Sunshine Suits Her

by LaDemonessa

Summary

An AU that asks what if Felicity and Tommy were together long before she met Oliver? In fact, what if Malcolm had taken her in as his ward? How would Tommy's life have changed?

Tommy had always been the easy going guy who followed everyone else's lead. He didn't care where he wound up, just that he was along for the ride...until a little Sunshine came into his life and he realized he could be much, much more.

Notes

Dedicated to Eilowyn, who came up with the idea in the first place.

Author’s Notes:

This is an AU which means it’s not canon. By ‘not canon’ it means that things are different. People are a little different, time runs a little differently, and it may not go the way you think it might or even should. That said, this is an AU, an alternate universe, where Felicity’s origin story, along with everyone else's, is very, very different than what it once was.

In this universe, Malcolm Merlyn, for reasons of his own, takes in a young Felicity Smoak as his ward. This is how I imagine Tommy’s life changing if he had someone like Felicity in his life.

Eilowyn came up with a story idea we codenamed ‘The Greek Tragedy’ where these scenes were meant to complement each of her chapters. Due to scheduling conflicts she had to
shelve that story but kindly allowed me to post the parts I had already written and run with it.

Once more, this is an AU, specifically a ‘What if Tommy and Felicity got together as kids but not as siblings?’ kind of thing. Expect Flommy and don't complain when you get it and don't write snarky little notes about it not being like the show or what you want to see. :) If you want to complain about it, well, there are other stories you might enjoy more than this one then.

As for the rest of you, enjoy!

---Jen
Alice B Toklas Was Here
Chapter One: Alice B Toklas Was Here.

Tommy had loved Laurel Lance from the first time he’d laid eyes on her.

There was just something about her, this poise and grace that seemed almost timeless, ageless. He’d never admit this to anyone, not even Ollie (especially not Ollie because he’d never let him live it down), but the first time he saw Laurel he thought about his mom. Not that Laurel and his mother looked anything alike, and not that he was attracted to women who looked like his mother even if they did, but he thought about her in the same way his father thought about his mother before she died. He called Rebecca Merlyn his ‘princess’ because he said it suited her. When someone, usually some reporter, would ask why, he’d smile and say that to him, she always looked like a young Grace
Kelly and that she was his very own fairy tale princess brought to life. That was his best childhood memory of his all too often absent father; Malcolm would come home and immediately enfold Tommy’s mother into his arms, bury his nose in her pale gold hair, and whisper, “Hello Princess.”

Laurel had the same poise his mother had, the same fluid grace. She moved like a dancer, long legs and lithe limbs and, as a consequence to that, he fell hard.

So hard, he couldn’t even bring himself to talk to her.

“This is…so fucking depressing,” Ollie said from beside him as he pulled his knit cap over his eyes and rested his head in his folded arms.

“You know what’s depressing?” Tommy said sarcastically. “That it’s ninety degrees outside and you’re wearing that stupid Rasta skull cap.”

“I’m hung over,” he grumbled without lifting his head.

“You’re always hung over; you’d think you’d be used to it by now.”

“I should, but I’m not,” he said, lifting his head as he inhaled sharply and rubbed his hands over his eyes. “Oh man, I feel like shit. What the fuck did I drink last night?”

“What didn’t you drink?” he asked dryly, never taking his eyes off Laurel as she and her friends laughed together from across the quad.

“Why aren’t you hung over?” Ollie asked, glaring at him with bloodshot eyes.

“Because I stuck mostly to weed. Ironic that, of the two, alcohol is legal and yet I’m the one who is still somewhat functional the next morning while you look like hammered dog shit.”

“You know, you are totally turning into one of those holier than thou legalize weed douche-bros,” he grumped then looked at him curiously, “Got any left?”

“Naw, Jeremy brought it,” he told him absently as he watched Laurel squeal and run from her friend as she tossed some ice from her cup at her. “I only got a couple of hits off it anyway. I swear, Jeremy is such a fucking asshole. Whenever I get some X or some blow he’s all over my ass for a free hit or a bump, but he won’t even part with a single joint.” He tossed him a look, “Plus he can’t roll for crap. His shit was sad, man.”

“Was it any good?” he asked curiously.

“Decent,” he admitted. “I’ll admit to being pleasantly surprised. It wasn’t at all like that ditch weed and schwag he usually carries. You know, not like that brick he tried to pass off on us last time that tasted like it was dried in the microwave next to a frozen burrito; *that* shit sucked so bad I couldn’t even get a decent buzz off of it. This new shit though; it was actually pretty smooth, but he still didn’t know what to do with it. His mix was off, he didn’t grind the bud so there were hard chunks and stalks in it, and his papers were so loose I had to re-roll the spliff. Plus, he didn’t even know how to make a roach; instead he figured he could use the filter off a Marley. I wound up having to do a goddamn weed tutorial in the middle of the party only to barely get a hit off it before he wet sucked the shit out of the thing like he was giving it a blowjob. I wasn’t about to put it back in my mouth by the time he was done with it.”

“Goddamn amateur hour,” the other man commiserated.

“I’m telling you, it was a waste of good dank,” he agreed shaking his head. “And he used *hemp*
paper instead of rice paper; I guess he figured it would add to the high, but all you could taste was the paper! I mean, what the fuck? And we’re talking quality fresh green; it was a damn shame! I swear, it was like watching him turn a lady into a whore. I just had to step in and do the chivalrous thing, man. Seriously, Jeremy’s smoked enough weed that he should know this shit already.”

“Where the hell did Jeremy get decent bud anyway?” he snorted.

“Somebody said he has the hook up with a guy into hydroponics,” he smiled as the woman of his dreams chased her friend then began to kiss her on the cheek playfully as the other woman tried to push her away. He caught the look on Ollie’s face, “What?”

“I’m almost embarrassed to be seen with you, you know that? This is just…pitiful,” he said disgustedly. “You’re Tommy fucking Merlyn! Just go ask her out!”

“I will,” he said defensively.

“When?”

“Eventually,” he muttered.

“You and Caroline have been over for a year! Sack up, dude; it’s just Laurel!” he said rolling his eyes. “Just go up to her and tell her you want to hook up, so I don’t have to watch you stalk her anymore.”

“Hey, first off, that’s the mother of my future children you’re talking about, not some random hook up, so watch it. Secondly, I’m not stalking her,” he said with a frown. “I’m merely observing her from a distance.”

“All you need is a white paneled van and a roll of duct tape and you could totally be a stalker,” he said flatly.

“That’s not a stalker, that’s a serial killer; I want to date her not stab her in the shower.”

“Not with a knife anyway,” he said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a small silver flask then hiding his soda under the table so he could doctor it a little.

“That was both disturbing and highly inappropriate.”

“I try,” Ollie said, taking a deep drink from the can.

“Getting wasted and it’s not even eight in the morning yet; nice,” Tommy said arching an eyebrow.

“Hair of the dog. Want some?” he asked, offering him the flask, “Might help give you the courage to actually talk to your future whatever over there.”

Tommy looked at the flask before reluctantly reaching for it and taking a quick drink. He made a slight noise of disgust as the warm vodka burned a path down to his stomach then rose to his feet, “Okay, I’m going in.” He took a single step in her direction before turning to Ollie who still looked like death warmed over, “Are you coming or what?”

He squinted up at him, “Why do I need to go?”

“Moral support.”

“You know, you can be such a girl sometimes,” he bitched as he reluctantly rose from the bench. “Next thing you know, you’ll want us to hold hands as we go skipping through the wildflowers
together like in freaking Little House on the Prairie.” Tommy playfully reached for his hand causing Ollie to burst out in a pained laugh, “Fuck, ow! Don’t make me laugh, man; seriously.”

“I loved Little House,” he said in mock sincerity.

Ollie snorted, “Yeah, I know that, asshole. I’m the one who had to watch that shit with you.”

“Had to watch’, my ass,” he scoffed as they made their way towards the group of girls. “You were all ‘I’m gonna marry Laura someday!’“

“Hey, Laura was hot,” he deadpanned. “You’re the one who was all hung up on the brainy blonde sister, what’s her face.”

