of self-hate and pity. “Call her. Oliver, you need to tell her how you really feel.”

“No,” Oliver said immediately and adamantly. “It is way too late for that.”

“Really?” The height of Digg’s eyebrows was incredible. Oliver wondered if the Guinness’ Book of World Records still existed, because Digg’s eyebrows would have highest raised eyebrows in the bag.

“I can’t tell her over the phone. And I can’t disrupt her life like that. We’re each other’s best friends, I don’t want to jeopardize that. And I don’t want to take that away from her because I selfishly have to share all my feelings, even if they make her uncomfortable.”

“She might surprise you.”

“She constantly does.” Oliver admitted but then shook his head. “But not about this.”

“It’s a shame you can’t run it past her to see what she thinks you should do. Because I have a feeling she’s the only person that could make you see not telling her is amazingly stupid.”

Oliver looked down to the floor. If only. “I’m right. Our friendship is more important than my hurt feelings.”

“You really are one of the most exasperating people I have ever met.” Digg scrubbed his face with his hands then let out a sigh. Digg looked back at Oliver and shook his head. “I have to go.” Digg stood up with Oliver close behind him. “I’m going to tell you one last time, call Felicity. Tell her you love her.”

“Sorry. I can’t.”

Digg sighed and turned away from Oliver. “Goodbye, Mrs. Queen.” Digg waved to Moira. She barely looked up from her puzzle to acknowledge his parting. “Oliver, I’ll see you later. Maybe with a heavy frying pan to knock some sense into you.”
“I appreciate the advice and being able to talk to you,” Oliver said. They walked out into the entryway. “But being honest will only cause our friendship to end.”

“I’ll tell you what I told Sara today: if you can’t be honest it’s a sign there’s something wrong with what you’re doing.”

“I think we both know that’s too simplistic to be true all the time. And didn’t you say Sara and Nyssa are happy?”

“I did. Do you think you and Felicity are going to be happy with you keeping this from her?”

“She will be. That’s all that matters.”

“I wonder how much heavy frying pans cost?” Digg muttered to himself. “I don’t have any more time to argue with you.” He grabbed his coat off the coat rack and slipped it on. “I think you’re being an idiot.”

“She deserves better, Digg.”

“What about you? Don’t you deserve better than what you’re handing to yourself? Don’t answer me right now. Just think on it. Because I have a feeling Felicity would want you to be treated better.”

“Thank you, Digg. I’ll see you later. Say hi to Lyla for me.”

“Okay.” Digg opened up the door and took a step through. Digg stopped when he stood in the doorway. Louder, to be heard over the rain and wind, Digg said, “You’re both my friends. And I’ve always seen what you two have and known it’s special. If you two gave it a shot, I have a feeling you would be unbearably happy together. And I’d be willing to deal with your unbearableness if it meant you both were happy.”

Digg turned and ran for his car. Oliver stared after him. He wished with all his heart that were true. He would do almost anything to be the man to make Felicity happy.

Unfortunately, Oliver knew Felicity had more sense than to fall for a man like him.

Moira had been clingy with Oliver. So much so she slapped James when he tried to help her put on her shoes. Oliver apologized to James and, despite James’ protests, Oliver gave James the day off with pay. Dr. Snow was scheduled to stop by in the afternoon for an observational visit, which would last a few hours. Oliver only had to call out for the morning.

He was concerned he wouldn’t be able to get any work done at home, but Moira was fine staring out the window and watching the rain as Oliver worked in the office. Oliver had even been able to join a teleconference without any interruption.

Oliver knew he couldn’t work from home all the time. Also, the board would never allow it. He wasn’t a professional caretaker and one of the main reasons why they had hired 24-hour CNA care was the toll they were told family members of dementia patients feel. Especially when they cared for the patients themselves.

Going forward, Oliver would keep the CNA here, as long as they were willing.

He never thought he would have to essentially raise the woman who raised him. The difference was Oliver had learned, grew, and became more and more independent. Moira would only deteriorate
and become more dependent.

The thought made Oliver feel somber. One he still hadn’t accepted, even after two and a half years. Oliver knew his denial didn’t help anybody and he needed to get past it.

Lunch was simple, grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup. It was perfect for the morning rain, but just as they ate, the clouds parted. Once they finished lunch the sun shined bright and the air warmed.

Dr. Snow arrived to Moira’s delight. They went into the sitting room and Moira told Dr. Snow stories Dr. Snow had most likely heard before. Dr. Snow listened happily as she assessed Moira’s mental state, memory, language, and a few other things.

With Dr. Snow at the manor to keep an eye on Moira and Winn’s shift starting before Dr. Snow left, Oliver thought it okay to go the office. Just as Oliver opened the front door, he found Felicity on the other side of the door. Her hand held up as if she had been about to knock.

“Hi,” Oliver said tentatively after he recovered from his dumbfoundedness of seeing her.

“Hi,” Felicity said in a tone Oliver knew to be her shy voice.

Why was she shy with him? She looked beautiful and Oliver wondered how he ever fooled himself into thinking he only had friendly feelings toward her. His heart thumped loudly in his chest and Oliver had to consciously slow his breathing. Her eyes searched his for something, but Oliver didn’t know what she wanted to find. Felicity soon looked away and shook her head. “Uh, I called Gladys and she said you spent the morning working from home. She said I could probably catch you before you left.”

“You did,” Oliver responded and then cursed himself for stating the obvious. His toes tapped the floor and his thumb and forefinger rubbed against each other.

“Barely, it seems,” Felicity said as she looked toward his laptop bag.

“Um. Oh, yeah.” Oliver followed her gaze and shifted the bag. “I was just about to leave, but um, come in.” Oliver moved out of the doorway and waved her in. Felicity almost stumbled on the first step but recovered.

“I don’t want to keep you from the office,” Felicity said as she turned back to face Oliver.

“It’s fine. They can live without me for a little while more.”

Felicity seemed uncertain as she looked away. Oliver became distracted staring at her bottom lip as she bit it. The long silence eventually snapped Oliver back to their conversation. “Really, Felicity. It’s okay. Are you back for good or is this just a short visit?”

“I’m back. I-uh-I convinced Cat Grant she didn’t need me on site.”

“How?”

“Um,” Felicity looked down as her cheeks colored with the lightest shade of pink. “I told her she could either have the best IT specialist setting her firewall up off site or she could hire a mediocre one who would probably be on site for longer than she wished.”

“You still have the account?”
“Of course I do. Cat Grant is demanding not stupid. I may need to travel to National City a couple more times, but it would only be for a day or two each.”

“I’m glad you’re back,” Oliver said, emotion coating his words more than he would have liked. God, he had missed her. Felicity’s eyes went back to his as she searched them for whatever she was looking for.

“Thanks. Can we go someplace? To talk?”

“Sure,” Oliver agreed. His stomach did a somersault at the mention of a talk. Was she going to tell him she was seeing Barry? Had she made her move back here to be closer to Barry? Oliver’s flight or fight response told him to run. He swallowed it down and suggested, “Why don’t we go out back to the garden? The sun is finally shining and Mom and Dr. Snow are in the sitting room. I don’t want to disturb them.”

“Of course. The garden sounds nice.”

Oliver placed his laptop bag on the bench butted against the stairs and Felicity deposited her purse next to it. They walked the long way, which led them through the kitchen to out back. Once they stepped outside, Oliver led them to the roses. “Did you have a bumpy flight with the storm? Or was it okay?”

“It was just foggy in National City so my flight was delayed a bit. The landing was a little bumpy.”

Oliver nodded. The bark chips of the walking paths were dry enough to walk on, though the two avoided the grass. The smell of cedar mixed with the smell of the roses. Silence consumed them again and it made Oliver twitchy. Eventually, Oliver asked as he glanced over at Felicity, “How was National City? Were you able to see Thea and Roy?”

“Oh, it was fine. Thea and Roy send their love. They’re fine. Thea’s trying to convince Roy to get a puppy.”

“She’s wanted a puppy for years. Roy doesn’t want one?”

“He wants a dog. That is already trained.”

“Roy might as well give up now. Thea is going to get a puppy.”

“That’s what I told him. He said he was sticking to his guns on this one.”

“What you’d say?”

“I just laughed. I don’t think he appreciated it.”

Oliver chuckled and said, “The truth hurts. Better him than me though.”

Felicity stopped walking and turned to face Oliver. He turned back and saw a look of resolve on her face. “I came back to see how you are.”

“Me? I’m fine,” Oliver said. Unless she counted the thousand and one times his heart broke with the realization he loved Felicity and Oliver would never be with her.

“You know it’s true time will heal everything,” Felicity said. “I promise.”

There was no way Felicity could know about his feelings for her. Right?
Oliver’s left hand cupped his right fist a few times and then rubbed his fist against his palm.

“Just,” Felicity hesitated for a moment. She then straightened her shoulders, seemed to put on a mask, and soldiered on, “Don’t give up on love. One bad experience doesn’t spoil future ones.”

She couldn’t know, Oliver thought. Unless Barry realized and told Felicity. Or Digg. But Digg wouldn’t do that. Digg knew it would be a major overstep. His brow knitted inward and he finally just asked, “What are you talking about?”

“What are you talking about?” When Felicity got no reaction she added, “Married? This whole time?”

“Oh,” Oliver thought back to the news that had been so shocking when he first heard it. Now it bared very little thought. “I’m fine.”

Felicity responded with arched eyebrows. The height of her eyebrows rivaled Digg’s from the day before.

“Really, I am. I know I acted like an idiot around Sara. But I never meant anything by it.”

“You two were always all over each other,” Felicity said in slightly louder voice.

“Not always,” Oliver argued. “And, like I said, idiot.” He pointed to himself. “I swear I only like Sara as a friend. Nothing else.”

It was Felicity’s turn to look dumbfounded. Oliver guessed she had expected to find Oliver heartbroken for the first time. Though he was, Felicity was the cause, not Sara. Sara with whom Felicity had seen Oliver flirt. Oliver realized he showed more attention to Sara than any other woman Felicity had seen him with. No wonder Felicity was confused. He might need to find a stronger word than idiot. Finally, she spoke, “That just doesn’t compute with what I’ve seen of you two.”

“Look, I haven’t talked to Sara, but she obviously used me. Trying to appear single and available, instead of, you know, married. And Sara and I are a lot alike. Maybe too much. And we both have families who depend on us.” Oliver sighed. What he admitted next left Oliver feeling shamefaced and embarrassed, but Oliver needed Felicity to know the truth. With a bit of reluctance, Oliver said, “I liked the attention. Sara was always there, ready to follow any whim that took us at the moment.”

“That’s it?” Felicity still looked skeptical, but Oliver could see she was more willing to accept his words.

He sighed and strolled down the path again, Felicity soon came up to his side. “There was a time I thought I liked her, in response to thinking she liked me. It was flattery. Honestly, with my ego that inflated, we’re lucky I didn’t do anything more horrible.”

They walked in silence for a bit before Felicity asked, “So, you aren’t mad at Sara?”

Oliver thought about it. “At first I was… I felt very righteous. I didn’t, and still don’t, know how Sara treated Nyssa that way. I also felt embarrassed by my behavior to both of them, individually. Now, I guess I’m annoyed. Sara couldn’t have known for certain I wasn’t falling for her. As it is, I’m a little bruised, but not really hurt.”

Blowing out a puff of air, Felicity walked faster. Oliver kept pace with her. He looked over to her and couldn’t name all the emotions that rapidly played over her face. Felicity came to a sudden stop. Oliver skidded in the bark chips, stopped, and turned back around to face her.

“I don’t know how I feel about Sara now. I’m upset she could have hurt you, but you aren’t hurt so
do I have the right to be upset? I can’t help but think she crossed several lines and took advantage of her friends. But everyone is so quick to forgive her.”

Felicity put her hand over her forehead. Oliver always assumed she had so many thoughts, her brain sometimes couldn’t contain them all and she had to hold them in. Oliver could tell she had too many emotions that rumbled inside of her. He gave Felicity space to process them.

She walked again, head down with slow, deliberate steps. Oliver walked next to her and stole glances at her every few steps. She stopped again and said, “I can give her another chance. But it’ll take a while to forget the dangerous game she played with other people’s hearts.”

“Felicity, are you okay?” Oliver found it difficult to understand why Felicity was so reluctant to forgive Sara, when Sara had done nothing to Felicity directly.

She stopped again. Felicity turned and bit her lip. Oliver knew she debated with herself. Felicity took a deep breath and said in a quiet voice, “I have something I need to tell you. But there is no way it won’t affect our friendship, so I’m scared.” Felicity’s voice broke. She swallowed and continued, “And hesitant to share it.” Oliver saw her eyes pool with unshed tears.

Fear ran through Oliver’s body, leaving a chill in its wake. He knew Felicity was going to bring up Barry. She would tell him she loved Barry. Oliver’s heart splintered and his soul ached with the emptiness of unrequited love. He didn’t know how he could take hearing Felicity say those words.

No.

He knew he wasn’t strong enough.

“Don’t say it then,” Oliver replied. “Your friendship is the one constant in my life. I can’t have it change along with everything else in my life. Please.” He wasn’t too proud to beg. Oliver couldn’t lose Felicity.

Felicity took a ragged breath in and swallowed her words. After a beat she said, “Okay. You know I’d do anything for you. And perhaps you’re right. It’s probably best not to tell you.”

With fast steps, Felicity turned around and walked the way they had come into the garden. Her shoulders sagged and her own sadness consumed Oliver. She would do anything for him, shouldn’t he do the same? Felicity needed her friend. And hadn’t he resolved to support her in her relationship with Barry? Oliver would put aside his own selfish desire and help her in any way she needed.

“Felicity,” Oliver called out. Felicity either didn’t hear him or ignored him as she kept walking. He jogged back to Felicity’s side and pulled her elbow to stop and turn her towards him. He dropped his hand as he saw Felicity appeared to be trying not to cry with tears in her eyes and red splotches under them. Oliver hated seeing her tears. He could never be the one to cause them. He would give anything and everything for her happiness. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t the friend you deserved just now. Tell me what’s going on.”

She studied him once more. Oliver did his best to remain steady under her gaze. He saw her reluctance to open back up to him. In a soft, quiet voice Felicity had to lean to hear, Oliver requested, “The truth, please.”

Felicity’s eyes widened and she took a sudden and deep intake of air. The phrase was enough for her to regain her courage. “Okay.”

Her teeth pulled at her lip and her fingers twisted around each other. Once she noticed, she balled her hands into tight fists and rolled her shoulders back. Oliver steeled himself to hear Barry’s name. His
finger and thumb rubbed against each other quickly.

“You probably noticed how critical and stand-offish I was with Sara. Even just now, when I thought she had hurt you, I cursed her and her behavior.”

“You were just worried about me,” Oliver said, not knowing why Felicity brought up Sara again. When would she say Barry’s name?

“No. I mean yes,” Felicity responded, “but it wasn’t the only reason. I was jealous of her.” Felicity paused and looked back down at her hands, which had twisted around each other again.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Oliver said. He took a half step closer to Felicity to put his hands on her shoulders and rubbed his hands up and down her upper arms gently. Her perfume mixed wonderfully with the smell of the roses. “Why were you jealous?”

Felicity looked back up at him. Oliver looked above her head, unable to watch as she broke his heart. “I felt jealous because I thought, wrongly as it turns out, you had feelings for Sara.” Oliver eyes zoomed back to meet Felicity’s. He couldn’t have heard her correctly. Or she meant something else by it. “The moment I saw you--no that’s not right, you were naked then, not that everything wasn’t great because it was.” Felicity looked down his body and blushed. She cleared her throat and tried again, “The moment you spoke to me, begged me, really, with your blue-blue eyes to help you, I knew. I knew I would never be the same again.

“And I was right. Our friendship means everything to me. You mean everything to me. You have stood by me at my worst moments and have relied on me during yours. You have made me feel important, respected, and cared for.” Oliver took a stuttered breath. He felt terrified to hope for what he wanted, more than anything, for Felicity to say next.

A self-conscious laugh escaped her lips. “You think with all my babbling this would have come out long before today.” And then quieter, almost to herself, Felicity said, “But I guess I haven’t really said anything yet, have I? It is easier to talk about anything else. Less important and more trivial things. If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.”

It took several moments for Oliver to process Felicity’s words.

Felicity. Loved. Him.

Felicity loved him.

How?

Maybe he didn’t care? Felicity loved him.

Oliver’s smile gradually grew wider until his cheeks hurt, and even then, he smiled wider. Felicity looked up at him with a questioning and hopeful expression, but tinged with fear.

“Felicity,” Oliver responded and moved his hands up onto her neck and shoulders. “It may have taken me until a couple days ago to realize, but I know now. I love you. I always have.” It took a moment for Felicity to take in Oliver’s words and believe them. When she did, an astonished sigh escaped her and she smiled a smile that rivaled his. “And I don’t know why I’m so lucky to have you love me back, but I’m amazed you do.”

Holding her face in both hands, he felt her skin in a new, exciting way. Oliver’s lips slowly found Felicity’s with a revered gentleness. Their lips caressed each other before Oliver’s tongue ran along her bottom lip. Felicity opened her mouth and his tongue gradually slipped in and he explored her
mouth.

The sun shone bright down on them but it was the warmth, which started from their lips that traveled to the rest of his body. Oliver’s heart instantaneously seared back together.

It didn’t take long for Oliver to feel the need to be closer to Felicity. One of his hands slid down and around to her hip and pulled her body against him. Oliver felt sparks at each point of contact with Felicity. He applied more pressure to her lips and Felicity responded with a delicious whimper. He was excited to have new knowledge about Felicity and couldn’t wait to explore even more new things.

Her tongue entered his mouth and Oliver felt as if he was on sensory overload. Felicity seemed to surround him and his body couldn’t help but react.

Oliver lessened his hold on Felicity’s hip and pulled his lips slightly back. Both Oliver and Felicity breathed hard. Oliver could feel her heated breath on his own lips as they breathed the same air. He kept his forehead touching hers and his hand on her neck.

“Is this really happening?” Felicity asked with a laugh. “You really love me? I’m not dreaming? I really thought I’d have to fight to win you over.”

Standing up straight, Oliver looked down at Felicity reverently. With a gentle smile, Oliver answered, “I promise you’re awake. You won me over the moment I met you. I love you. Always.”

Felicity smiled back at him with happy tears in her eyes. Unable to do nothing with tears threatening to fall from her eyes, Oliver leaned back down to kiss Felicity. Both smiled into the kiss, which made it difficult to kiss until Oliver took her bottom lip between his. He sucked her lip lightly and Felicity grabbed a hold of his biceps to keep herself upright.

The warmth that enveloped Oliver with their first kiss turned to a fiery heat in their second kiss. It felt as if it scorched him from the inside but instead of withdrawing from the heat, Oliver went deeper. He welcomed the inferno and molded his body around hers, which essentially added gasoline to the forest fire inside him.

“Oliver,” Felicity said as she managed to pull her lips away from his. Oliver wasn’t bothered. In fact, he loved hearing his name in Felicity’s breathy moan and he just moved his lips down her neck. “Ah! Oliver. You were headed to work.”

Oliver sighed as rested his head on Felicity’s shoulder. “I don’t care.”

“From what I’ve heard, you’ve cared more about QC recently.”

He lifted his head but kept his arms around her waist. “You checked up on me?”

“I would have, but I didn’t have to. John was happy to share everything about you while I was gone.”

“He’s going to be thrilled about this new development.”

“Is that what we are? A development?” Felicity asked with humor in her tone. “That makes us sound like a new block of houses going up in an expanded suburbia.”

“Well,” Oliver said as he thought about it. “We are expanding our relationship.”

Felicity let out a laugh and replied sarcastically, “How romantic!”
“Anyway, work can wait. I want to talk with you.”

“Talk?” Felicity asked rhetorically. Oliver raised his eyebrows suggestively and she blushed as a giggle escaped her. He loved seeing her blush. Her giggle was how perfect happiness felt. Once she took a breath, Felicity said, “I know you’ve taken a few days off recently to care for Moira. It’s probably a good idea for you to go into the office this afternoon.”

“But,” Oliver complained, “I don’t want to leave you.”

Felicity smiled and ducked her head against his chest. When she raised it back up her blush remained present on her cheeks. “We’ll see each other tonight. I don’t want to be a cause of you not giving QC the attention it needs. Your family business is important.”

“So are you.”

“Thank you,” Felicity smiled. “But QC and I are not mutually exclusive. We can talk tonight.”

Oliver stared at Felicity with awe. He tried to remember a time he’d been this happy, but came up empty. It made him even happier to not be able to think of a time he’d seen Felicity happier. After a moment he whispered, “You are amazing. You’ll be here when I get back?”

She nodded and ran her fingers down his jaw through his stubble. They kissed once, and then one more time, in goodbye. Oliver dragged his limbs away from Felicity and back inside to leave for the office. If he hadn’t missed so much time at QC in the last week, he wouldn’t have left.

Despite not being in Felicity’s presence, Oliver couldn’t stop smiling the rest of the work day. He knew he scared Gladys. Time mocked Oliver and he’d been certain he once saw the clock tick backwards.

Though Oliver was positive he didn’t deserve Felicity, he wasn’t dumb enough to argue with her. Oliver promised himself he would spend the rest of his life attempting to be worthy of her.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity have sex and then make plans for the future.

10 Years Ago

Alone in the staff elevator, Felicity could admit to herself the groaning and creaking of the elevator’s cables freaked her out. If it moved faster than one centimeter a minute, it wouldn’t freak her out as much. Being forced to stare at the elevator shaft’s cement walls as the open car trudged upward, Felicity’s stomach felt heavy.

If her mom had just left work on time, Felicity wouldn’t have been there. Also, if Felicity wasn’t as nice as she was, she’d be safe at street level. She wouldn’t have been forced into being her typical nice self, if she and her mom had left the hotel on time. But because Felicity’s mom was late, leaving Felicity to continue to wait for her in the staff lounge, Raquel wouldn’t have found Felicity. And Felicity wouldn’t understand Raquel’s need to study for her nursing final.

Then, Felicity wouldn’t have taken pity on Raquel and offered to bring the requested towels up to one of the penthouse suites.

She closed her eyes and tried to inhale deeply. Felicity willed the cavernous and clunky staff elevator to go faster. Her fingers tapped against her leg, searching for patience. If she could just wait a little longer to open her eyes, she would be surprised how far up she was when she did look up at the floor indicator light. With a scrunched face, Felicity opened one eye and looked at the red floor number.

Twenty.

Damn! Sixteen floors to go.

A particular loud groan made Felicity jump and she began to hum a Spice Girls song. If only her mother hadn’t insisted she spend her spring break at home. More specifically, away from school. But it wasn’t as if they could afford to have her go anywhere else but home to Las Vegas.

With one final groan, the elevator stopped and opened. Once out of the housekeeping closet with towels in hand, Felicity made her way to 3606. Though disgruntled Felicity wasn’t in uniform, the businessman accepted the towels and shut the door. Realizing she didn’t have a key card to get back into the housekeeping closet, and thus the staff elevator, Felicity smirked and walked the longer path to the quiet, and more shiny, guest elevator.

As Felicity turned the corner, she gave a startled cry. She was forced into an abrupt halt, so as to avoid stepping on a man seated in the hallway. A naked man seated in the hallway.

“Hey,” the man greeted Felicity with a wave of his hand, as if he had twenty layers of clothes on instead of his actual zero layers.

“What--why?” Felicity couldn’t settle on what question she should ask. Silence filled the air, which was not normal for a conversation involving Felicity. She tried to keep her eyes on the man’s
gorgeous face. But she caught her eyes dropping to his gorgeous body too many times. Felicity wasn’t aware anyone in real life actually had such well-defined muscles. His abs brought all sorts of sinful thoughts to Felicity. Fortunately, his raised leg covered everything below his very lower abs.

Lower abs where Felicity could see one half of a V.

She slammed her eyes shut and looked away. Felicity heard the man chuckle. Taking a quick breath in, she opened her eyes and looked straight into his eyes.

Eyes that were a light ocean blue, which threatened to drown Felicity.

“Why are you sitting out here in the hallway? Naked?” Exasperation filled her tone.

“I got pushed out of my room,” he gestured to the door next to him, “with none of my clothes or personal effects.” He didn’t seem too bothered by said events.

“You? You got pushed out?” Felicity asked as she gestured to all of his taut muscles. “Is there a sumo wrestler in there?”

“No. I was caught off guard.”

“Naked?”

“Obviously,” he answered. Smoothing his voice, he added, “I was just waiting for some kind soul to come along and help me out. May I use your room until I get this sorted out?”

“No.”

“No?”

“First, I don’t know you. You’re just some strange naked man in a hotel hallway. You could be a serial killer.”

“I’m not. My name is Oliver Queen. I’m famous in certain circles.”

“What circles?”

“Rich ones.”

Felicity rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t make you any less of a threat. Second, it doesn’t matter because I don’t have a room. I sort of work here.”

“Really?” Oliver narrowed his eyes and studied Felicity. “You seem too sweet to be an escort.”

“Ugh,” Felicity recoiled. “I’m not an escort, thank you very much. Not that there is anything wrong with being a sex worker. It does attract abusers and manipulators as controlling agents for the sex workers. And then there are some clients who are also abusers, so not the safest profession. But, really, there is nothing wrong with women, or men, using their sexuality for profit. Our society, as a whole, is too Puritan for my taste.”

After Felicity paused to take a breath, Oliver asked, his voice soft, “You say you’re not an escort?”

“No. Just because I can feel empathy for sex workers doesn’t mean I am one. My mom works here as a waitress. I was just helping out a housekeeper.”

“So, you don’t have a room that I can wait in and even if you did you wouldn’t let a naked
billionaire in for fear of being killed?”

“Did you say billionaire with a B?”

“Yes.” Oliver answered with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Hm,” Felicity blinked a couple of times, unable to comprehend that amount of money. After a shake of her head, she said, “Yes. I mean no. I don’t have a room. And I really need to go meet my mother downstairs, not chat up strange naked men.”

“Wait a minute, I’m not a stranger. I told you my name, though don’t think I didn’t notice I haven’t gotten yours.” Felicity’s cheeks pinked at his flirty line. “And you’re really not going to help me?”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“But you’re my only hope. No one else has walked by for the last 20 minutes. She won’t let me back in, believe me, I’ve tried.”

Felicity wondered about the ‘she’ in question, but decided she didn’t want to know more than what she had pieced together.

“Do you have a phone I can use?” Oliver asked.

With a bite to her lower lip, Felicity shook her head no. “My phone is with my backpack, down in the basement.”

Her finger tapped her leg in rapid motion as Felicity tried to think of a way she could get past a well-defined, naked man in the hallway without A: touching or staring at any parts of him, and B: feeling guilty about leaving him in said hallway. Naked. As her brain was concocting a hundred different scenarios with only a few glances down Oliver’s body, the ding of an elevator was heard around the corner.

Oliver sprung to his feet, leaving nothing to Felicity’s imagination. It turned out her imagination had not been as generous as life had been to Oliver. He was very impressive. Much more impressive than what Felicity had experience with. Not that she had much experience. But damn!

“One what you see?” Oliver asked, a smirk plastered on his face.

Felicity’s whole face blushed and she darted her eyes away from Oliver. Just as she was about to deliver a witty and charming retort, a security officer turned the corner and stopped in front of Oliver. Security officer Davis was not as impressed by Oliver as Felicity was.

After a nod to Felicity, Davis crossed his arms and said, “Sir, you can’t be out here in the hallway naked.”

“I would love to not be out here. Especially not naked.” Oliver had turned toward Davis with his back to Felicity. She told herself she shouldn’t be surprised his ass was just as sculpted as the rest of him. Yet her mouth dropped a bit anyway.

“Don’t give me lip. You need to get back in your room or I will have to take you down to the security office and call the police.”

“Seriously?” Oliver’s arms and hand flung in the air and came back down to his sides. His voice got louder. “I was pushed out of my room and you want to arrest me for that? Clearly, I’m the victim. And with how much I’m paying for this room, you think you’d be a little more understanding.”
“We don’t make the laws about public indecency, sir.”

“Public indecency? In Vegas?” The incredulous tone in Oliver’s voice peaked.

“Sir, I’m going to need you to calm down.”

“Or you’ll have me arrested?”

“Yes.”

“Davis,” Felicity said as she side stepped Oliver, giving him and his nakedness a wide berth, and stood between the two men. “I know you run into some really obnoxious people. All the time. And Oliver may very well be obnoxious.”

“How is that helping?” Oliver asked in a low whisper in her ear. Felicity ignored him.

“But in this instance, I really don’t think he is purposefully being indecent in public. It sounds like a couple’s spat.”

“Not really a couple,” Oliver commented again in her ear. He was leaning down close to her. “It was more of a one-night thing.”

“Shh,” Felicity turned her face around and was hit with his blue eyes right next to her. She spun her head back to Davis.

“Felicity,” Davis said, “I can’t just leave him here. What if a guest sees him?”

“Felicity, huh?” Oliver’s voice glided over her name. Felicity willed her goosebumps to disappear. “I like it.”

“Instead of calling the cops, Davis,” Felicity soldiered on, “why not talk with the person in his room and see if you can negotiate a solution that works for everyone?”

“Like her letting me back in my room, her leaving, and giving me back all my things. Especially my clothes,” Oliver suggested.

Davis stared at Oliver but responded to Felicity, “I don’t have time to play marriage counselor.”

“Not even remotely close to married,” Oliver interrupted.

Ignoring Oliver’s interruption, Davis continued, “There are 50 other complaints we have to respond to. You know they’ll be more.”

How did she get herself in the middle of this, Felicity asked herself. “Fine.” She turned and knocked on the door to room 3603. A woman with dark hair opened the door and looked at Felicity through the security chain.

“Hi, I’m Felicity. You probably heard us through the door.” The woman gave no indication either way. “Look, it would just be easier for all of us, since I somehow got wrapped up in all of this, if you give Oliver his clothes and wallet back. You keep the room-”

“Hey,” Oliver interjected. Felicity ignored him.

“Do you know what he did?” The woman finally talked.

“No, but I’m sure he deserves every bit of this.”
“Are you sure you’re helping me?” Oliver asked. Felicity was sure he was pouting.

“But,” Felicity continued, “if Davis here, calls the cops, Oliver will explain you have his clothes and wallet. Which would make it appear as if you stole them. So in the end, you end up arrested and Oliver gets his room and all his things back. This way, you get to keep the room.”

“I don’t want another room.” Oliver objected.

“You can afford it,” Felicity hushed Oliver.

The woman seemed to think over all Felicity said and nodded. She closed the door and the three of them were left waiting.

“I don’t know about this, Felicity,” Davis said.

“If Oliver is dressed, he would no longer be indecent in public. And when he gets another room, he won’t even be in public.”

“Another room?” Oliver squaked. “I’m paying for another room?”

“You want your clothes back?” Felicity asked and rolled her eyes. Oliver huffed. A couple minutes later, just as Oliver began to fidget, the woman opened the door and threw Oliver’s suitcase, clothes, and wallet into the hallway and slammed the door shut.

Grumbling about the lack of care the woman took with his things, Oliver dressed.

“See, Davis. He is no longer naked. So no harm, no foul.”

“Fine. But if I see him again out in the hallway naked, I’m taking him down to the security office.”

“Consider me duly warned,” Oliver replied with a salute. Davis glared at Oliver but walked back to the elevators. Oliver bent down and stuffed his remaining clothes in his suitcase. He looked up at Felicity and smiled. This time his smile reached his eyes. And, of course, he looked nearly as good as he did naked. “I am in your debt.”

“No,” Felicity shouted back. Quieter, she added, “It’s fine. I just want to go, find my mom, and go home.”

“I can’t let that happen.”

Felicity sighed. “Why not?”

“You saved me. I must repay you. Dinner?”

“No, thank you. Really, I just want to go home.” Felicity walked toward the elevators only to find Oliver right behind her. “Are you following me?”

“You’re the one who made me get another room.” Felicity hit the down button for the elevator and the two waited. After four seconds of silence, Oliver asked, “So what do you do here in Vegas? I have a hard time imagining living here.”

“Locals don’t live on the strip, first of all,” Felicity explained. “Second, I don’t live here anymore. I go to college in the Boston area.”

“Really?” There was a hint of skepticism in his voice.
“Yes,” Felicity replied, unsure what Oliver was implying. “I go to MIT.”

“Huh. I go to Harvard. Well, I go to Harvard this week. Academic probation will be sending me chained to my father’s desk at my family’s company.”

“That sounds like fun.” Her stomach rolled, as if it knew something Felicity didn’t.

“How old are you?”

Felicity rolled her eyes. The elevator arrived and she walked in, Oliver close behind. “I’m not asking for that. Unless that is a possibility, but I’m picking up that it’s not. So just humor my curiosity, please.”

“Eighteen.”

“What year are you at MIT?”

“I’m a junior/senior. I’m hoping to graduate after taking a couple summer courses. Then I can start my Master’s in the fall.”

“So my hunch was correct.”