“Mary,” he nodded with a slow grin, “Hot, blonde, and tragically struck blind at a young age. It’s got it all, man; drama, tragedy, romance, plus she had a job so she could support me if my dad ever did actually cut me off without a dime.”

“You are one sick twist, Tommy Merlyn,” Ollie chuckled.

“Why yes, yes I am,” he said proudly.

As they neared the group, McKenna took one look at the two of them and grinned, “You’re holding, aren’t you? You guys look totally baked.”

“We’re not baked,” Ollie said, sidling up to her and throwing his arm around her shoulders, “We’re drunk, there’s a difference.”

“I’m still a little baked,” Tommy admitted reluctantly.

“Before class even starts; seriously?” Laurel said in disapproval as she glared at Ollie. Sara sidled up to his other side and dug the silver flask from his pocket before taking a quick drink. “Sara!”

“What?” Her younger sister coughed a little before sneaking the flask to McKenna who drank as well before handing it back to Ollie, “You guys are already halfway out of here with one year to go. Meanwhile, I’m still gonna be stuck in this hellhole for another three years.”

“Well, you’re all going to get expelled if anyone catches you,” Laurel said rolling her eyes at them.

“Oh relax,” Ollie told her, taking another drink before stuffing it back in his pocket. “You’re just worried you won’t get to be valedictorian if, God forbid, someone catches you having fun.”

“Getting drunk and wasted isn’t fun,” she said flatly.

“Actually, that’s kind of the definition of fun,” he returned lazily. “You should try it sometime; might help loosen that stick up your butt.”

McKenna and Sara snorted while Laurel continued to shoot him a laser-like glare.

“Not for me, I’m with you; clean living all the way. Gum?” Tommy offered, after popping a couple of pieces in his mouth and chewing.

“No, thank you,” she said with a scowl, “And since when do you go for clean living, Tommy Merlyn?”

“Yeah,” McKenna grinned as she snatched the gum out of his hand and popped a piece in her mouth as well, “I could have sworn I saw you getting lit at Jeremy’s party last night.”
“My last hoorah,” Tommy said with mock sincerity. “I’m a changed man.”

“Right,” the other girl said shaking her head.

Laurel, ignoring the rest of them, continued to glare at Ollie, “Seriously, if you get caught with that flask, they’ll expel you and you’ll blow your chance to get into an Ivy League college.”

“Screw college,” he said dismissively. “I don’t want to go to stupid Harvard anyway. That’s my dad’s idea, not mine. I want to take a year off and go to Europe so I can expand my mind a little.” He turned to Tommy with a quizzical frown, “Amsterdam’s in Europe, right?”

“I can’t believe you’d just blow off your entire future like that,” she said darkly.

“Yeah Ollie, grow up!” Tommy said mockingly as he pasted on a dad-like glower, “You need to learn to take your responsibilities more seriously, young man.”

“Damn, Tommy, you sounded just like your old man that time,” he said with a hint of genuine praise.

“I’ve been practicing,” he preened.

Sara and McKenna burst out into laughter while Laurel just sighed and shook her head at them, “You two should take your act on the road. Like now and very far down the road where we don’t have to hear it.”

“You know you love me,” Ollie said with a rakish smirk.

“You wish,” Laurel said flatly.

“You guys are so married!” McKenna said, pointing between them.

The other girl arched her eyebrow, “Not even.”

“Yeah, you totally are,” Sara agreed.

“Plus, you two did date a couple of times, right?” McKenna added mischievously. “I’m telling you; in a few years you’re totally going to be Mr. and Mrs. Ollie Queen.”

“More like Mrs. and Mr. Laurel Lance, ‘cause Laurel is totally going to have him whipped by the time she gets done with him,” Sara snorted.

“Wait, what?” Tommy said in surprise. He looked over at Ollie with a frown, “When did you two go out?”

“It was nothing,” Ollie waved him off.

“Less than nothing,” Laurel said in clipped tones.

“It was like a couple of dates last summer when you went to Australia with your old man,” he shrugged. “Tell you the truth, it didn’t even count as ‘dating’; more like we were both at the same party and hung out a little. I’d pretty much forgotten about it until just now.”

“Ouch,” McKenna said with a wince as Laurel shot him a filthy look of near murderous rage.

“Maybe if you hadn’t been drunk off your ass with your tongue down some other girl’s throat, you might have remembered,” she said icily.
Ollie merely leaned back on his heels, his hands stuck deep in the front pockets of his jeans, and grinned indolently in response, “What can I say? I was bored and was eager for…’stimulation’ wherever I could find it.” He ducked his head a little and muttered under his breath, “God knows I wasn’t getting any from you.”

“That’s because I’m not one of your skanks,” Laurel said flatly. “Unlike you and the women you ‘date’, I actually have some self-respect.”

“I had self-respect once,” he said with a yawn, “but then I decided to have fun instead.”

“I’m going to class,” Laurel snapped, grabbing her backpack and turning on her heels, “Not that ‘class’ is a word you’d be familiar with.”

“It’s not that I’m unfamiliar with it, it’s just that I really don’t give a shit,” he said, his lazy grin never wavering.

Laurel made an aggravated noise and stomped off, her sister and best friend hurrying to catch up to her.

“Fucking asshole!” Tommy said, punching him in the arm as he watched her stalk away angrily.

“She started it,” he said rubbing his arm with a whine.

“Thanks to you I didn’t get a chance to ask her out, shit head!”

The bell rang and Ollie sighed, “Dude, seriously, you don’t have to ask her out. Brandon’s holding an end of the year blow out on Saturday and I know for a fact that she’s going along with McKenna; just hook up with her there, man. Shit.”

“Oh. Well okay,” he said, somewhat mollified. He threw his buddy another look of discontentment, “Hey, why didn’t you tell me you hooked up with Laurel over the summer, man? You knew I had a thing for her for a while now.”

“Honestly man, I forgot,” he said shaking his head. “Seriously, it was just like I said; I showed up someplace and she’d be there, then we’d hang. I never even thought of it as ‘dating’ but apparently Laurel must have.” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “I mean, seriously; I may be a douche but if I had known I was on a date, I would’ve stopped banging Traci Arbogast when she walked in on us and invited her along for the ride.”

“Why am I friends with you?” Tommy said, shaking his head in disgust.

“No fucking clue.” The second bell rang and Ollie turned to him with a frown, “Ah shit, guess that makes us tardy.”

“Yup,” he agreed, but made no move to hurry along to class.

“You ever get the digits to Jeremy’s DD with the hydro hook up?” Tommy threw him a wry glare. “Sorry man, stupid question.” He looked at him curiously, “Wanna go make a run and spend the rest of the day making party favors with me? Brandon put me in charge of the refreshment committee and my normal weed guy has been trying to pass off inferior stock so I’m seriously thinking about cutting him loose.”

“Yeah, might as well,” he said, already heading towards the parking lot.

“You think he’ll let us sample some if we offer to buy some honey butter? Might help with this rager
of a headache plus I’m thinking about baking some brownies.”

“Dude, again, it’s like eight in the morning; show some restraint,” Tommy told him as they slipped inside his Jeep.

“Feels like 4:20 to me,” he said with a grin as they took off.

It turned out that Jeremy’s hook up was an Ag student at Starling Central University who used to date his sister. The guy was a little spookish about selling to them since he only grew for personal use and had a professor who, like Tommy, was a legalize weed fanatic, so he let him grow on the down low as long as he donated the bulk of his crop to the Medical underground. After convincing him that it was a medical emergency by waving a fat wad under his nose, they got a couple of lids and some hash oil for the brownies along with his assurance that should they need his humanitarian services in the future, he’d be willing to contribute to the cause.

After Ollie glanced at the back seat where they had stashed their stash for the umpteenth time, Tommy sighed, “You are not gonna hot box in my ride, man. I like to never get that stink out of the upholstery the last time you did that shit. Besides, you blaze up in here and we get busted while holding, no amount of parental irresponsibility is going to save us from getting our asses pounded by a couple of hard cores in the clink. Quite frankly, I’ve got no urge to be some leather daddy’s bitch today, thanks.”