“What hunch?” Felicity turned toward Oliver and crossed her arms.

“You’re smart.”

“So?”

“I think you might be smart enough to tutor me and even get me to pass.”

“And why would I want to do this?”

“If you were tutoring me, it might make my father back off and give me a little bit more time at college. Maybe even until the end of the semester.”

“Again, why would I do this?” Felicity asked, unsure how this exchange would work out. She had a feeling Oliver got his way, all the time.

“Money. And the pleasure of my company. Also, the challenge of tutoring the untutorable.” Off Felicity’s raised eyebrow and deadpan look, Oliver amended, “But mainly money. My father will be so happy I want a tutor, he’ll probably pay you anything.”

Was this guy serious, Felicity asked herself. She supposed billionaires were used to thinking about snapping their fingers to get something done and it was done. Felicity didn’t really want to be around someone like that, but some extra money would minimize the amount of days she ate only Top Ramen. And there was a new processor she had her eye on. Felicity sighed.

“You will do whatever I tell you.” Felicity faced Oliver and pointed at him. He nodded and smiled a smug, yet captivating, smile. “Tutoring you will not get in the way of my own studies.”

“Of course not.” Oliver placed a hand over his heart as if he was giving Felicity a solemn vow.

“And,” Felicity added after a beat, “it’s going to be a lot of money.” More to herself, she said, “I have a feeling I’ll earn every penny.”

“Hey, listen,” Oliver said. “I am motivated to get my grades up, believe me. Actually studying in
Cambridge will be significantly better than being lectured on corporate stuff and family responsibility in Starling City.”

“Fine. Give me your number and we’ll meet when we’re both back at school,” Felicity said as the elevator doors opened. Oliver held the door open for her as she stepped out. His smile now was smaller but genuine.

Felicity’s breath caught in her throat. She knew she’d regret this. Spending any time with Oliver Queen, all his muscles, and his real smile, that made his eyes a deeper blue somehow, was dangerous. Felicity wasn’t certain she’d survive their tutoring sessions and remain intact.

Present Day

Dinner that night seemed excruciating long. With Moira having a bad night, Oliver didn’t want to tell her about him and Felicity yet. He was beyond grateful when Felicity understood and even agreed. Oliver was sure that no one would be as generous as Felicity was. Of course, Felicity had intimate knowledge of Moira’s condition and the Queens’ family life.

Throughout the meal, Oliver and Felicity kept glancing at each other. Glances that conveyed another kind of hunger. A hunger the forgettable food they ate could never satisfy.

Felicity’s skin seemed to illuminate from within. It was especially true when she blushed, which happened nearly every time Felicity caught him staring at her. And he couldn’t take his eyes off of her. Oliver could only surmise what thoughts could be responsible for her reddened cheeks and neck. Which led Oliver to speculate how far Felicity’s blush extended down her body.

When Felicity came back after Oliver returned from the office, she had changed into a form fitting red dress. It had one silver zipper in the back, which ran from the top of the dress all the way down to the bottom of the dress. The zipper had taunted Oliver ever since he saw it.

Oliver sent a prayer to all the gods, Felicity would allow them to defer their talk about their new relationship status until after their desires were sated. At least temporarily sated. Oliver knew he would never tire of Felicity.

Shifting in his seat for the thousandth time, Oliver took a sip of his wine. He attempted to send the message to his body to calm down until dinner was over. His pants felt agonizingly tight and standing, at least without a napkin or a jacket, held the distinct possibility of another talk of the birds and the bees with his mother.

Finally, Moira finished her dinner and Winn came and led Moira to her room.

Somehow it became possible for the air between Oliver and Felicity to become more charged. They were only able to glance at each other briefly unless they wanted to christen the dining room table first. As the minutes went by, Oliver had difficulty remembering why that would be a bad idea.

Just as Oliver’s eyes found Felicity again, her tongue peeked out and licked her lips.

“Okay,” Oliver said with a choked voice as he stood up and threw his napkin on his plate. He walked over to Felicity and pulled her chair out. “I can’t wait any longer. Please say you’re in as dire need as I am.”

Felicity visibly gulped and then nodded. She stood on shaky legs and it took all of Oliver’s self-control to not pick her up and carry her to his bedroom like a caveman.
Holding her hand, Oliver led them through the quickest route to his bedroom. It was only then Oliver truly appreciated the size of the manor. And cursed it.

When they entered his bedroom, Oliver dropped Felicity’s hand and closed the door. Felicity bit her lip and turned away from him. Oliver noticed his palms were sweaty. He counted to ten in his head. It was not the time to act like a hormonal teenager. If ever there was a time for Oliver to be charming and irresistible, it was then.

The fact that Felicity knew of all of Oliver’s moves as a bystander, left Oliver at a disadvantage. He had no idea how to charm a woman who knew him better than he knew himself.

But it wasn’t just any woman.

It was Felicity.

And yes, she knew him.

But he also knew her. That knowledge both excited and calmed him. Felicity really was able to center him.

“Come here,” Oliver said as he walked by Felicity and over to the bed. He captured her hand again and gently pulled her along. At the bed, he stared into her eyes. She stared back at him. Oliver felt as if he was the center of Felicity’s universe. It awed him.

He leaned down and captured her lips in his. Oliver was still amazed he was allowed to do that. The fire that burned in him in the afternoon blazed back to life instantaneously.

They both deepened the kiss at the same time. Oliver pulled Felicity up against him. He ran his hands up and down her body, savoring every dip, every curve, every millimeter of skin her dress didn’t cover.

Oliver bent his knees a bit to better allow his hips to grind against Felicity’s. The friction was delicious, but it wasn’t enough. Though her dress was fantastic at emphasizing Felicity’s amazing figure, it was too tight for Oliver to squeeze a leg in between hers. And he craved for any part of him to be between Felicity’s legs.

The dress had to go. The dilemma Oliver had was Felicity’s tongue entered his mouth, gliding against his own tongue. One of her hands lightly scratched his scalp at the base of his neck. Pleasure ran up and down his whole body. He didn’t want it stop.

But he knew both of them would somehow feel even better, if their actions continued to progress.

Reluctantly, Oliver untangled himself from Felicity. Her red swollen lips immediately pouted. The skin around her lips was also red. Oliver chuckled at her pout with understanding and ran a thumb gently over her abraded skin. He made a mental note to order some beard softener.

His hands caressed her slim but strong shoulders. Oliver stepped around Felicity, keeping his hands on her soft skin, to face her back. Staring down at the red dress, Oliver took back any negative thoughts he may have had about it. The zipper started at the top of the dress and ended at the very bottom.

He felt himself get harder.

Oliver moved his hands to the top of Felicity’s dress. His hands shook. He felt both terrified and awed. After a deep breath, Oliver realized he was safe with her.
Blinking back the tears in his eyes, Oliver moved closer to Felicity and placed languid kisses all along her neck and shoulders. Felicity gasped and her hand went up and around his neck. She pulled gently at his hair. The combination of Felicity’s soft skin on his lips and the slight pain from her hair pulling, clouded his mind and the world outside Oliver’s bedroom faded away completely.

He took a step back and focused on her zipper. His now steady hands gripped the tab. Oliver, with agonizing slowness, pulled the zipper down. More and more of Felicity’s skin became exposed. Her matching red thong left little to Oliver’s imagination. He bent down to continue unzipping the dress and he was offered peeks of Felicity’s thighs.

The dress slid partially open once Oliver reached the end of the dress. He flipped the two sides further apart so the dress hung at Felicity’s sides. Her ass cheeks curved perfectly into her legs.

Oliver couldn’t help himself and palmed Felicity’s cheeks in each of his hands. Felicity’s ass was perfect. More perfect than he had imagined her ass would feel like.

And he could finally admit to fantasizing about his best friend.

On his knees, Oliver couldn’t resist a slow and delicate bite, though it was more like scraping his teeth against one of Felicity’s ass cheeks. Felicity jumped in surprise and Oliver brought his hands around to her hips, inside her dress, to keep her steady. He bit the other cheek and this time Felicity quietly moaned.

Being this close to her, Oliver could smell her arousal. He became harder. Oliver hooked his thumbs in her thong and pulled them down. He was surprised to find Felicity barefoot. Looking over toward the door, Oliver saw her shoes abandoned haphazardly in the middle of the room.

Felicity stepped out of her thong and straightened her arms. Her dress pooled on the floor in front of her. There was some inherent pride in Oliver when he thought of her clothes strewed across his bedroom. With that, he threw her thong somewhere behind him.

Felicity hadn’t worn a bra. Oliver realized Felicity stood before him completely nude. His mouth went dry. How had he become so fortunate?

Turning to face Oliver, Felicity reached down for him.

“I’m happy where I am,” Oliver said, his voice much lower than usual, as he shook his head. His eyes traveled up her body. Felicity’s belly button had a freckle next to it. Her stomach rounded out, her upper abdomen was flat. Felicity’s breasts were perfect for his hands. Her nipples were hard and poked out. Felicity blushed and it spanned down to her chest.

Oliver kept his eyes moving up. They landed on Felicity’s lips, which she bit. He smiled and licked his own lips.

“Oliver,” Felicity groaned. “At least take off your clothes.”

“I suppose that is only fair,” Oliver responded with a jerk of his eyebrow. Felicity’s smile quirked. With his hands still on her hips, Oliver shifted her to sit on his bed.

He stood up and his pants became a little less tight as the material no longer bunched up against him. Oliver had been so focused on Felicity he hadn’t realized how uncomfortable his pants had been. Having no patience for his clothing, Oliver ripped the buttons down his dark blue dress shirt and pulled it off. He then shucked his undershirt. Oliver went to work on his belt and toed his shoes off. His pants and boxers went down together. He stepped out of those and took his socks off as well.
When Oliver stood up, Felicity sat at the head of the bed and had covered a laugh with her hand. Oliver felt insecurity creep through him. She saw the embarrassment on his face and quickly explained, “I guess I don’t get the strip show you got?”

Oliver laughed, feeling relieved. “Next time.”

They both smiled at the thought of the many more times like these they would have.

Felicity’s eye line finally went downward and she took him all in. A gasp escaped her lips and an eyebrow arched in pleasant surprise. The cocky grin on Oliver’s face took hold before Oliver could stop it.

Oliver sat on the bed and crawled over to Felicity’s legs. His hand smoothed over her legs as he went. Her skin felt amazing.

He kissed the inside of her ankles and worked his way up to her knees. Oliver slowed down and gave each inch of skin on the inside of her soft thighs attention. He kissed. He licked. He bit.

Felicity tugged on his hair as she tried to guide him to where she most wanted him. Oliver ignored her.

“Oliver,” Felicity hissed. “Please.” Her voice took on a desperate tone. Oliver didn’t divert from his path. Felicity moaned and bucked her hips, but nothing could deter him from exploring every inch of her.

Once he got closer to her center, Oliver tasted her wetness. It was sweet and Oliver knew from the first swipe of his tongue he was already addicted.

Oliver reached Felicity’s core. Felicity sighed as he placed her legs over his shoulders. Oliver licked a long stripe on her outer lips. Felicity wiggled her hips in an attempt to get closer to Oliver.

“Oliver,” Felicity breathy voice pleaded. He smiled and wrapped an arm around one of Felicity’s legs, placing his hand above her pubic bone. Felicity whimpered with complaint about her lack of movement. Oliver looked up into her eyes, smiled, and then dipped his tongue into her folds.

Felicity breathed harder. Oliver focused on swirling his tongue around her clit. After only a few moments, Felicity moaned after every swirl.

She was so wet. Part of Oliver wanted to just plunge himself into her and thrust until he came. He knew it wouldn’t take long, but Oliver wanted to savor their first time. He loved how responsive Felicity was; he hadn’t even entered her yet and the apple of her cheeks burned bright red.

He brought his other hand to Felicity’s entrance and embedded just the top of his finger into her.

“Oliver,” Felicity growled. “Please stop teasing me.” Oliver was teasing her. It surprised Oliver how much he enjoyed drawing the experience out. He inserted his whole finger and reveled in her hot tightness. Oliver’s cock ached in the most painfully pleasant of ways.

“Mmmm,” Felicity groaned.

He added another finger and set a rapid pace.

“Ahhh.”

Oliver then wrapped his lips around Felicity’s clit and alternated between licking and sucking.
“Oh, yes, oh god, yes, Oliver, oh, oh god,” Felicity moaned out. Oliver hummed at her response. He looked up at her and brought his hand on her hip up to her breast. Oliver caressed it and marveled at its softness before pinching her nipple, which caused Felicity to squeeze her legs around his head.

Doubling his focus on Felicity, Oliver changed the angle of his fingers and found her soft fleshy spot inside. Felicity’s back arched.

“Oliver!”

He maintained his pace, ensuring he hit that spot inside her on every thrust. Oliver sucked her clit into his mouth hard.

Felicity’s inner muscles clamped against his fingers, just as her legs mirrored that around Oliver’s head. He worked Felicity through her orgasm. Oliver looked up at her and saw a flush start from her head and go all the way down to her breasts. She straightened her legs out straight and her thigh muscles shook fiercely. Felicity’s face looked suspended in bliss and Oliver knew he could never see that face too many times.

She slowly breathed again and her legs unclamped themselves. Felicity’s back found its way back to the bed as she brought her hands up to her face to wipe the sweat beaded on her forehead.

“That was amazing,” Felicity praised in an astonished and airy voice, in between gulping breaths. She smiled up at Oliver as he lifted her legs off his shoulders and kneeled in between them.

Felicity was more beautiful than he had ever seen her before.

Oliver gave her only a moment to recuperate as his cock throbbed for attention.

Reaching for a pillow behind Felicity, Oliver kissed her lips. Just as Oliver realized his face was wet from her, Felicity deepened the kiss. Oliver lingered at her lips. Her soft lips could make him plead, pillage, or partake in all sorts of rougish behavior for only a shot at feeling her lips against his own again. Oliver managed to remove himself from her lips and snag a pillow Felicity wasn’t using.

He sat back up. Oliver raised Felicity’s legs and ass to slide the pillow underneath her. Felicity furrowed her brow.

“Just trust me,” Oliver replied to her unspoken question. Felicity smiled and bit her lip. Oliver kneeled again between her legs and looked down at her center. He mumbled to himself, “So wet.”

Oliver reached over to his nightstand and pulled out a condom. Taking his cock in his hand, pre-come smeared over it, he rolled the condom on. Oliver slipped his cock through her folds and over her clit.

“Oh,” Felicity cried out when the tip of his cock bumped her oversensitive clit for the second time. Oliver drew back and lined himself up at her entrance.

Slowly Oliver sank his cock into her as he maintained eye contact with Felicity.

His mind blanked out.

Felicity felt even more incredible than he assumed she would feel.

Her wet heat was beyond perfect. The angle the pillow provided allowed Oliver to penetrate Felicity deeply. Soon his entire length was surrounded in her.

“Yes,” Oliver growled.

Oliver thrust in and out of Felicity at a slow pace, but the tingle at the base of his spine told him he wasn’t going to last long.

“Yes,” Felicity cried out. Knowing she was ready, he grasped the back of Felicity’s knees and used them as leverage to drive into her rapidly. Oliver had never thrust as quickly before. A few drops of sweat dripped off him onto Felicity’s breasts and rolled down her abs. Her forehead and neck dripped with sweat, too.

“Oh, oh, oh,” Felicity said each time the base of his groin hit her clit. Her face flushed again and Oliver knew she was close. He needed her to come soon; once more before he did. Keeping eye contact with her, Oliver was overcome with love. The warmth of blissful happiness spread throughout his body. He smiled down at Felicity. She smiled back. A smile so simple and full of love. He felt his balls tighten.

He took one arm and placed it in between him and Felicity. His thumb searched out her clit and stroked it in rapid, tiny circles.

Felicity’s core contracted around Oliver’s cock and her back arched against Oliver. Her mouth opened in a silent scream.

Her orgasm pulled Oliver’s from him. His mind whited out and he thrust into Felicity one more time. Oliver’s release drew out and he vaguely wondered if there would be anything left of him afterward. He didn’t care.

Oliver wanted to give all of himself over to Felicity.

After he was spent, Oliver pulled himself out of Felicity. They both whimpered at the loss. He grabbed the pillow underneath Felicity and threw it off the bed. He pulled the condom off and threw it in the trash can next to his side of the bed. Oliver turned around and flopped down next to Felicity. His flop caused the bed to bounce and Felicity squeaked and seized a hold of his hand.

When she felt secure of the bed not tossing her out of it, Oliver interlaced his fingers with hers and held on tight.

They were both breathing heavy.

“That was,” Felicity huffed. “That was…wow. I mean…wow.”

A full belly laugh escaped Oliver and took a few seconds before he could get out, “Is Felicity Smoak, the babbler of babbles, at a loss for words?”

“I told you,” Felicity reprimanded with a light slap to his arm, “where you’re concerned, I don’t have the words to fully and completely express how I feel.”

“Me, too,” Oliver replied softly. He turned toward her and she followed his lead. His arm went around her and Oliver held Felicity over his heart. He stroked her sweaty hair and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

He never wanted to let her go.
After they cleaned themselves up and Felicity shivered, Oliver moved them underneath the sheet and blanket. They had dozed off for a couple hours. The newness of being in each other’s arms created an excitement where they were unable to sleep for long. Oliver sat up against the headboard and Felicity followed him, in between his legs and her back against Oliver’s torso. Oliver wrapped his arms around Felicity and rested his head on hers.

“So now what?” Felicity asked in a whisper. The only light came from behind Oliver’s sheer curtains as the nearly full moon shone down on them.

“What do you mean?” Oliver whispered back.

“Well, we’ve admitted our feelings for one another.” Felicity ticked off.

“Hm-mm.”

“And now we’ve slept together.”

“Yes,” Oliver replied with a wide smile. “I have fond memories of that.”

She reached her hand up behind her and hit the back of her hand against his chest. “So, what do we do now?”

“Felicity, are you planning on leaving me again?” Oliver only half-kidded. He tried to hide his insecurity in the joke. He and Felicity were too new for him to have a lot of confidence in them as a couple.

“No!” Felicity responded a little too loudly and abruptly sat up. The sheet and blanket fell down to their waists. Felicity’s skin glowed in the moonlight. She turned around and cupped his face in her hand as if she could soothe all his fear away. Oliver leaned into Felicity’s hand and realized she did have that superpower. She lowered her voice back in a whisper and eased her way back into Oliver’s embrace, “No. I just wonder what the next step for us is. When we’re ready for a next step. I’m not saying we are. I just like to plan things in my head first. You know what, never mind. Forget I said anything.”

Oliver wrapped his arms around her tighter and kissed her head. “It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize for wanting to know where we are going.”

She sighed and fully relaxed against him. “I love you, Oliver.” Her fingers danced across his arms and Oliver closed his eyes at light sensation. Her soft breathing calmed him further.

“I love you too, Felicity.”

They both snuggled into their love for each other. Happiness and peace seemed to envelop them. Oliver closed his eyes and tried to capture every detail about this moment, from her hair out of her ponytail skimming his chest when Felicity shifted, to the feeling of his heart swelling so much he knew it would burst. Years later he wanted to remember exactly how he felt.

“I suppose the next step is telling people,” Felicity suggested as she brought Oliver out of his cataloging. Felicity sounded less than thrilled and more dreading the idea. “Can we just skip this step? Have everybody learn through osmosis and us being a couple is just normal?”

“Do you have a way of doing that?” Oliver wouldn’t be surprised if she did.

“No.”
“It won’t be bad. It’ll be fun to see people’s reactions to us. We’ll have to Facetime Thea and Roy. Digg will just be smug about it so he won’t be any fun to tell.”

“And your mom?” Felicity asked in a hesitant voice.

Shit.

“I know,” Felicity continued, “she doesn’t deal well with change. And us, as in us,” Felicity used her arm to wave around them, “might be confusing and agitate her.”

“We’ll make it work.” Oliver tried to assure Felicity but he wasn’t confident himself. How would Moira deal with the change of his and Felicity’s relationship status? Oliver had moved back into the manor for a reason. To take care of Moira. He couldn’t just abandon his mother because he would get laid regularly. Not that that was what he and Felicity had. But Oliver couldn’t do that to Moira. Not even for Felicity.

And Oliver couldn’t ask Felicity to wait for him.

That wouldn’t be fair to any of them. Oliver and Felicity would be missing each other and wanting to be together. They would start to resent Moira and all her needs.

Felicity was the only one who knew what caring for Moira cost him. He didn’t want Felicity to pay the price as well. But Oliver wasn’t sure they had any options.

“What if,” Felicity questioned, her tone high and hesitant, “we minimize the change for Moira?”

“How do we do that?”

“I could--when you’re ready, when we’re both ready. I’m not saying we’re ready now. I’m just brainstorming. And I think this will work. At least I hope so. But, like I said, only when we’re both ready. I don’t want you to feel like I’m pressuring you. Or putting the gas pedal on us. Because I’m not. I’m just coming up with an option.”

“Felicity,” Oliver soothed and kissed her head. “What is it?”

“I…I could move in here. With you.” Felicity’s voice was small. Oliver knew she didn’t want to overstep and did everything she could to avoid it.

It was an amazing offer. Truly generous. But Oliver couldn’t accept it. He couldn’t put this life on her. Felicity deserved better. And Oliver couldn’t offer Felicity better. At least not at this point in his life.

His heart dropped into his stomach.

“I can’t…I can’t let you do that,” Oliver said, every word drenched in pain.

“Excuse me?” Felicity asked in an accusatory tone. She sat up and scooted over to the side of Oliver to better look at him. She held the sheet and blanket against her. “Did you just say ‘let me?’ I don’t do or not do anything because I have your permission. That won’t be changing. I’m the one who decides my life choices. Me, buddy.” Felicity poked him in the chest. “Not you. Me.”

Oliver couldn’t hold back a smile. “Okay. Sorry.”

“Now that we have that settled.” Felicity bit her lip, blushed, and asked in a sheepish voice, “You weren’t saying I couldn’t move in because you don’t want me here?”
“Felicity, I…,” Oliver grasped her hand and held it between both of his, “it would be amazing to have you here. I just don’t want you to move in here and regret it.”

“Oliver, I would never regret it.”

“My mom wasn’t exactly an easy person to live with before her stroke. Now, it’s…”

“I know what it’s like,” Felicity interrupted. “I see what you go through. All you do for her.”

“And then you get to take a break from it and go home. Your home. The home you bought with your own money. The home you put so much thought into. The home you love. How selfish would I be to ask you to give that up for me?”

“First,” Felicity sat up straighter and her tone became more business-like, “you didn’t ask me, I offered. Sort of. Offered it in a way if you wanted it I’d do it. Because I do want to. That would be my second point. Third, my townhouse isn’t a home because I don’t have you there with me. Without you it’s just a place for me to sleep and hang my clothes. Which I could do both here.

“And I don’t know if you noticed, but you live in a freaking mansion. It’s not like I’d be downgrading. “

“But your townhouse is so…you. It is so full of light and so much closer to everything in town compared to here.”

“You are so stubborn,” Felicity said under her breath as she rolled her eyes and, with her elbow on her knee, rested her forehead on her hand. After a moment, she sat back up. “Let’s get one thing out of the way so I don’t keep getting my feelings hurt. Just answer yes or no. I don’t want to hear anything else. Do you want me to move in here with you?”

Oliver sighed and answered, “Yes.”

“Okay, good. Nope. Nothing else.” Felicity responded when Oliver tried to elaborate his answer. He shut his mouth and waited. “To make you feel better, I’ll redecorate your room. Which would be our room. And, you’re aware I telecommute to work, like ninety to ninety-five percent of the time, right?”

“But you don’t telecommute to QC. You’re there a lot.”

“Because you’re there a lot, Dummy. I love you, remember?”

“Yes,” Oliver said with a bashful smile. “I seem to remember you saying something about that.” The fact still blew his mind.

“That settles it. I’m moving in. Now we just have to decide when.”

Oliver put his hands out in question, “Uh, tonight? Now?”

“Oliver, be serious. We only just started dating. We can’t move in together before we technically have our first date.”

“You slept with me before our first date,” Oliver pointed out. Felicity smacked his arm. “Ow.”

“It’s too fast.”

“Says who?” Oliver asked. He turned more towards her and clasped her hands. The sheet and blanket fell. “Are you worried about what other people will think?”
“No.”

“Then why does it matter what we choose to be our timetable? Haven’t we waited long enough?”

Felicity looked down at their joined hands. Oliver squeezed her hands. She looked back up at him and asked, “What if you change your mind? You just realized you loved me a couple days ago. And now you’re talking about moving in together and playing house. What if I move in and you realize this isn’t what you really want?”

Oliver looked at Felicity, bewildered. It took a moment for him to find his voice. “Felicity, come here.” He reached around her and pulled Felicity into his side where he could hold her. “I know I was slow on the uptake. But don’t let my idiocy keep you from feeling secure about how I feel. I love you. That is never going to change. I’m almost positive my love for you is tattooed on my DNA. I couldn’t stop loving you any more than I could stop breathing. You’re it for me.”

He leaned her back and enveloped her lips around his. He had only meant to brush her lips, but once he felt her lips around his, Oliver deepened the kiss. He pulled her bottom lip in between his and ran his tongue across it. He then slipped his tongue inside her mouth and she moaned. Oliver gripped Felicity’s head to bring her closer. Her hand came up and hooked around his neck. He could feel himself start to harden. Oliver finally released her lips and gave her a couple pecks. He moved his head away, and moved his hand under her arm and in between her shoulder blades.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Oliver said. He grazed her back lightly. “I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

“Okay. So, I’m moving in?” Felicity asked.

“Yes.”

“You know I’m not leaving this bed tonight, so packing will have to wait.”

“I think I can live with that,” Oliver replied suggestively.

“The change of address form with the post office will have to wait, too.”

“I don’t think they’re open right now anyway.”

“And though realtors tend to be fairly enthusiastic about new clients, I’m not sure any of them would appreciate a phone call at this hour.”

“That’s very considerate,” Oliver responded. He slid down onto his back, wrapped his hand around Felicity’s hip, and pulled her on top of him.

Felicity shrieked and then asked, “Do I not get my own side of the bed?”

“No,” Oliver said. “You know what they say, ‘sharing is caring.’”

“Very true.” She ground her hips into his groin, causing Oliver to hiss. His cock was at full attention now. “You know what they don’t say that about?”

“What?” Oliver has lost the thread of conversation as he focused solely on her center and her breasts scraping against his chest in a fantastic way.

Felicity sat up halfway, bracing herself on Oliver’s shoulders, to regain Oliver’s conversation. In doing so, she put more pressure on his cock and he slipped in between her wet thighs. Her breasts
were also on full display. He reached up and palmed both breasts. “Hey,” Felicity said. Oliver looked back up into her eyes. “They don’t say sharing is caring in regard to closet space. I have a strong need for lots of closet space.”

“Whatever you want if you just stop teasing me right now.”

She laughed and laid back down on top of him, her lips meeting his.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity tell Moira about their change in relationship status. When Oliver and Felicity have dinner at Digg and Lyla’s, they get ambushed.

Saturday morning found Oliver with Felicity in the sitting room. Oliver rubbed his finger and thumb together as they both waited for Jax to bring down Moira from her bedroom. Felicity’s leg bounced up and down. The week had been both wonderful and anxiety-ridden. The couple wanted Moira to be the first to know about their new relationship status. Since it was more likely Moira would be more clear-headed in the morning, they waited until Saturday. Oliver felt it better if he didn’t spend any more time away from the office.

So, Oliver and Felicity kept their relationship a secret.

Now they both felt nervous. Moira was the one person they were most apprehensive for her reaction. Moira had the power to cause Oliver, and Felicity to a certain extent, to feel guilty about their relationship. Neither wanted Moira to feel as if she was being abandoned.

“Good morning, you two,” Moira greeted as she and Jax walked into the room.

“Good morning, Mom.” Oliver jumped up to help Moira sit down.

“I’m fine, Oliver. I haven’t forgotten how to sit down.”

“Right. Sorry.” Oliver walked back to the couch and sat back down next to Felicity.

“You two look as if you’re about to face the…the thing,” Moira gestured with one hand slicing down. “What do you call it? France? No.” Moira shook her head.

“Guillotine?” Felicity suggested.

“Yes, that’s it,” Moira responded with a smile and happy sigh. “What’s going on?”

“Mom, you’re feeling okay today?”

“Yes. I’m having a good day today, as I’m sure, Jax already told you.”

“I’ll go ahead and give you guys some privacy,” Jax said as he backed out of the room. “Holler if you need anything.”

“What is this all about?” Moira asked.

“Well, Mom, we have something to tell you,” Oliver told the coffee table in front of Moira.

“I realized that much.”

Next to him, Oliver heard Felicity laugh. He looked over at her. Felicity looked at Moira. Oliver looked over and saw Moira smiling. Moira sassed him and enjoyed it.
“Fine, Mom. Felicity and I are together,” Oliver announced. And a moment later added, “As a couple.”

“I know what together means, Oliver. I’m not that old.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Oliver focused on keeping eye contact with Moira. He knew he sat too straight to look natural, but he didn’t want to fidget any more than he already had. Moira glanced from Oliver to Felicity and back again. Her face was blank and nothing betrayed what Moira thought or felt. A whole swarm of butterflies hatched in his stomach.

“I thought you two were already a couple,” Moira responded, confused.

“No, Moira,” Felicity answered. “We just started seeing each other this week.”

Moira’s eyes narrowed as she studied Oliver and Felicity. She attempted to realign her thinking with the new information. Oliver wondered if Moira would forget and they would have to tell her again. After what had felt like ten solid minutes of silence, Moira said, “It’s about time. You haven’t told me before, right?”

“No,” Oliver breathed.

“Good,” Moira responded.

Felicity sighed next to him and her shoulders visibly relaxed. Without a conscious thought, Oliver reached over and squeezed Felicity’s hand. Slowly, his posture became slack as well.

“You’re really okay with this?” Oliver asked. He had built up her reaction so much beforehand, Oliver didn’t know how to respond to Moira’s easy acceptance.

“Sweetheart, I just want you to be happy. And no one has ever made you happier than Felicity. And, as a proud mother, I’d like to believe the same is true for you, Felicity.”

“It is,” Felicity responded in a soft voice. “Thank you.”

“Thank you. Oliver wouldn’t have become who he is now without your…um…being here. I’m very grateful for that.”

“Uh, Mom, there’s something else.”

“Do I get to help plan a wedding?” Moira asked as she leaned toward them. Her voice became higher and her words came out in a rush. Moira quickly turned to Felicity. “Oh, are you pregnant?”

“No, Mom. No. Felicity is going to move in with me. Us.”

“Oh,” Moira sat back in her chair clearly disappointed. “That’s nice but I already thought she lived here.”

Oliver carefully prodded. He wanted to ensure Moira understood and was ready for the changes Felicity living at the manor would bring, “You’re not worried about what that might mean to you?”

“What will change? Felicity is here almost every night for dinner as it is. Now I’ll get to see her at breakfast too. This is hardly anything exciting. For me at least.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Oliver said with a tiny smile.
“It’s fine. It’s your lives. I will just say September is a beautiful time for a wedding.”

“Mm,” Felicity replied. “I always preferred winter weddings, myself.”

“Those can be very beautiful,” Moira commented. “And, Thea is a very...um...what is it? Fast? No. Fast planner. I have several ideas.”

“Mom,” Oliver said in warning.

“Okay, okay,” Moira said. As she leaned closer to Oliver, she whispered, “I have some beautiful rings that are family…” she sighed and went with “hand-me-downs from both the Queens and the Deardens, if you need one.”

With his hand on Felicity’s lower back, Oliver rang the doorbell. Not two seconds later, Digg answered the door with a big, goofy grin on his face.

“Stop,” Oliver said before Digg got to say anything.

“I didn’t say anything,” Digg replied, his smile still stretched from ear to ear. “I’m just so happy to see you two together. Finally! I was beginning to think I would have kidnap the two of you and lock you in a closet to have you admit your feelings for each other. Now look at you. A couple who live together and drive to their friend’s house for dinner together.”

“Wow, John,” Felicity exclaimed with a smile. “I’m not sure I’ve ever heard you say so much at once.”

Oliver laughed and Digg soon joined in.

“Johnny, let them in,” Lyla called out as she walked toward the door. “They aren’t pieces of art you stare at to analyze their contrast of dark and light.”


“Though don’t get too comfortable,” Lyla chimed in. “We’re having dinner out on the patio.”

“Yay, you two finally get to use it,” Felicity said. “When did the patio finally get finished?”

“Last week,” Digg said. The group made their way through the house to exit through the back. The smell of food on the grill greeted them when they made it to the kitchen. They sat around the stone fire pit in thickly padded patio rocking chairs. Everyone avoided the seats placed in the path of the smoke. The sun became lower in the sky, but, with the longer summer nights, it would be a while until the sun set. “But Lyla has been out of town, so we haven’t had a chance to use it.”

“It looks amazing,” Felicity praised. The deck was made of a dark wood. The boards ran diagonally and met in the center. There were small lights on the three steps down to the yard and each big post of the railing had a light fixture on top.