“But Tommy, my head is killing me,” he whined. “C’mon man!”

“So go take an aspirin.”

“Fine, stop here so I can buy some,” Ollie scowled and motioned for him to pull into a supermarket parking lot. “I need to pick up some brownie mix and a carton of Reds anyway. Think they sell papers here?”

“It’s the Valley,” he said, as if that should be obvious. “No need though; I got plenty at home.”

“Hey man, is your dad still out of town?” he asked as they pulled into a spot near the front.

“When isn’t he out of town?” he snorted. “What’s worse is that the orphan is visiting so that means I’m stuck with her until he remembers we even exist.” Tommy paused, “Well, he remembers she exists at least; it’s just me he could give a shit about.”

“What is she doing here? I thought she was at some boarding school up in Gotham?”

“I don’t know,” he said darkly. “Daddy dearest suddenly got a bug up his ass about having her around more since I’m heading to college in a couple of years. I’d say it was empty nest syndrome but it’s not like he ever cared about being a full-on parental unit in the first place. The only time he ever pulls the dad card is when he’s giving me shit over some perceived fuck up or another; then it’s like Malcolm thinks he’s being father of the freakin’ year or something!”

“What’s up with the orphan anyway?” Ollie asked, adopting Tommy’s nickname for her. “Why’s he care about this kid so much?”

“Fuck if I know,” he said dismissively. “She’s the daughter of an old buddy of his or something so he’s taking care of her.”

“You sure she’s an orphan and not Malcolm’s love child from some Vegas cocktail waitress?” he
grinned.

Tommy snorted, “Yeah right; he hasn’t so much as looked at another woman since my mom died. He’s a friggin’ robot! Naw, she’s his ‘ward’.”

Ollie’s brow furrowed at that, “What the hell’s a ‘ward’?”

He shrugged noncommittally, “Basically he’s her legal guardian.”

“So, what? Does that mean she’s adopted or his foster kid or what?”

Tommy could understand his confusion. Malcolm Merlyn was definitely not the type of man who enjoyed parenthood so the idea of him adopting or taking in a child from the foster system was a completely alien concept. “No, I don’t know the legalese of it all but apparently; her dad was some old college buddy of his and her mom was just some coked up slut who took off and abandoned her. Malcolm was named her guardian in the dead dad’s will so he got this wild hair up his ass about taking care of her; said he didn’t want her to be put in the system. I guess you could say that he’s her legal ‘foster-uncle’ or some shit, I don’t know,” he shrugged again. “He manages the trust fund her dad set up for her so the crack mom doesn’t blow it on rock and keeps her at that boarding school most of the time. Until lately that is.” He twisted in his seat and gave Ollie a belligerent look, “Do you wanna know what that asshole did the other day?”

“What?”

“He gave her my mom’s locket; you know the one she always used to wear?” he said angrily, “Then he told her, right in front of me, that my mom would have loved to have her as a daughter and took my baby picture out of it so he could put their wedding photo in it instead like they were having some kind of goddamn father/daughter Hallmark moment! I about threw up right then and there.”

Ollie’s face reddened in outrage on his behalf, “Didn’t your mom leave that to you to give to your future wife or something?”

After Rebecca died and Malcolm subsequently took off to join an ashram in Tibet, Tommy practically slept with that locket every single night so he knew exactly how important it was to him.

“Yeah, he got it out of my room and just gave it to her, just like that!” he said indignantly. “When I called him out on it he said that at the rate I was going I’d probably wind up losing it or giving it to some random floozy so, at least this way, it would ‘stay in the family’. Can you believe that shit? Like the orphan is family?”

“That’s bullshit, man,” his friend said, shaking his head. “Did you get it back from the kid?”

“No,” he said gruffly. “When he told her my mom was basically her mom she burst into tears and started blubbering about it so I just let it go.” He offered him a wry grimace, “And now he’s out of town until Thursday and I’m stuck babysitting the little creeper.”

“You know, we should get some payback and have a get together at your place tonight; test drive some of this hydro.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said, man? I’m on babysitting duty.”

“So? Let the nanny or whatever watch her and we’ll hang out in the pool house,” he said indolently.

He sighed, “Dad didn’t hire one this time. He said that we needed to ‘bond’ or something so I’m stuck with her by myself after our housekeeper leaves.”
“She’s like, what? Eight?”

“No, I don’t know. I know she’s older than that, though. I think she’s eleven, maybe twelve; something like that,” he said morosely.

“Are you sure?” he asked dubiously, “Because she’s not that much bigger than Thea and she’s only five.”

“Shit, I don’t know! Maybe she’s a midget! All I know is she acts like she’s thirty, plus she talks weird and drives me up the friggin’ wall.”

“Whatever; just send her to bed early,” he told her. “We’ll party afterwards; she’ll never know.”

Everything in Tommy screamed that it was a bad idea but he was still pissed that the little creeper was wearing his mom’s necklace, not to mention the fact that his dad had screwed up his whole week with this bonding idea crap.

“Okay, but no one can come over until after the staff leaves and she’s down for the night. Plus, I gotta warn you, she’s kind of hyper,” he said with a grimace. “She’s some kind of freaky genius so she’s constantly walking all over the place and yammering on about random shit.”

“So? We’ll slip her some Benadryl or something,” he shrugged.

“You can’t drug her!” Tommy burst out.

“It’s just Benadryl!” he scoffed. “I can pick some up when I get the aspirin.”

“No, no way,” he said firmly. “I may not like having to deal with her, but even I know there are some lines you just do not cross and slipping drugs to a kid in order to knock them out so you can party? Yeah, fuck that. With my luck she’ll OD or something and then we’ll have to dig a hole and make up a story about how she ran off and joined the circus.”

“Fine,” Ollie pouted. “You can try feeding her warm milk and cookies or some shit, see if that works.”

“Fine,” Tommy threw back. “Come on; you get the brownie mix, meanwhile I’m getting some party supplies and snacks.”

“Sounds like a plan, my man. Tommy is the man with the plan.”

“Fuck you.”

“Not unless you woo me first. A girl’s got to have some standards.”

“Are you having a party?” Felicity asked as she wandered into the kitchen.

“Yeah, a big party,” Ollie snickered, still buzzed from the joint he smoked before the housekeeper left. Now he was busy making a second huge pan of hash brownies while he came down from his high.

“Can I help? I’m a good cook; I even help out in the cafeteria sometimes.”

Tommy glanced over at the mousy haired little girl as she peered at him over the counter, her big blue eyes exaggerated by the coke bottle lenses she wore. “No. Go away,” he told her as he emptied
various bags of chips into different bowls along with salsa and dip.

“Can I come?” she asked hopefully, ignoring his harsh tone.

“It’s not a kid kind of party,” Tommy told her as he grabbed the two huge bags of plain M&M’s and poured them into a bowl as well.

She looked at the bags of groceries filled with various kinds of junk food ranging from Twizzlers and Cheetos to several different kinds of sugary sodas and Red Bull, “Sort of looks like a kid’s party to me.”

“Well it isn’t,” he said abruptly then turned to Ollie, “What time did you tell everybody to come over?”

He glanced at the clock, “They should be here in about an hour, hour and a half.”

“Okay kid, bed time,” Tommy told her.

Felicity narrowed her eyes at him and scowled, “But it’s not even seven o’clock and we haven’t had dinner yet.”

He looked at her askance, “Didn’t Mrs. McGregor feed you?”

“No,” she said roundly and pointed to the deep pan of chicken and spinach casserole on the counter, “She told you before she left that you were supposed to put that in the oven but your friend decided to make brownies instead, remember?”

“Right,” he said with a grimace then sighed, “Hey Ollie, I’m gonna call for pizza; what do you want?”

“The usual,” he said absently as he began cutting up the still warm brownies and putting them on a cooling rack.

“Why can’t we just have what Mrs. McGregor made?” she asked crestfallen. “She made that special because I told her it was my favorite.”

She is so weird, Tommy thought. What kind of kid turns down pizza and asks for chicken spinach casserole instead? “Because I’m not waiting around for that crap to cook when we can have a pizza delivered in thirty minutes or less, so just deal with it.”

“Fine,” she conceded. “Can I have chicken and spinach on my pizza then? With the white sauce?”

“No,” he snorted. “You can eat pepperoni or plain cheese or something like a normal kid instead of a freak.” At the expression of hurt on her face he found himself easing up slightly, “Fine, I’ll order you some Fettuccini Alfredo instead.”

“With broccoli?” She asked perking up slightly.

“You are so weird,” he muttered. “But after we eat you’re going to your room and staying there. Go watch TV or something, I don’t care, but you don’t come downstairs,” he warned.

“Why can’t I come to the party?” she asked.

“I told you why,” he said with a note of aggravation. “Keep it up and I’ll make you go to bed without dinner altogether.”
“Okay,” she said in a slightly muted tone.

He reached into his back pocket and gritted his teeth, “Great! I left my phone in the pool house.” He looked over to Ollie, “Can you watch the orph—“ He stopped himself, “Felicity while I get my phone?”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “Hey, while you’re out there you might want to call McKenna and see if she can get Laurel to come over. Or better yet, you can sack up and call her yourself.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad idea,” he mused.

“What does ‘sack up’ mean?” Felicity asked with a frown as she climbed up on a barstool to watch Ollie as he poured another box of brownie mix into the stand mixer on the counter.

“It means grow a pair of—“

“Hey!” he said, cutting off Ollie at the pass.

“C’mon man,” he said, tossing him a slightly stoned grin. “Even Thea knows what that is and she’s five.”

“Yeah, well, she’s your little sister so she had to grow up fast,” Tommy retorted. “The last thing I need to hear from my old man is how I corrupted the one kid he actually likes.”

“He likes you,” Felicity said softly. “He writes about you in his letters all the time.”

“Letters?” Tommy repeated incredulously.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “He writes me all the time. He says it’s more special than just calling. He even bought me a calligraphy set; want to see? I can show you. I’m actually getting pretty good at it.”

“See what I mean?” he said turning to his friend with a grim expression.

“That’s just weird,” Ollie agreed.

“It’s not weird,” she said in a hurt tone. “Malcolm says that every young lady should learn to do elegant things like play the piano and use good penmanship. He even said that our—“ she bit her lip and looked guiltily at Tommy for a second before dropping her gaze and fingering the locket under her simple white blouse, “He said that Tommy’s mom knew how to do all of that stuff when she was my age.”

Tommy felt himself do a slow burn, quickly eradicating the last vestiges of the contact high he got from hanging out with Ollie in the pool house earlier. “I’m going to go call Laurel. Stay in here and do what Ollie tells you to, understand?” he said then turned on his heel and left before he said something to make the little freak cry again.

The other day after Malcolm gave her his mom’s locket they had gotten into it in front of her. Harsh words were spoken on both sides ending with him saying some rather unkind things about the fact that Felicity wasn’t his real kid, just some crack orphan he decided to take on as a hobby. It ended with Felicity running out of the room in tears and his dad shoving him against the wall, angrier than he’d ever seen him before, and that was saying a lot. He made him go upstairs to apologize to her only to have the kid apologize to him instead and hand him back the locket. Then she said she’d go downstairs and ask Malcolm to send her back to school if he didn’t want her there. When he pointed out how stupid that was since the school was already out for summer break, she said she was thinking of going to computer camp and thought that maybe the headmistress would let her stay over
for a couple of weeks until it started. She even said she was used to it since last year, when Malcolm was out of the country and he went skiing with the Queen’s over in Big Bear; she stayed at the school and did extra coursework instead.

That made the knife twist in his gut and then she had to go and add to it by smiling and pointing out that it was okay because it meant she could get a head start on the new semester and, besides, she was Jewish so Christmas wasn’t really that big of a deal to her.

After that he couldn’t even look her in the eye so he told her to keep the locket and that it was okay if she stayed. That is until Malcolm decided to ‘let the punishment fit the crime’ and decided to put him on babysitting duty so they could ‘bond’.

Shaking off his foul mood, he found his phone and, after he called and ordered a ton of pizzas, he called Laurel.

It took a few minutes of stumbling and awkward speech but, before long, they were actually having a pretty interesting conversation. He invited her over but she opted out. She did say however, that she was definitely planning on going to Brandon’s that weekend and maybe they’d see each other then. It wasn’t a ‘date’ date, more of an ‘I’ll be there and so will you’ kind of thing, but it was close enough as far as he was concerned. By the time he got off the phone he realized that he’d been talking for almost an hour and not only would people be arriving soon, but the pizzas he ordered had been delivered and had probably already gone cold.

At that moment however, he couldn’t have cared less. Even if all there was left was some congealed cheese stuck to the cardboard, nothing could bring him down now that he knew he was one step closer to bagging his dream girl.

“Tommy! Get in here quick! Help!”

He stepped into house through the back door, mouth already open to crow over this auspicious change of events when he heard Ollie calling out to him in an almost frantic tone.

He rushed into the kitchen to see Felicity clutching at her throat and gasping as she turned red and began to sway slightly. Ollie was freaking out, practically in tears, his eyes locked on hers, “Tommy! Tommy, help!”

“Is she choking?” he asked reaching for her and patting her on the back.

She was breathing in harsh pants and in a cold sweat, while Ollie’s pupils were blown from the pot brownies and panic, “No! I don’t know!” he said, running both his hands through his hair frantically.

“Tommy…” Felicity gasped, “I don’t…feel good. My lips…feel numb…and I think…going to…vomit.”

Tommy, confused and terrified, looked around, trying to figure out what the hell had happened. He’d only been gone—

And that’s when he saw it. Lying on the plate next to Felicity’s half eaten pasta, was a brownie.

“Motherfucker!” he shouted, curling up his fist and laying Ollie out with one punch. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he bellowed in the fallen man’s face as he gazed up at him in shock, “You fed her a hash brownie? She’s fucking twelve, you asshole! How’d you like if I did something like that to Thea?”

“Whoa!” Ollie said from the floor, the force of the hit along with the shock making him go from
stoned to stone cold sober in an instant, “I did *not* feed her one of the brownies I made for the party! That was a batch of plain ones I made in case Laurel decided to show!”

“Then what the hell did you do to her?” he yelled.

“I didn’t do anything, I swear!”

Felicity stumbled off the chair and fell to her knees then began to stagger to her feet.

“Whoa,” he said grabbing her.

“E-epi—“ was all she got out.

Tommy looked over at the brownie again, his eyes going wide, “Oh shit! Did you put nuts in the brownies?”

“Yeah, but Laurel’s not allergic to nuts,” he said blankly, scrambling to his feet and still rubbing his rapidly swelling jaw.

“But Felicity is, dumb ass!” he shot back.

“You didn’t tell me that!” Ollie returned angrily.

“I—I forgot!” His heart clenched in fear, “What do we do? Do we call an ambulance?”

“I don’t know!” the other man said swallowing. “Hang on!” he said then rushed out of the kitchen.

“Epi—“ Felicity took in a wheezing breath, “Epi…Epi-pen.”

“Where?” Tommy asked her.

She pointed to the cupboard near the sink where their housekeeper always stored Felicity’s special ‘nut-free’ snacks. He snatched one of the boxes containing the EpiPen Jr’s and looked at it in wide-eyed confusion, “How—what do I--?”

Felicity pulled up the hem of her tartan plaid skirt and pointed to her thigh wordlessly. Without even stopping to think about it, he ripped open the box, allowed the needle to hover over her outer thigh for just a split second, before plunging it in, causing her to cry out and whimper slightly.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said over and over as tears of fear and pain rolled down her bright red cheeks. “Now what? Do I do it again?”

She shook her head, “Not—yet…” She began to rub her thigh and he remembered dimly the instructions their housekeeper had given him a while back on what to do if she ever had a reaction.