“It should be after all we spent on it,” Digg complained.

“Stop it, Johnny. There was no way you could have done all this work and ran the bakery.”

“Not unless you’ve given up sleep completely,” Oliver joked.
“Ha,” Digg said. He and Lyla shared a look. Before Oliver or Felicity could question it, Digg jumped out of his chair. “Where are my manners? Can I get you two anything to drink?”

“May I have a glass of wine, please?” Felicity asked. Oliver almost made fun of her politeness, but didn’t see that working out too well for him so Oliver ignored it.

“I’ll have a beer.”

Once everyone had drinks and the food checked on, the two couples enjoyed each other’s company. It was much the same as before when the four of them would hangout and Oliver and Felicity weren’t a couple. Though Oliver felt much happier and didn’t resent Digg and Lyla when they shared a kiss or held hands. In fact, with Digg and Lyla showing affection to one another, it gave Oliver permission to share lingering touches or glances with Felicity.

“How have others reacted to you two being together?” Digg asked, his smile still wide.

“My mom was fine with it. Wasn’t even a little surprised,” Oliver responded.

“And I keep reminding Oliver that’s a good thing,” Felicity said as she held his hand. Oliver stroked his thumb against hers. “My ears have still not recovered from Thea’s screaming.”

“She was excited, huh?” Lyla asked.

“I thought Roy would have to sedate her,” Oliver said. He laughed at the memory of his and Felicity’s Skype call with Thea and Roy. Roy only added to the number of times Oliver was called an idiot for waiting so long.

“Felicity,” Lyla said. “Have you moved all the way into the Queen manor yet?”

“Everything is moved. But there are boxes everywhere. You know that thing where you don’t realize how much stuff you have until you have to move it? I am firmly in that place right now. I have so much crap.”

“It’s not all crap,” Oliver said as he placed his hand on her knee and rubbed it comfortingly. “I happen to like all the photos of you from your younger years I keep finding.”

“Oh, shh,” Felicity said with a glare in Oliver’s direction. Oliver chuckled. She ignored him and faced Digg and Lyla. “Anyway, my place sold. Really quickly. So, I had to get it out.”

“I still don’t understand why you won’t let me hire a professional organizer for you.”

“Because, this way I get to sort through all my crap and decide what I need to keep and what I can donate, or, in some cases, incinerate.”

“Don’t bother trying to burn your pictures,” Oliver said. “I have them all in a safe place back home.”

He loved that.

Home.

He loved saying it.

Oliver said it way more than necessary with Felicity. He was always saying he’d meet her at home. Or the thing he was looking for was probably at home intermixed with her things. Or asking Felicity when she would be home.
The doorbell rang and Digg and Lyla gave each other an apprehensive look. Oliver’s curiosity became too much for him to hold in. “Okay, what’s going on with you two? Who is at the door?”

“I should get that,” Digg said as he stood up and made a quick exit. Both Oliver and Felicity stared at Lyla expectantly.

“Do you need a refill?” Lyla asked, pointedly ignoring their questioning looks.

“Damn it, Lyla,” Felicity exclaimed. “You know I don’t handle surprises well. Surprises and babbling don’t go well together. Just tell us.”

“I’m going to check on the food.” Lyla stood up and walked over to the grill. Felicity looked over at Oliver and he shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you think we should be worried?” Felicity asked.

“I don’t know why. Digg and Lyla are our friends.”

“Let’s just hope it isn’t Isabel and Slade.”

“Oh, god,” Oliver cried out. “One of us will fake the stomach flu if that happens.”

“No. That’s too obvious. I’ll claim menstrual cramps. It doesn’t lead to a lot of follow up questions and people expect them to be over soon.”

Oliver looked over at Felicity, impressed. He whispered in a low tone, “Did you know your brilliant mind turns me on? Because it does.” Felicity blushed. Oliver leaned closer to Felicity and dragged his finger lightly across her hand. “Seriously. How long can we be together in the bathroom before Digg and Lyla notice?”

“Not long enough,” Felicity answered as she shook her head at Oliver’s silliness.

“Hmm. I think we’re going to need to test that theory. Use the scientific method and do many experiments.”

“That would be one study where I wouldn’t mind being a lab rat. As long as I was with you.”

“Later tonight?” Oliver asked with a hopeful tone.

“Yes. But when we get back home. Not here.” Oliver’s heart skipped and he realized he loved hearing Felicity call the manor home more than he liked saying it.

Just as he turned to tell Felicity that, Digg came out to rejoin them. Oliver and Felicity turned their heads to find Sara with him. She had her hands in her back pockets and appeared hesitant to come outside completely, staying in the door frame.

“Hi, Ollie. Felicity.”

“Sara,” Oliver said, more on reflex than anything else. He blinked a couple times to realize Sara really was there and not a figment of his imagination. “I-I didn’t know you would be here.”

“I asked Digg not to tell you,” Sara answered. “I wanted the chance to talk to you and didn’t want to give you the opportunity to not show up. Sorry.”

“It’s…that’s fine,” Oliver replied, lying.
He knew both he and Felicity could have used a warning about Sara’s presence at tonight’s dinner. It would have been better if they had been able to mentally prepared for seeing her. Oliver didn’t like being forced into a conversation he wasn’t sure he was ready for. Besides being able to think of what Oliver wanted to say to Sara, he would have had another beer. If he asked for a beer right at that moment, everyone would think Oliver had more feelings for Sara than he had told everyone. In reality, he just needed something to help calm him down.

There was also the matter of Sara putting Digg and Lyla in the middle of whatever was between Oliver and Sara. Oliver wanted to be angry with them, but knew they had been put in a rough spot.

Oliver turned to Felicity. Her lips were set in a straight line and she sat unnaturally still. It took a moment, but Felicity took her eyes off Sara and focused on Oliver. Felicity relaxed a centimeter and gave him a small smile. He smiled back but Oliver was unsure if Felicity’s smile was genuine.

“Ollie, can I speak with you privately?” Sara asked. Oliver jiggled his leg. He could tell Sara wasn’t sure what his answer would be. The petty part of him wanted to say no. He knew it’d be better to get this awkward conversation over with, so everyone could relax.

“Sure. Digg, is it okay if we use your living room?”

“Of course.”

Sara made her way back inside. Oliver placed a kiss on Felicity’s cheek and squeezed her hand. Felicity smiled and squeezed back. Oliver felt better knowing he had Felicity’s support. As Oliver passed Digg, Digg mouthed ‘sorry’ to him. Oliver shook his head and gave the message Digg shouldn’t worry about it.

In the living room, Oliver found Sara pacing. Oliver sighed. He wasn’t in the mood to make Sara feel at ease after her actions had the potential to hurt him. The situation could have ended badly for both of them because of Sara’s recklessness. Oliver felt Sara should feel bad about her behavior. Oliver wasn’t angry because he could have fallen for Sara. He was angry because he could have lost his chance with Felicity. Sara’s, and his, actions did hurt Felicity. Sara wasn’t aware of the pain she inflicted, but Felicity had to stand by and watch Sara and Oliver flirt. Oliver felt uncertain if he could have been as gracious as Felicity if it had been Felicity and Barry.

Sara didn’t bear the whole weight of the blame. Oliver hadn’t found a way to forgive himself wholly for his part in causing Felicity pain.

He sat down on the couch and had a front row seat to Sara’s pacing route. Oliver waited for Sara to start talking and kept his body still.

His eye gravitated to the white gold diamond and ruby wedding band around Sara’s finger. Besides the contrasting color of metals, it matched Nyssa’s ring perfectly. Oliver shook his head.

After several moments of silence, Sara finally stopped pacing, faced Oliver in a stiff position, and said, “I’m sorry. I know I wasn’t fair to you and I’m sorry. My intention wasn’t to hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me, Sara,” Oliver said. “But that’s only because you were lucky.”

“I know,” Sara replied. She went back to pacing and said underneath her breath, “I keep being reminded by everyone how lucky I am.”

“That’s because you are.”
“It didn’t feel that way when Nyssa and I lied.” Sara’s voice got louder and her tone developed an edge. “It felt like the whole world was out to get us.”

“That didn’t give you the right to use people the way you did.” Oliver kept his voice calm and non-accusatory. Oliver felt, however, annoyed about her actions and her seemingly uncaring attitude about what she had done.

“I know. But if you could only see it from my side.”

“I can sympathize. But that doesn’t take away the damage you did and could have done.”

Sara went back to pacing and Oliver leaned back on the couch. It felt as if someone made her apologize and she only did it to make them happy, not because she was apologetic.

In fact, it appeared as if Sara was spoiling for fight. She didn’t seem to expect forgiveness so she was here to say she tried to apologize but Oliver acted unreasonable and wouldn’t listen to her. He wasn’t going to let Sara off the hook so easily and, therefore, refused to fight with her.

Sitting down on a chair, Sara tried again. “I love Nyssa. And at the time, letting everyone know we married each other wasn’t a possibility. If it had gotten back to Ra’s, he would have made Nyssa’s life horrible. If she had been lucky, he would just have disowned her and left her penniless.”

“Why couldn’t you have supported you both? You’re a successful business owner, certainly you could have afforded it?”

“It wasn’t just about the money. Though Nyssa didn’t want to come into the marriage feeling as if she wasn’t bringing anything to it. She loved her father. Despite who he was, Nyssa wanted his acceptance and love. I think…I think she believed one day he would see her as she really is and respect that.”

“That doesn’t sound like the man that’s been described to me.”

“It isn’t. But he was Nyssa’s father. I couldn’t force her to give him up. Especially after losing mine so abruptly.”

“You really didn’t trust anybody?”

“Where Ra’s was concerned? No,” Sara replied. With her elbows on her knees, Sara looked down at her hands that twisted around each other. “When I got into town, you became a good red herring.”

“Thanks,” Oliver sarcastically replied. Women had called him many things throughout the years. A red herring was never one of them.

“Don’t be insulted. You were a very handsome and charming red herring. And if I hadn’t already been married to Nyssa, I would have been tempted by you. Fortunately, for both of us, Nyssa came into my life first.”

“She couldn’t have liked you flirting with me?” Oliver asked.

“Um, no. She did not. In fact, she almost ended everything between us because of it.”

“Then, why do it? Why hurt her like that?” Oliver really didn’t understand it. There would be nothing to convince him to hurt Felicity the way Sara must have knowingly hurt Nyssa. That Nyssa forgave Sara was just another instance of Sara being extremely lucky.
“She had convinced me we needed to mislead everybody. Nyssa felt paranoid about Ra’s connections. He had them everywhere and she didn’t want to be caught that way.”

“You flirting with me, in front of Nyssa, was her idea?” Oliver asked incredulously. That couldn’t have been the whole story or Nyssa wouldn’t have almost broken them up over it.

“Not exactly,” Sara admitted. “She told me it would be better to look as if I was unattached and able to see whomever I wanted. If those people happen to be male, so much the better.” Sara paused. She sat up and tapped her fingers on her thigh. “Nyssa didn’t tell me to date other people, just to look available and open to a relationship.

“I wasn’t thrilled with the idea, but she was so paranoid. Part of it came from growing up with her father and totally justified. The other part was probably from her PTSD. But she wouldn’t admit it, became adamant it had nothing to do with her PTSD. For a while I believed her. I shouldn’t have. I see that now. I should have pushed her, but I was afraid if I pushed too hard she would leave me.”

“So why not flirt with everybody? Why focus solely on me?”

“Ollie,” Sara gave him a look like he was insane. “Come on. You would never fall for me. I knew it the first day I met you.”

“I could have. There was no way you knew that from the beginning.”

“Fine. But it didn’t take long to see. First, you are a notorious player. I was certain I just experienced the famous Oliver Queen charm, like thousands of other women.”

“It wasn’t exactly like everybody else,” Oliver defensively argued. “I typically didn’t have a long attention span.”

“Yes, I did wonder about that,” Sara admitted. “But then I was so sure you knew about Nyssa and me. At least that we were in a relationship.”

“How did you think that?”

“You constantly told me your theories about Nyssa’s love life,” Sara said with a little laugh.

Oliver palmed his forehead and sighed. He really had been the worst. He looked back up at her, his face serious. “That’s another thing. You allowed me to talk about Nyssa, meanly. Encouraged it even. And then, I’m guessing, shared that with Nyssa.”

Sara’s face went back to somber and she looked away, confirming Oliver’s guess.

“Any chance I had at friendship with Nyssa was erased. Not to mention the pain I caused her. I never intended that.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just found your theories hilarious. And Nyssa did too. In the beginning,” Sara admitted. “I was sure you baited me to tell you the truth. I almost did too. The day I left after my first visit? It was on the tip of my tongue.”

“You couldn’t have been certain,” Oliver said, getting back to the point, “of my feelings regarding you. Or that I knew anything, which I obviously didn’t.”

“True, but I knew you would never be serious about me.” Sara’s tone took on a teasing quality. “You’re not the kind of guy who is serious about anyone.”
“I am now,” Oliver stated. He didn’t appreciate her teasing. “And us flirting hurt Felicity as well.”

Sara sighed and looked down at her fidgeting fingers. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Neither did I.” Oliver looked down at his own clasped hands.

“I’m happy you two are together now. I can see how you make each other happy. She’s good for you.”

“I know. I’m lucky too. Just not as lucky as you are.”

“I am sorry, Ollie,” Sara apologized and Oliver felt Sara was sincere this time. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Or Felicity. Or anybody else.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Sara looked up at him and asked with a hopeful tone, “Does that mean you forgive me?”

“It means I’m not angry. But it’s going to take me some time to get over it.”

“I can deal with that,” Sara nodded.

When they made it back to the group outside, the sky had become darker. The flames from the fire pit made Felicity’s skin glow. It made Oliver consider removing the lights from their bedroom and only light the room by candlelight. Oliver then realized it wouldn’t be candlelight they would see by, but tablet, phone, and computer screen light. That thought appealed less to Oliver, but not by much.

Felicity, Lyla, and Digg were quiet. They clearly had been waiting for Oliver and Sara to return. The tension felt a little high.

“Oh, you guys are back. Good. I’ll go get the food,” Lyla said. Oliver could tell Lyla was happy to leave the potential awkwardness that could come.

Sara took a seat next to Lyla’s chair and Digg handed her a beer. Oliver looked at the beer forlornly until Felicity nudged a cold beer bottle into his arm. He took it, grateful, and mentally listed all the ways he would thank her later for it.

“Sara,” Felicity said as she broke the silence. “Where’s your wife?”

Oliver didn’t hold back the laugh that came from Felicity’s blunt question. Neither could Diggle or Sara.

“She’s back at her family’s place. They are still going through everything and fighting about every little thing. I will tell you, Talia is exhausting.”

“That’s too bad for Wayne,” Oliver said with a shit-eating grin.

“Felicity,” Sara said, ignoring Oliver’s pettiness, “I wanted to tell you I’m sorry for whatever pain I caused you. I shouldn’t have been so flippant with everyone’s lives.”

“Thank you,” Felicity responded. Oliver loved and appreciated Felicity’s forgiving nature. He swore to himself he would never take advantage of that trait. At least, never again.

Lyla and Digg served up dinner on paper plates and it tasted even better than Oliver expected it to be. Digg really knew how to cook. And bake. Oliver realized he could never lose Digg as a friend or Oliver would have to survive on fancy chef’s cooking and not Digg’s casual hamburgers and potato
“There’s another reason we wanted to get together with you three,” Digg said after a natural pause in the conversation. Both he and Lyla looked nervous and Oliver really hoped everything was okay. Oliver couldn’t handle anymore change. If the two of them moved away he might move Moira, Felicity, and him with them.

“I’m pregnant,” Lyla announced.

“What?” Felicity asked excitedly. “That’s so exciting! Congrats!” She stood up and hugged both Digg and Lyla. Felicity’s hugging led to Oliver and Sara hugging the soon-to-be-parents.

“How far along are you?” Felicity asked. Her eyes seemed to sparkle she was so excited.

“I’m nineteen weeks.”


“Thank you. But if I’m not in baggy clothes you can see my obvious bump.”

“Also, we just found out the sex of the baby,” Digg added. “We’re having a girl.”

“Oh, that’s amazing,” Felicity exclaimed.

“A female Diggle?” Sara stated in an amused tone. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“That’s the last thing we wanted to share,” Lyla said.

Digg turned toward Oliver. “We wanted to name the baby after either you, Oliver,” Digg looked at Oliver and then turned to Sara, “or you, Sara. You got us out of some tough scrapes and this little baby wouldn’t exist without you. Since she’s a girl, we’re going to name her Sara. If that’s okay with you?”