Pushing her hands out of the way, he began to massage the injection site.

“Hey, I got the—what are you doing?” Ollie said looking at him askance, a bright pink box held in one hand as he stood next to them.

“What is that?” he asked, nodding to the box and ignoring the question.

“Benadryl.”

“I told you *not* to buy the Benadryl!” he said sharply.
“It’s kid’s Benadryl,” he said defensively, “See?” He said, pointing to the box, “Bubblegum favor. Besides, aren’t you glad I bought it now?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said with a tremor in his voice. “Felicity, can you take Benadryl with the Epi shot?”

She nodded. “Last…time I had a reaction, the…school nurse gave me some,” she said, still slightly breathless but he could tell she was already improving.

“Okay, give her some,” Tommy told him, still massaging her thigh.

“Hang on, I’m reading the damn box!” Ollie snapped. “Why do they have to make the goddamn print so tiny?”

Tommy snatched the glasses off of Felicity’s face, ignoring her noise of protest as he did so, and shoved them at him, “Here!”

“I don’t--!” Ollie began but then looked through the lenses at the dosing indications, “Oh, okay, that helped.” He tore open the box and filled the tiny cup full of a viscous pink fluid. “Here.”

Felicity took it from him and drank it down, pulling a face as she did so and shuddering in distaste, “Sure doesn’t taste like gum.” She gasped out but her breath was no longer wheezing and he began to relax a little.

“Okay, we should take her to the hospital now just to be safe,” Tommy said, his heart still racing slightly.

“No!” Felicity said quickly, placing her hand on his arm as he reached for his phone.

“Felicity--!”

“No,” she said, shaking her head as her cheeks began to go from bright red to dark pink. “You’ll get in trouble. Besides, I feel better now, honest.”

Tommy started to object but Ollie stopped him, “She’s right, man. If your dad finds out, he’s going to go ballistic.”

“He’ll be even more pissed if she dies,” he scowled.

“I won’t die,” she promised, her eyelids beginning to droop slightly.

He took in a shuddering breath and picked her up. She hardly weighed anything, maybe seventy pounds, if that, as she was small for her age. The first time he met Felicity he thought she was much younger than she was until Mrs. McGregor told him in confidence that the ‘puir wee moppet,’ as she referred to her, had been born severely premature but that she’d catch up eventually. Even so, she was still on the small end of normal so he figured her mother must have been petite as well; not that he’d ever met her. Supposedly the woman was still alive somewhere but, as far as he knew, she’d never so much as visited the kid either here or at the elite private boarding school Malcolm sent her to in Gotham.

She immediately threaded her arms around him and buried her tiny face into his neck which was now sticky with panic sweat. Tommy unconsciously rubbed his hand up and down her back in a soothing gesture, the other supporting her in his arms as he turned to his buddy who was still dazed and looking more than a little scared shitless himself. “I’m going to go put her to bed. Can you call everybody and tell them the party’s off?”
Ollie glanced at the clock and started to say something then swallowed, “Yeah, sure; are we still taking her to the hospital or what?”

“I don’t know,” he said, feeling torn. Felicity burrowed herself deeper into his chest and he wrapped his arms around her a little tighter, “Not…not yet,” he decided at last. “I’ll watch her and if she looks like she needs to go, we’ll take her.”

“Tommy, I’m sleepy,” she mumbled against him.

“I know, sunshine,” he said back quietly using his dad’s nickname for her and causing her to make a happy noise as she began to drift into a light doze. He looked at Ollie and the mess that surrounded them, “Can you handle getting rid of the--?” He lifted his chin and nodded at the trays and trays of hash brownies. “Just in case. If we do have to call an ambulance, I don’t want anyone finding them.”

“Yeah sure,” he said ruefully.

“Thanks,” he said before exiting the kitchen and taking her upstairs to her room.

Her room was another point of contention between him and his dad. Before, when Felicity was just some kid he never really saw, he didn’t care about her or what his dad did as far as she was concerned. That is until Malcolm started bringing her home whenever he would join the Queen’s on their family vacations until, one day, he came home to find out that he had turned the empty room across from his into ‘her’ room. He’d even had it professionally decorated.

The entire room looked like something out of a magazine. The walls were painted with bright concentric circles in purple, lime green, deep pink, burgundy, and blue on a pale lavender background that extended throughout the room including the gabled ceiling and carpet. There was also an accent wall done in a darker shade of lavender with a huge mural of a flower silhouette and a funky looking chandelier hung from the ceiling like a weirdly shaped flower. Her queen sized bed sat low to the ground on a brightly upholstered striped base that matched her bedding and made the already large room look even bigger.

Between all that and the large stuffed animals that cluttered the various surfaces, it looked like every tween-age girl’s fantasy bedroom and, frankly, it was a hell of a lot nicer than his. She even had a better view of the grounds from her large floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the garden and opened to the third floor balcony. He even got her a huge flat screen to go on the accent wall next to her bed and a state of the art computer was sitting out on the desk that was tucked into the corner.

The last person to decorate *his* bedroom was himself and all that involved was tacking a couple of centerfolds on the wall which were both promptly removed and tossed, most likely by the ubiquitous Mrs. McGregor. In fact, he was sure of it. For two weeks afterwards, every time she'd look at him, she’d suck on her front teeth in a hissing sound and make the sign of the cross as she muttered, “Och! Ah’m pure scunnurt o’er tha boy. Saint’s preserve us!”

He put her down on her bed and she mumbled, “I need my nightie.”

“Right,” he said, turning to the dresser and grabbing a white cotton and lace gown and handing it to her.

She got shakily to her feet and walked into the bathroom to change leaving him to stand helplessly outside the door. Time seemed to slow as he watched the clock, his heart thudding out of his chest as the seconds ticked by.

‘Maybe I should have gone in with her?’ he thought after he could no longer hear the water running
or her feet as they slapped lightly against the tiles. She might have been in there for all of five minutes but it felt like hours given his already strained state. Finally, unable to stand it anymore, he reached for the door to the bathroom only to have her stumble out sleepily instead. She swayed on her feet as he led her to the bed then pulled down her duvet so she could fall face first onto the soft mattress with an almost comical ‘thump’. He straightened her in the bed and tucked the covers around her, “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you want some water or something?”

She shook her head without opening her eyes, “Tommy?” she slurred.

“Yeah?”

“Can you stay with me?” Felicity asked him in a faraway tone. “I don’t want to be by myself.”

“Okay,” he said, kicking off his shoes and lying down in the bed beside her without thinking twice about it. To tell the truth, he was kind of glad she asked because as soon as he did she curled up beside him to lay her head on his chest. He could feel her breathing even out as her heart thudded reassuringly against his side. He wrapped his arm around her then pulled her a little closer, his own heart rate slowing to match hers.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly.

“Sorry for what?” he asked, switching off the bedside lamp to darken the room.

“I ruined your party,” she whispered.

“It’s okay,” he told her with a sigh. Maybe it’s just as well Laurel didn’t come after all. Her seeing him and Oliver nearly getting his…whatever Felicity was, killed would have definitely doomed whatever chance he had of ever being with her.

“You should go have fun. I’ll be okay,” she yawned.

“Shut up,” he said, not unkindly. “Besides, I’m tired and your bed is softer than mine anyway.”

She wrinkled her nose, “Plus, your room smells kind of funny; like hamster food and feet sweat.”

He frowned, bending his head to look down at her, “When were you in my room?”

She cracked her eyes open, “Um, never?”

“Go to sleep,” he said gruffly.

“Night night, Tommy.”

“‘Night,” he mumbled back, shutting his eyes as well.

A while later the door to Felicity’s room opened and Tommy opened his eyes slowly, not even realizing he’d drifted asleep.

“Hey, is she okay?” Ollie asked quietly from the doorway, holding up her glasses awkwardly.

He nodded to the dresser and watched as Ollie put them down next to the cut crystal music box Malcolm gave her. “Yeah,” he said in a near whisper. “I think so but I’ll probably stay with her just in case.”