“I’d be honored,” Sara said. She was as close to tears as Oliver had ever seen her.

“Good,” Lyla said. Everyone took their seats again. “We have a lot to do. I’ve transferred to a desk job at the bank, so I won’t be traveling anymore.”

“I’m so happy that’s over,” Digg admitted. “But, Oliver, you were right earlier tonight.”

“I was?” Oliver asked in a surprised tone. The others laughed. “When?”

“Lyla and I probably will be giving up sleep.”

Oliver and Felicity laughed. Oliver teased, “I can’t wait to see how long it takes for Baby Sara to have Digg wrapped around her finger.”

“Please,” Felicity added. “I bet John already is.”

“You’re right,” Lyla said. “He is.”

Digg ducked his head and took a sip of his beer. As they ate their meals, the group discussed the baby’s room and how Digg planned to keep Lyla’s sister and her kids from visiting for an extended amount of time. Sara told them Nyssa would be getting a dog from Paws and Stripes once they moved and settled in Hub City.
When dinner was done, the group continued to talk and hang out. The stars came out and frogs could be heard from the pond on the golf course a couple miles away.

“So how come I haven’t seen the two of your faces on all the tabloids speculating about when your romance really started?” Sara asked Felicity and Oliver.

“Ugh,” Felicity responded as she leaned over and placed her head on Oliver’s shoulder.

Oliver turned and kissed her head. “We’ve only told my family and Digg and Lyla.”

“Making a public announcement,” Felicity said as she raised her head back up, “just seems so fake and contrived. Seriously, Oliver, why can’t everyone just know?”

Sara laughed. “I know the feeling.”

“They’ll find out soon enough,” Digg said. “Someone will take a picture of you two kissing and send it into the tabloids. Then you’ll be sorry everybody knows.”

“That’s the thing, John,” Felicity pointed at Digg. “I want to get the novelty of us over with it.”

“Okay,” Digg appeased Felicity. Oliver could tell Digg thought Felicity would change her mind once the press learned about them. Oliver wasn’t worried. Felicity was tough.

“Oh, Ollie,” Sara exclaimed. “I got a new cell phone number.”

“You did?” Digg asked.

“Yes, Digg, I did,” Sara replied with more emphasis than Oliver thought necessary. After a beat, Sara demanded, “So give me your phones Digg and Ollie and I’ll update them. Lyla and Felicity can get the new number from you two later.”

“So pushy,” Digg said as he pulled out his phone with Oliver.

“One at a time though. And make sure it’s unlocked.”

“See, pushy.”

“Oliver, why isn’t your wallpaper a picture of you and Felicity?” Sara asked.

“And nosy,” Lyla added.

“I don’t know,” Oliver answered with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’ve been busy.”

Sara held up Oliver’s phone to take a picture of Felicity and Oliver. “I’ll fix that. Put your arm around her. Look couple-y.”

Felicity looked at Oliver with a skeptical look on her face. Oliver, not one to turn down any reason to touch Felicity, complied with Sara’s instructions. Sara looked at the couple through the phone and scrunched her face up. Looking over the phone, Sara said, “That’s not good. It’s not too different from how you two acted as friends.”

“How are we supposed to look different?” Felicity asked.

“Kiss.”

“Umm,” Felicity said. “We don’t want to make everyone else uncomfortable with PDA.”
“I’m okay with it,” Oliver confessed.

“Surprise, surprise.” Felicity shook her head.

“I think the three of us,” Sara assured, “can handle a little smooch.”

“Fine.”

“Sara, we should hangout more often,” Oliver said.

“You are hilarious,” Felicity deadpanned in a soft voice as her head neared his.

“You love me,” Oliver whispered back with a huge smile on his face. He pressed his lips against Felicity’s. His hand went up to cup the back of her neck. Her soft lips were difficult for Oliver to leave, but he felt Felicity start to move away. He released her lips and caressed her cheek before they parted.

“That’s more like it,” Sara cheered. “Now to make that your wallpaper. And I can’t forget to put my number in.”

Sara fiddled with Oliver’s phone for a few more moments and then took Digg’s and did the same.

Later, when Oliver and Felicity drove home, Oliver’s phone chirped. Felicity took it out, as Oliver drove, and unlocked it. “Oliver, why is Instagram blowing up your phone?”

“It is?”

“Yeah.” Felicity flashed his phone to him to confirm said blowing up.

“I have no idea. I probably got tagged in something?”

“Let’s look,” Felicity said as she opened the app. After a few quiet moments, Felicity announced, “Sara uploaded the picture of us kissing to your Instagram. I guess the world knows about us now.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Oliver apologizes to Barry. Applied Sciences open and the board decides on whether or not to keep Oliver as CEO.

The smell of dark roasted coffee assaulted Oliver when he stepped through the door of a place called Jitters. After a, thankfully successful, meeting with Dr. Wells regarding a partnership between QC’s Applied Sciences and Star Labs, Dr. Wells informed Oliver Barry usually went to Jitters during his lunch.

Barry Allen.

Barry became a topic Oliver had not allowed himself to think about. Oliver knew if he thought about Barry, Oliver’s guilt would potentially overshadow the happiness he had with Felicity.

Oliver had no place telling Felicity about Barry’s feelings for her. That was for Barry to tell or not tell. Oliver hadn’t talked about Barry at all with Felicity. Thankfully she hadn’t pushed. Oliver was sure it was because she thought he felt bad for firing Barry. Which Oliver did. But being the direct cause of Barry’s broken heart, again, was the main reason why Oliver regretted his association with Barry. Oliver painfully knew that without Oliver’s influence over the past year, Barry would have forgone a lot of heartbreak and disappointment.

Therefore, Oliver had done his best to keep Barry off his mind. It had worked at first. But little by little, Oliver found thoughts of Barry, and the guilt associated with Barry, sneaking into his day to day thoughts.

At QC, reports from Applied Sciences were written by Barry. At home, Moira would ask where that nice young boy was. Digg had even mentioned Barry’s absence.

When the meeting with Dr. Wells had come up, Oliver took it as a sign and stated he would attend the meeting in Central City. Cisco had looked surprised, but had accepted it as an action of the new Oliver. It became increasingly more common to find Oliver more involved in QC business.

All that led Oliver to a coffee shop in Central City having no idea how he would apologize to a kid he had taken under his wing. Oliver knew he would never do that again.

Oliver found Barry at a table sitting across from, and holding hands with, a woman who looked familiar. It took Oliver a few seconds to place her. He had never met her, but Oliver had seen a few pictures of her on Barry’s phone. She was the infamous Iris. Oliver genuinely did not know what he felt, or how he should feel, about the two of them together.

Shaking his head, Oliver hesitantly walked over to their table.

“Hi, Barry,” Oliver greeted. Barry’s jaw tightened and said nothing. Oliver turned to Iris and held his hand out to her. “You must be Iris. I’m Oliver Queen. It’s nice to meet you.”

Iris’ eyes became hard as she took in Oliver. “Yeah, I know who you are.” Her voice was just as hard as her eyes. When she didn’t shake his hand, Oliver awkwardly put his hand down. Oliver
realized his plan for Barry didn’t just hurt Barry.

He turned back to Barry. “May I talk to you privately? Just for five minutes?”

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” Barry responded.

“I understand that,” Oliver said. He expected as much animosity from Barry. “But I do. Starting with
an apology. Five minutes?”

Barry’s eyes went wide at the word apology. He nodded his assent and stood up and walked with
Oliver to a more deserted section of the coffee house.

“You don’t have to, Barry,” Iris said, grabbing his hand to stop him. “You don’t owe him anything.”

“I know,” Barry said in a low voice. “I want to hear what he has to say.”

“Just don’t let him turn your head all around again, okay?” Iris asked as she crossed her arms. Oliver
wasn’t used to people vilifying him, at least not in front of him. Oliver accepted it, as he knew, in
Iris’ eyes, he had earned the title. Barry nodded and walked again to the corner of Jitters.

Oliver followed and seated himself after Barry did. He leaned forward, wanting to show Barry he
was engaged in their conversation. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants and tried to decide
where to start. Oliver had no way he could make up for what he had done to Barry. And Oliver
doubted Barry would ever think of Oliver in a positive light again. But Oliver knew Barry deserved
an apology at the very least.

“First, I’m sorry,” Oliver began, realizing how dry his mouth was. “It was never my intention to hurt
you. I really did, and still do, see potential in you. In regard to Applied Sciences, I can only say it has
taken me awhile, far too long, to start being competent as CEO. When I met you I tried to find a way
for QC to just be another place to have fun. Like Verdant. Hiring you, someone I liked and thought
could be a friend, was a means to that end.”

“Until what?” Barry asked. “Until you realized I wasn’t good enough for your board of directors?
And Cisco was?”

“Barry, the only thing you’re lacking is experience. I know once you’ve gained some, you’re going
to be able to do whatever you want.”

“And pawning me off to Dr. Wells made you feel better?” Barry still felt bitter. Barry had every right
to be.

“If I had demoted you at QC, no one in the Applied Sciences department would have taken you
seriously. At Star Labs, you’re back where you started. And once you are ready to lead your own
department, no one will be able to question your skills or how you got there.”

Barry sat back in his chair and digested what Oliver told him. Everything Oliver said was true.
Objectively, Oliver knew Barry understood. But since it was personal, Barry had difficulty seeing it.

Instead of continuing to focus on Applied Sciences, Barry changed the subject. “And what about
everything else?”

Oliver sighed. He had much less ground to stand on regarding Isabel and Felicity. Especially
Felicity.

“About everything else, I was an idiot,” Oliver admitted. There was no sense in denying the truth.
“Regarding Isabel, I molded my idea of who you and Isabel were into the perfect couple. It made me blind to who you two actually are and what really happened. I put together a puzzle where none of the pieces fit and called it a masterpiece. I should have seen Isabel for who she really is. I’m sorry I pushed the idea of you two as a couple on you.”

“I don’t really care about Isabel anymore,” Barry conceded.

“That’s good. She’s not worth your time or energy.”

“And Felicity? I’ve seen the pictures of you two together in the tabloids. Like together, together.” Oliver should have anticipated the explosion of coverage his new relationship had received by local, and a couple of national, celebrity news sites. “Is that just a coincidence? I tell you I love Felicity and the following week you’re suddenly dating her?”

Ugh, thought Oliver. The fun part of this conversation is just beginning. Oliver knew he had to be honest and straightforward with Barry. It didn’t mean he had to like it. If his younger self had ever gotten to this part of the conversation, which would never have taken place, this question would have had Oliver fake an emergency and leave. And probably never seen by Barry ever again. That was easier, but it wasn’t better.

“Let me tell you all the ways I was an idiot with Felicity. I was falling in love with her the moment I met her, but I only became aware of it after you told me about your feelings for her.”

“Really?” Barry asked. He remained skeptical and, given all the evidence against Oliver, Oliver couldn’t blame him.

“Yes,” Oliver answered as he kept eye contact with Barry. “It took the idea of losing her, for me to panic and wonder why I had such an extreme reaction. It was unthinkable for me that Felicity would rather spend her time with someone who wasn’t me. When you told me you loved her and she had feelings for you too, it gutted me.”

“So, you told her you loved her before I had a chance to.” Barry’s voice lacked anger. It was soft and barely audible. His eyes cast down to hands on the table.

“No,” Oliver said, surprising Barry. Barry’s eyes immediately found Oliver’s to determine if Oliver told the truth. “I planned on finding a way to support you two. I didn’t know how I was going to do that. But I knew I’d have to find a way, if it would make Felicity happy.”

“Then what happened?”

“She flew home early to make sure I was okay about Sara being married to Nyssa.”

“Why?” Barry asked, clearly confused by the shift in couples they discussed.

“Felicity believed I had feelings for Sara. Once I told Felicity I didn’t and wasn’t hurt by Sara’s lies, Felicity told me of her feelings for me. It shocked me almost as much as it made me ecstatic.”

Barry looked back down at his hands.

After a minute of silence, Oliver added, “I am sorry that us getting together hurt you. If I could change anything about Felicity and I, it would be that.”

“I understand,” Barry said. He slowly raised his head and met Oliver’s eyes.

Oliver felt hesitant to believe Barry had come even in the vicinity of seeing the situation from
Oliver’s perspective. “You do?”

“Yeah. I mean, I wish you had known about your feelings for Felicity before I really got to know her.”

“Me, too.”

“But, as much as it pains me to admit this, I know you two will be good for each other. I mean you already were. Anyone who spent five minutes in the same room as both you and Felicity could see that. I guess I always assumed you weren’t attracted to her.”

Oliver bit his tongue. He knew it would do no good to tell Barry Oliver actually had the opposite problem. If such things could be considered problems. Oliver didn’t. And it seemed Felicity didn’t either. Oliver just shook his head and was grateful Felicity and her tendency towards babbling wasn’t with Oliver at the moment.

“And I don’t know if you noticed,” Barry continued with a growing smile, “but I’m kind of with Iris now.”

“I did notice.”

“Yes, well after the last time I saw you, I could kind of tell you weren’t okay with the idea of Felicity and me. I didn’t know what to think of that. When I got back to Central City, I ran into Iris. And I found myself asking her out without really thinking about it. She said yes and we’ve been on three dates so far. Well, four if you count today’s lunch.”

“You two looked happy,” Oliver commented.

“We are. I mean, I am. I’m pretty sure she is,” Barry said in one quick breath. “I know you think it’s weird we grew up in the same house but I think it just makes us know each other that much better.”

“All that matters is how you two feel.” Oliver was happy for Barry, though he wanted to be subtle about it. Oliver could see how self-serving it would be to promote Barry’s relationship with Iris. It kept Barry away from both Felicity and Starling City and eased Oliver’s guilt.

And Oliver still felt their relationship was a bit on the icky side, but even Oliver the idiot knew to keep that opinion to himself.

“Yeah. Iris is amazing.” Barry’s smile stretched across the width of his face.

“Good. All I can say is don’t be as stupid as I was and you two should be fine.”

“Could anyone be as stupid as you were?” Barry asked, with a hint of meanness in his tone. With a lighter tone, Barry added, “I mean, how long did it take for you to figure out you had feelings for Felicity?”

“Very true. But, let’s be honest, Felicity deserves better than the man I used to be. I can only hope to keep deserving her.”

“If you don’t, expect to hear about it from me.”

“I’m sure I’d hear about it from Felicity. Which I’d want to hear about it. I don’t want to live the life of an uncommitted bachelor anymore. It doesn’t hold any attraction to me anymore.”

“Wow,” Barry exclaimed as he leaned back in his chair. “You have changed. There is no way the
guy I met that day in QC would ever say that. He especially wouldn’t mean it.”

“Very true, but I can tell you, I’m so much happier now.” Oliver looked down at his watch. “I have
to get to the airport. Thank you, Barry for listening to me.”

“Of course.”

“I am sorry and if you ever need anything, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks, Oliver.” Barry stood up, and, after Oliver stood up, shook Oliver’s hand.

As Oliver walked out of the coffee shop, he knew his conversation with Barry couldn’t have gone
better. He felt amazed he got through it without getting punched in the face. Oliver wasn’t Barry’s
favorite person though. Oliver probably got his picture off Barry’s proverbial, or literal, dart board.
Or at least moved away from the center of the bullseye.

Oliver didn’t know how he got so lucky, but he wasn’t going to question it. He would go back home
to Felicity and enjoy every moment with her in it.

The sunglasses in Oliver’s jacket pocket rested heavily against his chest. Oliver wanted to put them
on, but knew he couldn’t. His eyes had acclimated to the bright morning sun and if he put his
sunglasses on, Oliver would squint through the entire press conference. Applied Sciences needed to
be the focus of the press, not speculation on if the reason for his squinting was a hangover.

Because apparently, that was the only reason why Oliver Queen would squint outside on a sunny
day.

Speaking of focus, Oliver needed to keep his on the reason why he was there. The Robert Queen
Memorial Applied Sciences Division of Queen Consolidated’s ribbon cutting ceremony. And it was
only a week behind schedule. Given the shakeup Oliver did with personnel as late as he did, the
timing was a minor miracle.

He felt excited and anxious. QC’s board would decide if they would fire Oliver from his position as
CEO. In the recent months, for the first time, Oliver wanted to be CEO of his family’s business. He
thought he had a firmer grasp of what was expected of him and how to meet those expectations.

Oliver wasn’t perfect. But he felt competent enough to be successful. Oliver hoped the board felt the
same.