“Do you need me to stay, too? I can call my mom--?”
“No man, it’s cool. I think I got it.”

He nodded and entered the room fully, “Look bro, I’m really sorry…”

“It’s okay, you didn’t know,” Tommy assured him. “It was my fault for not telling you about the nut thing in the first place. And, since we’re apologizing, I’m sorry for punching you like that. That was way the fu—” he glanced at the sleeping girl and cleared his throat, “It was over the line and I’m sorry.”

“No, that’s okay,” he told him. “I mean, you were right; if someone did what you thought I did to my little sister, I would have laid them out, too. This whole thing is my fault. I should have never been baking those kinds of brownies in front of your—“ he frowned, looking at her uncertainly, “uh, *her* like that. I definitely shouldn’t have been getting buzzed right in front of her.”

“Yeah, well, that was kind of both our faults,” he admitted. “And I shouldn’t have shuffled her off on you while I snuck off to call Laurel like that.”

“How’d that go anyway?” He asked, ambling into the room further to sit at the end of the bed.

“Pretty good, I think,” he said, adjusting Felicity against him slightly so he could lie propped up against the pillows as they talked. “She said she’ll be at Brandon’s so I’ll see her there.”

“Excellent,” he grinned and nodded. His eyes then swept through the darkened room, “Damn, her room really is nicer than yours.”

“I know, right?”

“Is that a flat screen?” he asked, pointing to the far wall.

“Yeah,” he said with a grimace. “She doesn’t even watch it either. The only time she ever watches TV is with my dad and then all she watches is old musicals and sci-fi movies.”

“That’s big. What is that thing; eighty inches? Think she’d let us watch the game in here sometime?” he asked hopefully.

“If you want to watch the game I’ve got a TV in my room, too, you know,” he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, but your room stinks of old bong water and the sweat socks you’ve been using as your girlfriend ever since Caroline dumped you,” he said with a note of disgust. “How come the maids don’t clean up in there anymore?”

“Mrs. McGregor found my porn stash and said that she won’t let any of the maids back in there until I get the ‘devil’s work’ out from under my bed,” he said mournfully then glanced at Felicity. “Fine,” he said with a sigh, “I’ll ask her about the game thing tomorrow.”

“Cool,” he said getting up off the bed. “Oh, and by the way. I put up all the food and loaded the dishwasher, plus I took the regular brownies she ate out to the trash just in case. I didn’t know how this allergy thing worked and I didn’t want to just leave them out in the open like that.”

“You cleaned the kitchen?” Tommy asked incredulously.

“What can I say; I was highly motivated,” he shrugged. “I figured that if we did have to call an ambulance that the cops would come and then, well…”

“Good thinking,” he agreed. “And thanks.”
“No problem. Hey, mind if I borrow your Jeep? We left my ride back at school. I figured I’d stop by early and pick you up.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “See you in the morning, man.”

“Night, bro,” he said as he made his way to the door.

“Night,” he said. As soon as the door shut, Tommy adjusted the pillows and rolled onto his side, bringing the little girl closer to his chest, then slept.

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The next morning he got a ten minute lecture from Mrs. McGregor on the perils of feeding Felicity junk food along with a warm pat on the cheek for cleaning up afterwards and showing how responsible he could be if he just put his mind to it.

He didn’t argue, especially when he came home to find his room clean and free of bong water stink and crusty sweat socks. Best of all, Felicity never said a word.

After that he never referred to her as ‘the orphan’ again, he just called her ‘Sunshine’. When his dad came home and asked why, he just shrugged and said it suited her.
We're all a little weird, and life's a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall in mutual weirdness and call it LOVE.

Dr. Seuss
Chapter Two: Platonic Life Bros

He stopped smoking pot after the incident with Felicity and the (almost) hash brownie thing. It wasn’t really a conscious decision, it just kind of happened. After school he came home to a room that smelled and looked better than it had in months because Mrs. McGregor finally let the maids back in after she (mistakenly) decided to reward him for showing some ‘responsibility’ when she saw evidence by way of the seven mostly uneaten pizzas, the large aluminum take-out pan of pasta, and the many plastic containers of various kinds of dips, chips, and candy, that he had fed Felicity (even though she scolded him because it was a ridiculous amount of junk food). She was also floored to find that when she came to work the countertops had all been wiped down and they had loaded the dishwasher (even though Ollie forgot to actually turn it on). He didn’t feel the slightest tug of guilt over it either, even though he was being rewarded under false pretenses since Ollie was the one who cleaned, not him, and the only reason he had cleaned the kitchen in the first place was because they’d nearly killed Felicity while cooking hash brownies. However, as far as he, Felicity, and Ollie were concerned, no one needed to know about that but them.

He went to bed that night, slipping into clean (!) sheets and breathing in air that smelled of pine sol and clean linens instead of stale bong water and various other biologically based odors, only to have his sleep interrupted a short while later when Felicity snuck in his room and crawled into his bed with him. He woke up confused as he felt her lay her little head against his chest just like she had the previous night when she’d been sick following a severe allergic reaction to nuts.

“What’s wrong?” he mumbled in confusion as she snuggled close, trembling slightly.

“I had a bad dream,” she whispered.

“Okay, so why’re you in my bed?” he asked groggily.

“Because my room is scary right now.”
“Oh. Okay,” he muttered then fell back asleep again.

Thus marked the second time they’d awoken to the sight of Mrs. McGregor standing over them with a beatific grin on her face as she gushed on about how precious her ‘two wee bairns’ looked as they were all ‘cuddled together like angels in the sweet Baby Jesus’s arms’.

Yeah, well, considering that he was sixteen, not six, it was kind of hard to appreciate the ‘wee bairns’ part but it did score them some fresh blueberry pancakes for breakfast and, he had to admit, the little creeper was starting to grow on him.

The next night when he was startled awake by Felicity crawling into his bed he didn’t even bother asking why she was there, he just tucked her close and went back to sleep. After that though, it became fairly obvious that this was going to become a habit so he began to reassess a few things. The first thing he did was take down all his black light posters depicting skulls and half-naked hot zombie chicks because they scared Felicity. He also took down his cannabis posters because, even though she probably didn’t know what the spiky leaves represented (Mrs. Mack thought he was just interested in gardening), he didn’t feel comfortable with her being around that stuff. He even packed up his collection of porn mags, adult DVDs, bongs, and other less than kid friendly paraphernalia, and handed it off to Ollie thinking he’d come back for it eventually, but he never did.

By the time his dad got back into town, he had pretty much accepted the fact that the little girl was planning on being in his bed every night until she had to go back to school in Gotham. And, truth be told, even though he probably should’ve been a little disturbed by it, he kind of liked having someone dependent on him for a change.

“Och!” Mrs. Mack exclaimed suddenly, “Tommy Merlyn, I ought to skelp yuir wee behind! You’re a right clatty!”

He and Felicity both looked up wide-eyed from their breakfast, “Huh?”

“Youir shirt!” she said in her heavy Scottish brogue. “You’ve dripped syrup all over it! You cannae go ta school with a manky shirt on, go upstairs and put on a fresh one right now before yuir father sees ya lookin’ like the dog’s dinner!”

“But I’m not done with my pancakes yet and, besides, it’s the last day before summer vacation anyway,” he said with a frown. “I could go naked and they wouldn’t care. All we do on the last day is watch movies and go to some stupid end of the year assembly thing.”

Not quite, he admitted silently. His dad had donated a buttload of money to the school along with the Queen’s to build a new library so he and Ollie were going to have to sit up on the stage looking like a couple of assholes while their dads gave stirring speeches about the importance of a good education or some shit.

“Don’t you be haverin’ ta me, Tommy Merlyn. Now up the stairs with ye or I’ll gie ye a skelpit lug!” she said with a hard look, her hands on her wide hips and a stubborn set to her jaw.

“What’s she saying?” Felicity whispered to him as the housekeeper turned away with a huff and went back to cooking his father’s breakfast.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, “Usually I just nod like I’m agreeing with whatever she’s saying then wait for her to call me an idiot and walk away.”

“And that works?” She asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Most of the time,” he admitted as he got up from his chair reluctantly, giving the fluffy buttermilk
pancakes that were swimming in warm maple syrup one last longing look.

“I’ll fix ye fresh,” she scolded again. “Now off with ya!”

Tommy left the table and walked out of the kitchen to head up to his room. He noticed Felicity following him and stopped, “Where are you going?”

“Upstairs,” she told him.

“Why?”

“To help you pick out a shirt.”

“Why?”

“Because you have no taste.”

“I have taste!” he objected.

“You were going to pick out a t-shirt, probably something with a naked girl or a rock band on it; maybe both.” It wasn’t a question.

He opened his mouth to object but she was kind of right. Instead he said, “Yeah, well, it’s going to be hot and we’re going to be outside so I figured--”

“The last letter Malcolm sent said you had to wear a button down shirt with a collar and a tie,” she told him patiently.

“I’m not wearing a tie.”

“You have to wear a tie.”

He scowled down at her, “But I don’t want to wear a tie.”

“You have to wear a tie,” she repeated. “You can wear a t-shirt under it then take them off in the car afterwards.”

Again, it was hard to argue with that. “Are you sure you’re twelve?”

“I’m going to be thirteen soon.”

“Fair enough,” he grumbled then led her up the stairs. “You know, I’d swear Dad was using this library thing to bribe somebody if it weren’t for the fact that he hasn’t brought up military school once. Usually when I screw up as badly as I was sure I did this year, he’s all, ‘Maybe military school will teach you some discipline and maturity, young man!’” he said mockingly, “But nope, not a word. Ollie hasn’t said anything, but given the fact that he went to only half his classes this year, I’m pretty sure he’s planning on staying in high school forever.”

“Do you want to stay in high school forever?” she asked dubiously.

“No really,” he said, pausing on the staircase. “I imagine it’d be kinda hard to get into a good frat so we can pick up hot college chicks unless we graduate eventually.”

Felicity closed her eyes and hung her head slightly, “How is it that you’re the one who’s supposed to be taking care of me and not the other way around?”
“Honestly, I have no idea,” he told her off-handedly. They got to his room and she immediately bypassed him and went to his closet while he sat down on the bed. “To tell you the truth, I’m kind of surprised I passed this year at all. I mean, we don’t even have to go to summer school or anything—not that we would have,” he said with a wry grimace. “I didn’t even go to half my classes during the regular school year and I know Ollie didn’t. How we both managed to pass all our exams and come out with a 3.8 GPA is beyond me.” He stared up at the ceiling musingly, “Huh, do you think that maybe I’m a genius too and I just never noticed because I was too busy partying?”

“Oh, maybe,” Felicity said with a furtive look as she handed him his shirt and tie.

He laid them down on the bed and went to his dresser to pick out a t-shirt to wear under them, “I mean, between you and me, I didn’t even read half the questions on the finals; I just filled in the dots randomly.” He snorted as he pulled off the sticky shirt he was wearing and slipped on the Guns N’ Roses Chinese Democracy World Tour t-shirt that he knew would either make Ollie laugh his ass off or bitch nonstop for an hour since it was the tour that barely happened.

They had to wait for four hours in their seats for the concert to start, then Axl not only forgot what city they were in but didn’t play anything from the ‘new’ album. Instead, if you closed your eyes, it could have been the 1987 Appetite for Destruction tour. Seriously, it started off with “Welcome to the Jungle,” which was kind of cool, then “Paradise City” which was okay, but by the time they were on “Sweet Child O’ Mine,” it was starting to get a bit old. When “Mr. Brownstone” started to play, Ollie got pissed and hurled one of the beers they snuck in up at Axl, which he picked it up and hurled back, while calling Ollie every kind of motherfucker and then some. Ollie shouted, ‘Bring back Slash because you guys suck without him!’ to a bunch of catcalls which pissed off Buckethead who put his guitar down and did some nunchuk shit, threatening to jump off the stage and kick both of their asses then, before they knew it, they had a riot on their hands. There was fire and sparks, lasers and smoke, the entire band was threatening to walk off stage amid a bunch of pissed off fans booing and cursing, and they barely got out of there alive, but despite all that, it was a truly epic night.

He grinned at the memory then turned to Felicity who was biting her lip and fidgeting slightly, “What?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly, “Here.”

“I thought Malcolm was going to pass out when my report card came in the mail,” he snorted as he slipped on the shirt and began to button it. “I can only imagine what Ollie’s parents said.” He stopped with a frown, “Actually, I don’t even remember Ollie taking his midterms at all. In fact, I distinctly remember being pissed because I showed up for class while he took off to Guadalajara for a week.” He looked at her quizzically, “Is it even mathematically possible to get a 3.8 GPA if you don’t take the midterms much less the finals?”

“Maybe he took make-up exams?” she offered.

He thought about that, “Naw, he would’ve told me. Besides, he was kind of proud of the fact that he skipped them.”

“Maybe he lied because he was embarrassed?” she shrugged.

“Maybe,” he conceded. He took the tie from her and moved to the full-length mirror beside his closet. He struggled to tie it before scowling, “I still don’t see why I have to wear a stupid tie; no one is going to give a crap about it anyway! I mean it’s the last friggin’ day; it totally blows that I have to go at all.”
“Mrs. Mack said there were going to be reporters and photographers and stuff, that’s why. Here,” Felicity got up from the bed and walked up to him, then led him to the chair by his desk to sit. As soon as he was seated she narrowed her eyes, her tongue poking out between her teeth, and started tying his tie for him.

“Well, isn’t this adorable?” Malcolm said from the doorway with a grin.

“Hi Malcolm!” Felicity said brightly as she turned to grin at him.

“Hi there, sunshine,” he told her as he pressed a kiss to the top of her hair and motioned for Tommy to get up. “Now pay attention,” he told Tommy as he began to tie a perfect Windsor knot. When he was done he winked at Felicity who was watching in rapt fascination.

“Can I try?” She asked.

“Sure,” Malcolm said, undoing his own tie to sit on the end of the bed so she could practice. Tommy walked over to the mirror and watched them in the reflection as Felicity slowly began to mimic the process his dad had showed her. When she was done he gave her another wink which caused her to light up with pleasure, “Very good, sweetheart. That was perfect.”

“Thank you,” she flushed and Tommy rolled his eyes.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and tell Mrs. McGregor we’ll be down in a minute,” he told her.

“Okay.”

She turned to leave the room and Malcolm stopped her, “Oh, and after you tell her you need to hurry up and get dressed. We need to be at the school in less than an hour.”

Felicity looked down at the simple denim skirt and pink butterfly t-shirt she was wearing and flushed again, “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?” Malcolm asked her with a frown.

Felicity looked at him then his dad nervously, “I didn’t know I was invited, I figured it was just going to be you guys going.”

“Why would you think that?” he asked her in confusion.

“Because when I asked Mrs. Mack if she was going she said it was just for family,” she said quietly.

Tommy didn’t even have to wait for his dad to say something, “Exactly, so you better hurry up and get dressed because if I have to wear a stupid tie in ninety-degree heat for the next four hours then you have to suffer along with the rest of us.”

She lit up like it was Christmas morning and began to grin from ear to ear, “Okay! I’ll go tell Mrs. Mack then meet you guys downstairs!”

Malcolm watched as she practically skipped out of the room before turning to Tommy, “That was really nice of you, son. Thank you.”

“It’s no big deal,” he muttered as he avoided making eye contact. Having Malcolm thank him for anything was frankly disconcerting.

“Speaking of Felicity,” Malcolm took a deep breath and rubbed his hands on his knees before speaking, “I talked to Mrs. McGregor...”
Tommy looked at him warily, “Yeah?”

He nodded, “She told me that in addition to the amazing turnaround you’ve done with your grades this year, you’ve really been stepping up to the plate when it comes to her.”

“She said that?” he said in mild disbelief.