Along with the scientist and lab assistants seated in chairs at the front of the building, Mr. Dennis
was at the press conference, representing the board. Walter was there as the CFO of QC and to show
his usual support of Oliver. Gladys ran around somewhere close, ensuring the day was as easy as it
could be for Oliver. Cisco was also there. He paced back and forth on the sidewalk of the side of the
Applied Sciences building. Sweat beaded on Cisco’s forehead.

“Cisco, relax,” Oliver said as he came up to Cisco’s side. “Everything will go fine.”

“You can’t know that,” Cisco said. “I’ve never spoken to the press before. I could humiliate you and
the company. I could drop the giant scissors.”

“You’ve done great with the board,” Oliver reminded Cisco as he handed Cisco a handkerchief to
wipe the sweat away. Cisco took it gratefully. “You know what you’re doing. The press conference
will only last ten minutes. Max. Maybe five. And I’ll be holding the giant scissors too.”
“Ten minutes?” Cisco’s looked up at Oliver with a hopeful expression.

“Yes. And I have to talk for part of the time.”

“Right. I can do this,” Cisco looked down and whispered, mostly to himself. His voice still sounded uncertain. Cisco jerked his head upward and in a loud, more confident, voice repeated, “I can do this.”

“Yes, you can,” Oliver chuckled. “But maybe don’t shout when the reporters get here.” Oliver looked toward the parking lot and saw a news van inch over the lot’s speed bump. “Which appears to be now. Get your game face on.”

“Oliver, you know I know nothing about sports, right?”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“Gotcha.”

Once the reporters had all found a spot behind the staff to view the ceremony, Oliver and Cisco stood in front of the crowd with a large ribbon in between them. Mr. Dennis and Walter stood behind Oliver and Cisco.

As he concentrated on not fidgeting, Oliver addressed the crowd. “I want to thank you all for coming. The Robert Queen Memorial Applied Sciences division of Queen Consolidated is something I’m quite proud of. It is my belief my father, if he were here today, would also be proud.

“It has taken a lot of hard work and long hours by many people to get us here today. But we have a lot more hard work ahead of us. The team at Applied Sciences, led by Cisco Ramon,” Oliver turned slightly to indicate Cisco, “and I are committed to creating technology and making scientific advances that will better not only for Starling City, but also the world at large. I’m excited by the possibilities and grateful to have the most qualified and experienced staff with Applied Sciences.

“With that, I’ll turn the floor, or sidewalk as it were, to someone Queen Consolidated wouldn’t have been able to do this without. The director of the Robert Queen Memorial Applied Sciences division, Cisco Ramon.”

“Wow, thank you, Oliver. Mr. Queen.” Cisco’s fingers tapped against his leg. The suit Cisco wore did not look natural on him. Oliver knew Cisco would eventually get more comfortable in suits, as this was just the first of many times Applied Sciences would make the news. “I don’t have much to add, except to say I’m honored to have this position. And my team and I have many ideas. We can’t wait to get started. In fact, we’re starting immediately after we cut this ribbon.”

“Well then,” Oliver said with a smile, “we shouldn’t wait any longer.” Oliver grabbed the giant scissors from Gladys and handed one handle to Cisco.

The two stood still with the scissors opened, the ribbon in the middle of the scissor blades. Walter stood next to Cisco and Mr. Dennis next to Oliver. They smiled for the cameras. After a minute, Oliver and Cisco cut the ribbon.

Clapping followed and Oliver shook Cisco’s hand. The cameras captured that and other multiple handshakes.

Cisco wasn’t kidding about starting to work after the ribbon was cut. He and his team headed into the building as soon as the reporters packed up their equipment. Gladys left for the QC’s offices to set up for Oliver’s afternoon meeting with the other department heads. Oliver put on his sunglasses
“I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to wish you luck before the ceremony,” Walter said. “But it seems as if you didn’t need it. You did great, Oliver. And I know Robert would be proud.”

“Thank you, Walter.” Oliver was pleased to receive Walter’s praise. “I’m not sure I did enough to keep my position.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“I wish I shared your optimism.”

“Mr. Queen,” Mr. Dennis greeted as he approached Oliver and Walter from behind Oliver. “I wanted a minute to talk with you.”

“Mr. Dennis.” Oliver turned around and faced the board member. He kept Walter at his side, wanting his support through the conversation.

“We need to discuss the board’s decision regarding your appointment as CEO of QC.”

“Yes, I expected this conversation,” Oliver replied. His finger and thumb rubbed against themselves. A single butterfly hatched in his stomach. “I’m surprised it’s happening so soon after the ceremony though. I thought you’d want to talk with the rest of the board before you made your decision.”

“I just talked to them on the phone,” Mr. Dennis explained in his monotone voice. “The board is impressed by your work on Applied Sciences. We weren’t initially certain of some of your choices, but you seemed to have corrected those.”

Oliver knew he referred to Barry. Despite Oliver’s ultimate agreement with the board about Barry, Oliver still bristled inwardly for Barry. Barry was a smart guy and would be a great scientist one day. When the day came, Applied Sciences would be lucky to have the chance to work with Barry. Oliver felt unsure if Barry would give him the chance. He hoped time would both ease the pain Oliver caused and create understanding that Barry wasn’t ready for such a position at the moment.

Continuing his pronouncement, unaware of Oliver’s musings, Mr. Dennis said, “As long as your commitment to Applied Sciences’ success stays the same, we are okay with you staying on at QC as CEO.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said with a sigh and a small smile. There was a large part of Oliver certain he would be fired.

“Your ringing endorsement of his capabilities as CEO,” Walter said sarcastically and in a harsh tone, “is overwhelming.”

“We still have our reservations about him, Mr. Steele. But we are mollified by his success here today.”

“And firing the son of the man whose name is on the building you just opened wouldn’t be good for public perception,” Oliver responded. “Right?”

Mr. Dennis cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. “You have the job, Mr. Queen. I suggest you be happy with that.”

“Oh, I am,” Oliver assured. “In fact, I’m so happy I’m going to continue to be successful so if you ever do decide to fire me, it will make you, personally, look bad.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Isabel learns of Oliver and Felicity’s relationship and has a change to hers.

Chapter Notes

Thank you again to my wonderful betas, Ruth, Shelby, and Jamie.

“We need to talk!”

Oliver looked up from his desk to see Isabel storming into his office. Gladys, with impressive speed, walked past Isabel and stopped right in front of her, blocking Isabel from walking in any further. Isabel put her hands on her waist and sneered at Gladys. “I’m sorry, sir. She just walked right past my desk. There was no time to stop her.”

“It’s okay, Gladys.” Oliver waved the non-offense away. A bear couldn’t have stopped Isabel. “Thank you.”

“Do you want me to call security?” Gladys gave Isabel the stink eye as she turned and walked back to her desk. Oliver thought Gladys’ stink eye was reserved for Oliver when he wouldn’t come into the office until well after noon.

“If you call security,” Isabel began to threaten in a slow, menacing tone, “I will have every media outlet in at least a two-hundred mile radius cover how poorly you treat your employees.”

“As you have reminded me,” Oliver sat back in his chair, “you are not my employee. You are an independent contractor.”

Isabel squinted at Oliver. As she maintained eye contact, Isabel stepped further into the office. Each step slow and deliberate. When Isabel reached his desk, she sat in a chair opposite him. With a raised eyebrow, Isabel dared Oliver to stop her. It took everything in Oliver to not laugh.

“Sir?” Gladys asked, still in the doorway.

“It’s all right,” Oliver reassured Gladys. “What’s next on my schedule?”

“You have a meeting with your IT consultant in less than ten minutes.”

“Thanks, Gladys.” Turning to Isabel he said, “Well, Isabel, I guess you have less than ten minutes to say whatever has caused you such distress you are unable to bother with the niceties, like scheduling an appointment with Gladys to see me.” Oliver enjoyed prodding and goading Isabel. Her face became bright red with anger and Oliver wondered if he continued to annoy her, her face would burn an even darker shade of red.

“I have been trying to call you all last week. I have left messages and sent texts.” Isabel crossed her
arms over her chest. “You haven’t answered any of my calls. How am I supposed to make an appointment with you if you never pick up your damn phone?”

“Gladys makes my schedule.” Oliver answered. It was fun for Oliver to not give Isabel any explanation for him being unreachable. He wondered how long he could drag it out.

“We have an emergency. And if I had been in town I would have just stopped by, but I wasn’t so-”

“Why were you out of town?”

Isabel huffed in irritation. “That’s not what is important right now. You’ve been hacked and the tabloids, and even the more reputable media sources, are running a story about you and your IT consultant. Now it’s too late to get in front of this, but we can release a statement. We can say you two are just friends and the photo is widely misleading.”

“Isabel,” Oliver interrupted, not being able to stop her ranting until then. “Just so we’re both on the same page to avoid any miscommunication,” the little reminder kept Isabel from taking over the conversation again. “What are you talking about?”

“Will you please keep up?” Isabel spit out. “I already said. The media is linking you and Felicity together.” Oliver kept his face blank. “As a couple,” Isabel tried again to no avail. Finally, in a voice that neared screaming, Isabel added, “Romantically!”

“Okay.” Oliver shrugged. The amount he paid Isabel for her PR consulting services was worth every penny for the sheer entertainment value he had as he watched her try to get him to care about what happened with the media.

“Okay? Okay?” Isabel stood up and walked to the middle of the room and back again. “I tell you almost every media outlet is saying you and Felicity are linked romantically and have pictures, and your response is ‘okay’?”

“Yes.” Oliver smiled a little. He couldn’t help it, he had been holding it down for far too long.

“Aaagghh!” Isabel yelled. Oliver wondered if she would start pulling her hair out. “We have talked about this. About the image you want to present to the world. That image of a single, carefree, playboy, billionaire bachelor. Now the whole world,” Isabel walked over to the windows and spread her arms out wide, “thinks you are a minivan and a dog named Spot away from being just another domesticated, committed, boring CEO.”

“So?”

“So, we need to fix it. ASAP.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t you care, Oliver? Your entire image just did a complete one-eighty. All because of a photoshopped picture posted from your hacked Instagram account.”

“The photo wasn’t photoshopped,” Felicity said as she walked into Oliver’s office. Oliver smiled wide. It had been six and half hours since he had seen her, which, by Oliver’s book, was too long. Felicity kept talking, “And Oliver wasn’t hacked. A friend did borrow Oliver’s phone, took the photo, and uploaded it without asking. It did, however, accomplish what we wanted.” Felicity walked over to Oliver’s side of the desk and gave him a kiss hello. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Oliver responded back.
“We really should thank Sara,” Felicity suggested. “Or maybe we’re even.” They both got caught in each other’s eyes for a moment before Isabel’s mere presence brought them back to the room.

Isabel stared at Oliver and Felicity in shock. For a moment, her jaw had dropped before she turned away and muttered to herself, “I don’t believe it. Her? Why her?” Isabel turned back pointed back and forth between Oliver and Felicity and asked, “How is this possible? When did this happen?” After a moment, Isabel was able to get oxygen back into her brain and thought from a professional point of view. “And why wasn’t I called immediately? We could have hidden this. I don’t know how I’m going to deal with it now.”

“Does it need dealing with?” Felicity asked innocently.

Isabel saw Felicity’s inexperience with PR as a weakness. A weakness Isabel could exploit. In a condescendingly sweet voice, Isabel talked as if she addressed a five-year-old. “Well, Lis, Oliver and I are trying to sell an image of a cool and never-going-to-settle club owner, and you come along and blow that all up. Yes. Yes, we have to deal with it.” Turning to Oliver, Isabel put on her business voice, “I think the best plan is to deny it. Say the pictures were photoshopped. How is the media going to prove otherwise?

“Now, of course, it’s be better if you two weren’t seen in public together.” Isabel went back and sat at the chair she vacated, bent down to her briefcase, and pulled out her tablet. “I can arrange rendezvous times. It shouldn’t be too difficult to sneak you,” Isabel looked at Felicity, “into the Queen mansion. It’ll be your place that’s difficult to get in and out of undetected. Does your place have security cameras, Felicity?”

“It used to have three or four security cameras.” Felicity answered as Isabel took notes on her tablet. “One in the main lobby, one at the back exit, another in the parking garage, and one on street level at the entrance.”

“Used to?” Isabel asked.

Felicity smiled and sat down in the other chair across from Oliver. She made a show of getting herself comfortable. It looked as if she planned to spend a large amount of time there. Oliver almost felt sorry for Isabel. “Yes, used to. But then I moved into the Queen manor and the manor has more security cameras than I could list off for you right now. I can get back to you though on that. Hunter,” Felicity swiveled her head to Oliver and answered what Oliver was about to ask, “the head of security at the security company you use for the manor. He’s a friend. Not a close friend, but I’ve helped him out a couple times with stopping some hacks.”

“What hacks?” Oliver asked, concerned about the manor.

“Not in the manor’s system, but a couple of their other clients. It was more of a referral. I am the best, but I’m pretty sure Hunter doesn’t know any other IT consultants.”

“Excuse me?” Isabel finally found her voice. “You moved into the Queen mansion? Just like that?”

“Yes, she did,” Oliver replied. “It took some convincing on my part. A lot of convincing.”

“Not that much,” Felicity quibbled. She gave him a teasing smile, which he returned.

“So, let me get this straight,” Isabel said in a strained voice. “You two got together and moved in together in the space of a week? Not to mention letting Sara,” Isabel said her name in a voice of disgust, “take and post a picture of you two on Instagram, essentially telling the world about your relationship status?”
“Actually,” Oliver said, “we got together and moved in together in one day.” Isabel’s mouth gaped open. “I also approved the final budget for the first official project Applied Sciences is undertaking.” Oliver shrugged his shoulders. “It was a busy day.”

“Fine,” Isabel sighed. “Help me out though. How am I supposed to sell you as a fun, carefree club owner when you have a live-in girlfriend?”

“I was thinking about that,” Oliver twirled a pen in his hand. “You had said something to me a few months ago about selling another image of me. For QC’s board of directors and QC’s investors, current and potential. I think it was you. You suggested I needed to be more serious. I think you were right.”

“I was right? At Christmas?” Isabel looked as if she was close to losing it.

“Well, Oliver is getting old,” Felicity responded. Oliver saw a couple worry lines in between her eyebrows make an appearance. Felicity tried to calm the flames in Isabel Oliver had stoked. Oliver knew Felicity thought it best to keep things civil and polite. He guessed it wouldn’t be great if it got out QC’s PR consultant went postal in the CEO’s office. “It’s probably better if he steps back from the club scene before he appears to just be a creepy club owner who leers at the female patrons.”

“Woah.” Oliver held his hands up in mock surrender. “I never leered at my female, or any other, patrons. Patrons?” Oliver thought about the word, Felicity tilted her head and gave him a look that said ‘really?’ “I mean, I guess the word works. Technically. But why not just say customer?”

“Because patrons sounds better,” Felicity argued. “Kohl’s has customers. I tried to distinguish you.” She winked and Oliver laughed.

“Oliver, did you sell the club?” Isabel asked.

“Not yet,” Oliver said. “But I’m thinking about it. Sin runs it. I mean, really, I just get in her way. Verdant really does run smoother when important decisions, or little decisions, don’t have to go through me.”

“Do you have any interested buyers?”

“I haven’t looked. Like I said, I’m just thinking about it. I keep going back and forth. I’m too busy here to do anything for Verdant. But if I sell it, Sin and the other employees might lose their jobs. That wouldn’t be fair.”

Isabel set her tablet on her lap and slipped back into a more professional tone. “It would be better for you to focus on either Verdant or QC. Owning both makes you look like either someone who is trying to recapture their youth or a man who is stuck in adolescence. Neither work for either company.”

“What if you offered a partnership with Sin?” Felicity asked. “You could then become a silent partner on Verdant, thus enabling Sin and the others to keep their jobs. Plus, people would accept you as a silent partner for almost any business. Well, not any. Sorry, owning a strip club or a sex toy store is not a good idea. I mean at all. Not that I think a sex toy store is inherently bad because I don’t think sexuality should be something anyone is ashamed of. But there is a lot of shame in it from the general public. There are some stores that are really shady too. And strip clubs can exploit women, sometimes men, who are usually desperate for money. Not that I don’t think people should be able to do what they want with their own bodies. It’s a complicated issue. The situations the strippers are in-”
“Felicity,” Isabel interrupted Felicity’s babble.

Oliver felt annoyed about the interruption because he now loved Felicity’s babble even more than he did before. He was one hundred percent certain he could listen to Felicity talk forever. About anything. Or nothing. It didn’t matter as long as he was with her. And Felicity talking about sex toys was something Oliver wanted to go back to. Oliver forced himself to listen to Isabel, though it was the very last thing he wanted to do.

“What would you suggest Sin use as equity to be a partner of Verdant? Partnerships are rarely cheap and Verdant is worth a lot.”

“Oh, I thought she could use her years of experience as equity. That has to count for something, right? And the amount of revenue she and her ideas bring in is worth more than one solitary payment.”

“That makes sense, Felicity,” Oliver said. “I think that’s what I’m going to do. It’s perfect actually. Thank you, Babe.”

“Your welcome,” Felicity smiled.

“Can we get back on track now?” Isabel asked. “I still have a ton of media requests for you, Oliver. And we need to respond to their reports.”

“How about you issue a statement,” Oliver suggested, “saying I’m in a happy and committed relationship with IT genius, and my best friend, Felicity Smoak?”

“Because, Oliver. That gives the impression you two are really serious about each other. And then it’ll come back and bite you in the ass when this goes South.”

“What’s ‘this’?” Felicity asked slowly.

“This,” Isabel said as she gestured to the both of them. “You two. As a couple.” Isabel rolled her eyes and looked back down at her tablet.

Oliver could see Felicity prepared herself for a fight.

“Isabel,” Felicity said in a disconcerting soft voice. “It is not your job to worry about this.” Felicity gestured to Oliver and herself. Her voice became tighter as she went on. “Your job is to promote QC, and in extension Oliver, in a positive light.”

“Yes, but if I can manage what is really going on, it is so much easier for me to control how it is seen in the public eye.”

“Except you are not paid to manage Oliver’s, mine, or anyone else’s life. So when Oliver says he wants you to put out a statement and what that statement should say, it is your job to do it.”

“I’m not a robot, Felicity. I have several years of experience and expertise in public relations. Which is why I’m the best, and QC hired me. My job isn’t to just issue public statements blindly. It is to give you my opinion and tell you what I think is best for QC and Oliver.”

“And you gave Oliver your opinion. He doesn’t agree with you and has told you what he wants you to do.” Then Felicity’s tone took on a more threatening tone, “Also, don’t presume you know anything about Oliver and my relationship just because you’ve worked with Oliver and at one time saw yourself by his side, not me.”
“That is not what this is about,” Isabel said coldly. “And I would appreciate it if you refrained from talking about my personal life.”

Felicity looked between the two of them and asked, “Anyone else see the irony of the statement? Anyone? Just me?”

“Isabel,” Oliver turned her attention back to him. He really needed this to end soon. He would already be behind schedule for the rest of the day. And maybe the next day as well. If he could get Isabel out in the next two minutes Oliver might be able to save the rest of his week. “Felicity’s right. I hear what you’re saying, but I’m not denying my relationship with Felicity. Nor am I hiding it. Please send out the statement and also ask that our privacy be respected. I know they won’t listen, but it doesn’t hurt to try.”

“Fine.” Isabel held her hands up in the air. “It’s your cash flow loss. But I expect my opinion will be respected more next time I give it.”

“Or what Isabel?” Oliver asked. He was tired.

“Or maybe you will no longer have the benefit of my services. I have other clients, you know. Clients who actually listen to what I say.”

“None as big as QC,” Oliver noted. “I will give your opinion as much weight as I usually do. But in this particular situation, you do seem to be taking it a bit more personally. Also, you were the one who said we had a contract and refused to let me out of it. So I don’t understand why you’re threatening to quit now.”

It made Oliver think if he just did whatever he wanted concerning the press and never listened to Isabel, he could get her to quit. Then he wouldn’t have to continue to see her. Unless Cisco kept inviting her and Slade to their group’s get-togethers.

“I’m sorry.” Isabel pulled herself back and sat up straighter. It lasted a few seconds before her face crumbled. Oliver panicked when he thought she might cry. His ruined week would become a ruined month if Isabel cried.

When she spoke next, her face stayed more neutral. “I’m having a bad day. Not that that is an excuse, but it’s the truth. I will release the statement right away.”

“Isabel,” Felicity said just as Isabel was about to stand up and leave. Oliver sighed. He had really hoped Felicity would let Isabel’s statement about having a bad day go. He could see Gladys standing at her desk and pointing to her watch. At this moment, there wasn’t much Oliver could do to speed it up. “Where’s your engagement ring?”

“That would be the source of the bad day.”

“Did you lose it?” Felicity asked.

“No. Slade asked for it back. He changed his mind about wanting to marry me.”

“I’m sorry.” Felicity sounded as if she genuinely cared about Isabel’s feelings.

“Thank you. He-uh, he was upset Nyssa didn’t take the position he got her. Apparently, he had pulled quite a few strings and called in a lot of favors for it.”

Felicity sighed loudly. “That seems like a dumb reason to call off an engagement.” Oliver stared up at the ceiling. He did not care.
“Well, that wasn’t the main reason. We had been arguing about having a prenup. I didn’t think it was necessary. Slade disagreed.”

“Shocker,” Oliver replied. Felicity’s face twitched.

“The final straw,” Isabel added, “well, I guess you’ll find out about this sooner or later. Might as well find out from me.

“A guy I accidentally slept with after I met Slade, took a picture of us and posted it to a…a porn site. With my relative fame, it didn’t take long for the picture to go viral. Slade was not happy. Like he didn’t have one last fling after we were engaged.”

“I’m sorry, Isabel,” Oliver offered. She might be mean and she might even deserve some pain, karmically speaking. But he wasn’t going to be an ass about it. He would have been a year ago. Hell, three months ago he would have laughed in her face. Now Oliver just felt sorry for her.

“You might want to contact a lawyer,” Felicity suggested. Her voice could not be sweeter. “Revenge porn is becoming something the courts are seeing more frequently.”

“Do you think,” Isabel looked down to the floor and then back up at Felicity. “Do you think you could hack into the site and take the picture down?”

“Sure,” Felicity agreed quickly. “But if anyone saved it they’ll still have it. And the guy will still have it and could post it again. A lawyer could potentially help.”

“Do you know any lawyers who deal with revenge porn?”

Felicity got her phone out of her purse and scrolled through her contacts. Oliver didn’t believe what happened to Isabel was right. But he wanted her out of his office.

It looked like that wouldn’t happen for a while.

That night Oliver didn’t get home until just after nine. He had been right about his whole week being off schedule. Gladys told him he would be able to keep all his appointments after she had rescheduled the two he had missed that afternoon. But he’d be putting in extra hours to get his own work done and prepare for said meetings.

Oliver couldn’t help but think comforting Isabel wasn’t worth the time. If Felicity hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have spent half the time Felicity did being an ear to vent to. Oliver knew if Felicity kept it up, their group of friends would never get rid of Isabel.

“Hello, Kara,” Oliver said as he walked into the kitchen to look for something to eat. He found his mother’s nurse there.

“Hi, Mr. Queen.” Kara still refused to call him Oliver, even after working for them for over two years.

“Why are you here tonight?”

“Oh, Lena called out sick and the agency couldn’t find anyone to cover her shift on such short notice. So I volunteered.”

“Thank you for being here. How was my mother tonight?”
“She had some confusion just before dinner. Ms. Smoak calmed her down so Mrs. Queen could eat, though she didn’t eat much. Then Mrs. Queen didn’t want to take her medication or go to bed.”

“Since you’re here, I’m assuming you managed it?”

“Yes.” Kara had a look of guilt on her face. “I had to bribe her to take her medication.”

“With what?”

“Chocolate. She wouldn’t take her medication otherwise. And I knew her meds would make her drowsy.”

Oliver was amused by Kara’s guilt. He walked over to the fridge to hunt for his late dinner. “Kara, you do what you have to do to make sure my mother stays compliant with her meds. A little chocolate isn’t going to hurt her. In fact, I may steal your method from time to time.”

“Okay, thank you.”

In the fridge, a plate sat wrapped in plastic with a note on top of it. The note read, “Oliver, I missed you at dinner, though it was an eventful meal getting Moira to eat. I had the cook fix you a plate since you missed dinner. I’m in our room, hopefully not asleep. Heat up your dinner and join me. Unless you have a thing about not eating in the bedrooms. Then heat up your dinner, eat it, and then join me. Love, Felicity.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at Felicity’s babbling note. Oliver folded it and put it in his pocket. After he heated his dinner he said, “Goodnight, Kara.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Queen.”

Balancing a glass of water on his plate as he opened their bedroom door took a bit of flexibility. He opened the door and found Felicity under the covers in her pajamas, with her laptop, coincidentally, on her lap. She had never been so beautiful.

“Hey,” Oliver greeted gently.

Felicity looked up at Oliver and smiled. “Hey, yourself. I was just starting to get worried.”

Walking into the room and setting his plate and glass down, Oliver sat on the opposite side of the bed facing Felicity. “That’s nice. I think I like this living with you thing.”

“I don’t mind it much myself. I think I’ll stay.” Felicity smiled then commanded, “Eat.” She looked down at her laptop again, saved whatever she was working on, and closed it. Oliver grabbed his plate and set it down next to him.

“What’s doing?” Oliver asked in between bites.


“The wine guys got you a meeting?” Oliver asked, excited for her.

“They got me a lunch, which I had today,” Felicity explained. She beamed with pride. “I got myself a second meeting with a written proposal.”

“Good for you. Kord is going to kick himself for waiting so long to hire you.”
“We’ll see. I don’t want to jinx it. No more talking about it.”

Oliver mimed zipping his lips, locking it, and throwing away the key. Felicity laughed.

“This weekend,” Oliver suggested, “I want to take the Lamborghini out for a drive. Sound good?”

Felicity sat back and stared at Oliver with wide eyes. “You want to take your precious Lamborghini out of the protective confines of the garage and risk getting dirt on it?”

“Yes. I just realized how silly I was being. Do you want to? I’ll even let you drive.”

“Going out for a ride with you sounds fun,” Felicity said. “About me driving? Let’s see how you feel the day of.”

“I trust you.”

Felicity smiled her soft small smile that somehow still reached her eyes. Oliver continued to eat and looked forward to the weekend.

“Thank you for making up a plate for me.”

“I didn’t do it. That was your cook.”

“Our cook,” Oliver looked up at her and winked. Felicity bit her lip and looked down. “But you know, it wouldn’t have been necessary, if Isabel hadn’t stayed so long in my office today.”

“I know. She just went on and on and on. And I felt sorry for her. I don’t wish that on anyone. That includes Isabel. I hope she is able to stop the guy who posted the picture.”

“Yes, that would be good. And the guy deserves worse,” Oliver replied. “But I was talking about you letting, nay encouraging, Isabel to keep talking about Slade. I did not need to know about Slade’s love of tribal masks. I could have gotten through the rest of life not knowing that particular creepy fact about Slade.”

Felicity gasped in mock indignation. “I didn’t encourage her. I don’t know what office you were in, but if you think I wanted to keep hearing her complain about the crime rate in DC as if it were a personal affront to her, you were not in your office.”

“Felicity you were too sympathetic. You kept asking Isabel questions about how she felt and if she was eating okay. Which Isabel would use to go off on something completely unrelated. Therefore, you are to blame for my long nights at the office this week.”

“I…was just being nice,” Felicity said as if daring Oliver to argue with her.

Normally he would surrender, or at least think about surrendering, but Oliver had a point to make. He wasn’t going to let Felicity cute her way out of it. “Even after she insulted you, and me to an extent, you still were kind to Isabel. She basically said it would be better for me to remain single than be with you.”

“I know. But she was hurting.”

“You and I both know Isabel would have responded the same whether or not she and Slade were still together.”

“We don’t know that.”
Felicity’s stubbornness showed, which meant there was something more to what she said. Oliver stayed silent while he finished his meal. He watched her as if he could read what went on with her on her face. He could see Felicity hid something.

“Felicity,” Oliver said as he set his plate aside. “What was it really about? You being nice to Isabel?”

She looked away and sighed. Oliver scooted closer to her and gently cupped her cheek so she would look at him. His other hand took hold of one of hers, squeezed, then ran his thumb back and forth on the outside of her hand.

After a moment, Felicity felt comfortable enough to talk to Oliver. “I guess I had put myself in her shoes. I would be miserable if we broke up and I would want someone to try to comfort me. Or at least be kind.”

“One,” Oliver counted off, “we are never breaking up. So that’s not even something you need to think about. Two, you have real friends who will always be there for you when you need them. And, just for the record, that starts with me.” He gave Felicity a wink. “Three, it is Isabel’s own fault she doesn’t have real friends. When you only care about the superficial, you only have superficial friends.

“And four, Isabel had been insulting and mean to you just minutes before. I don’t care if she just lashed out because she was hurt, though I very much doubt it. You shouldn’t let anyone treat you that way one minute and comfort them the next.”

“You’re right. And I wasn’t letting Isabel get away with insulting me. I fought back. I was just subtler than she was.”

“I know.” Oliver chuckled at the memory.

“But I guess when Isabel brought up the prenup Slade wanted her to sign, it just…The idea of prenups makes me sensitive.” Felicity admitted in a voice just a little louder than a whisper. Her eyes lowered again.

“Hey,” Oliver said as he moved his hand to her shoulders. “You know that stuff doesn’t bother me.”

“Yeah.”

“Felicity, there isn’t a person on this Earth that could accuse you of only being with me because of my money.”

“Hmm, I think Isabel could.”

“Isabel can go fuck herself. When we get married,” Oliver declared, “there will be no prenup for us to sign.”

Felicity’s eyes shot up. “No. I want to sign one. I don’t want your money. I’m fine without it. And I don’t want to give you any reason to think I don’t love you.”

“Well now we definitely don’t need a prenup.”

“Oliver, don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not the one being stupid for a change,” Oliver smiled at her. “The only way I will sign a prenup is if it states if we divorce, you get all the money.”
“You’re being ridiculous.”

“I could say the same thing about you.”

“You’re impossible. We don’t have to solve it tonight.”

“We don’t?”

“No, we’re not getting married anytime soon. So, we can continue to discuss it.”

“Define soon,” Oliver requested, very curious to her answer. He couldn’t see why they should wait more than a few months before getting married. And even that amount of time seemed a little foolish. But he knew Felicity. And Felicity would want to live together for a while before agreeing to spend the rest of their lives together. Oliver had resolved to be patient, but he wasn’t sure if he could wait as long as Felicity seemed to be suggesting.

“Oliver. Go change and brush your teeth. We both have early days tomorrow.”

“Which, I remind you, is your fault,” Oliver stood up and went into the bathroom. From there he yelled so Felicity could hear him. “If Isabel had left shortly after you arrived, we could have had our meeting today. But no, you had to be all nice and kind. It’s like you’re trying to make me love you more and at the same time infuriate me to no end.”

“Damn,” Felicity yelled back. “You figured out my master plan.” He could hear her laugh from the bathroom and his smile went unchecked.

After he finished in the bathroom and took everything but his boxers off, he turned off the lights and slipped into bed next to Felicity. Oliver reached out and took her into his arms. Felicity settled against him easily and sighed happily.

“How long do you want to wait until we get married?” Felicity swiftly turned the question back on him. “Which I want noted for the record that you brought up the subject of us marrying.”

“Duly noted,” Oliver chuckled. “I personally don’t want to wait at all, but I’m willing to give you a few months. So you don’t feel so rushed.”

“Duly noted,” Oliver chuckled. “I personally don’t want to wait at all, but I’m willing to give you a few months. So you don’t feel so rushed.”

“How magnanimous of you. I will remind you that you have yet to propose to me.”

“Do you want me to fix that error now? I don’t have a ring, but apparently, there are quite a few rings in this house. Do you want to pick out your ring or would you prefer I do it?”

“Oliver, we have been together for less than two weeks. It won’t hurt you to slow things down a tiny bit.”

Oliver ran his fingers over her back, loving the warmth she provided him. After a minute, he asked, “So I should wait to propose for what? Another week?”

“Incorrigible, that word defines you to a T. You’re aware of that, right?” Felicity shifted so she slid herself above him and able to look at his face.

“I believe you have told me that before.”

“Hmm. Must be true then,” Felicity said as she lowered her face to his.
“Probably. You usually are right.”

Their lips pressed against each other and soon Felicity’s tongue insisted entrance into his mouth. He acquainted and a shiver ran through his body when her tongue slid against his. Oliver’s hand went to her hip and brought her completely on top of him. Her center rubbed against him and his cock stirred. He thrust up against her and reveled in the feel of Felicity on top of him.

Felicity pulled her lips away and said, “Do we not care that we both have early mornings?”

“I’m one thousand percent sure in the morning, I will think this was worth it.”

Her smile grew wide and her pupils wide. “Me, too.” And her lips descended on his again.

The next morning, they didn’t regret a single second of how they spent the night before. Even though they only had three hours of sleep and required massive amounts of coffee.

Sacrifices never felt like sacrifices when they were with each other.

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