He nodded again, “I know…” he sighed, his countenance falling slightly as he gave him an apologetic look, “I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes with you and I wasn’t there the way I should have been. I wasn’t…I wasn’t the best father.” Tommy almost said something rather unkind at that but held his tongue, “And I know that when I brought Felicity into our home you weren’t happy about that, but I want you to know how much I appreciate all you’ve done with her and that I’m very proud of you.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask ‘Really?’ but he held off. Instead, he merely said, “Thanks, dad.”

He arose from the end of the bed, “She writes to me about you all the time, you know.”

“Yeah, she mentioned you two were pen pals,” Tommy said furrowing his brow. “What’s up with that anyway?”

Malcolm rubbed the back of his neck and offered him a small upturn of his lips, “It’s just…something we do,” he offered up. “I wish I had thought to do something like that with you when you were younger.”

“I wish you had, too,” he admitted quietly, then added in a stronger voice, “Then again, I probably would have never gotten around to writing you back after the first couple of times.”

Malcolm chuckled, “Yes, well, you were always restless, kind of like me; always on the move. Felicity though, she’s…different.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” he said dryly.

“She’s brilliant though; a true prodigy,” he said with a hint of pride. “Actually, the writing thing came about because she had gotten into trouble at her last school.”

He snorted, “Felicity? What did she do? Throw off the Bell curve or something and piss off all the other parents?”

He shook his head, “She used the school’s computer to hack into the FBI database to try to locate her mother after she took off and didn’t come home.”

Tommy’s jaw dropped, “Seriously? She’s twelve!”

“At the time though she was only seven.”

“Holy crap,” he said flatly.

His eyebrows lifted slightly as if agreeing with the sentiment, “It turned out for the best though. If she hadn’t done it and gotten caught then the FBI wouldn’t have investigated and contacted me. She would have just entered the system or worse, and I would have never known about her.”

“Wait, so her mom just left her?” he asked. “I mean, I knew she took off but I didn’t think…” He frowned, his voice trailing off. The truth was, he never really even thought about the logistics of it
all; he never even thought to ask. He was always so caught up with his own thing and chasing after Ollie that she barely even crossed his mind.

“I don’t know all of it because Felicity never really talked about it and the social workers couldn’t get her to talk to them either, but I don’t think it was the first time she’d been left on her own,” he told him confidentially. “Donna, as you know, had a drug problem and would often go on binges, or so I was led to believe. I’d never actually met her but, from what they were able to find out, it was fairly obvious that Felicity was used to fending for herself by that time.”

He blanched, “At seven?”

He nodded sadly and sighed, “They suspect Donna was gone at least a month, possibly longer, by the time Felicity tried to find her. She was still going to school every day but when social services investigated they found out from an older neighbor that Felicity had been asking her to help her with her laundry and a local shopkeeper said she’d been coming in regularly to use foodstamps to buy readymade pizzas for her dinners since there was no food in the house.”

Tommy felt his heart sink. No wonder she hadn’t wanted pizza if that’s all she had to eat as a kid, “You never told me about that.”

“You never seemed that interested in her before,” then added, “Until recently anyway.”

He shifted his weight slightly. “Yeah, well, the little creeper is growing on me, what can I say?”

He offered him a crooked grin, “She does have a habit of doing that,” he agreed. “Anyway, the writing thing was my way of giving her something to focus on besides computers at first, but after a while it became somewhat therapeutic for me as well. It really made me reflect back on how I came up short as a father, all the opportunities I missed with you.” He took a step towards him, “Son, I know…” he paused, “I know I made a lot of mistakes and maybe I didn’t handle bringing Felicity into our lives the way you might have wanted me to, but I’m glad you aren’t holding my faults against her.” His eyebrows drew down in a look of mild concern, “I worry that she’s so isolated at that school sometimes.”

He looked at him uncertainly, “I’m…sure she’s fine.”

“You’re probably right,” Malcolm said glancing up at him, although his expression didn’t change.

“What?” He asked, seeing the furtive look in his eyes.

He made a noncommittal noise, “Never mind, it’s nothing.”

“No, what were you going to say?”

Malcolm seemed to hesitate for a moment, “I was thinking about sending Felicity away for the summer to a school for gifted children with abilities similar to hers. It’s basically a technical program that lasts all summer long up in Princeton where child prodigies like her are tested and studied.”

“Wait, studied?” For some reason the idea of Felicity being studied bothered him. “Like summer school or…?”

“It’s a lot more involved than that. They put them through a series of psychological tests while offering a highly rigid and challenging academic program that explores the limits of their abilities. It’s done in conjunction with Princeton’s Psychology department and the kids are studied and the results published in various medical and science journals.” Malcolm stared off to some distant point, “I was approached by the director of the Institute some time ago about enrolling her but I turned them
down…at least at first. I thought about keeping her with us this summer instead.”

Something about that just sounded…creepy, “Why’d you change your mind?”

He shrugged, “You got upset the other day about her being here and I’m going to have to go away on business again soon, plus you usually spend the summer with Ollie and I knew you wouldn’t want to change your plans—”

“Wait, so you were going to send her away because of me?” he asked, suddenly feeling guilty.

Malcolm didn’t answer him, instead he said, “I suppose it was just me doing like you said and using her to make up for the mistakes I made with you.” He exhaled roughly, “Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I’m going to be in town until next week then I’ll take Felicity back east with me on Thursday.”

“She’s only been here a few days and you’re already sending her away?” he asked accusingly.

“What else can I do?” he asked helplessly.

“I don’t know but—! Why are you telling me this anyway?” he asked with a hint of anger.

Malcolm’s lips thinned but the look in his eyes held a note of apology, “I’m not trying to manipulate you, son. I’m just trying to thank you for being nice to her, that’s all and making her feel like she’s a real member of this family.” A look of profound sadness came over him, “It’s just…sometimes I think I’m failing her just like I did you. In fact, I know I am. From what Mrs. McGregor told me you’ve taken better care of her in a week than I ever have with either of you. I don’t know, I guess, in a weird way, I thought maybe you could tell me whether or not I was about to make another mistake since you know what it’s like to be in her shoes.”

“Dad…” he breathed.

He shook his head slightly, his expression brightening, “You know what; we really shouldn’t even be talking about this right now. It’s getting late, and Felicity will be fine at that school; she’s used to being on her own. In fact, she’ll probably enjoy herself more there than she ever would staying here with us.”

“You’re going to make her go to genius camp for the entire summer?” he asked incredulously. “Dad, no kid, even a kid like her, would rather spend their entire summer break at school than at home! That’s just nuts!”

“Like you said, Felicity’s different,” he reasoned. “She’s highly independent for one thing, and she might be twelve, but she’s more mature than most twenty-five-year-olds.”

“She’s still just a little kid though,” he said stubbornly.

“I realize that, but—”

“But nothing!” he said, cutting him off. “You can’t send her to that place, dad.”

“Tommy, I have no less than three business trips scheduled next month alone and I can’t keep relying on you to help take up my slack,” he said in a slightly patronizing manner. “It’s bad enough I made you watch her for the last week although I am happy you two are getting along so well as a result.”

“If this is about me and whether I’m willing to help out, then that should be my choice, not yours!”
he said angrily.

“So…” he looked at him askance, “Are you saying that you want her to stay?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said gruffly. “I mean, I’m not going to be the one to say she has to go to a place like that; that’s bullcrap!”

“You realize what that would mean?” he asked him, “You’d have to watch her on the nights that I’m not here, spend time with her, you wouldn’t be able to take off with the Queen’s on the yacht like you usually do--”

“I can handle that,” he blustered. “And, besides, I don’t even like going on that stupid yacht anyway; I just go to hang out with Ollie! He can deal with going alone for a few weeks; all he does is bitch and whine about how bored he is anyway.”

“I don’t know,” Malcolm said uncertainly. “I mean, don’t get me wrong; you’ve done a great job with her over the last few days, son, but taking care of a child Felicity’s age is a lot of responsibility; even one as intellectually advanced as she is.”

“So?” he challenged. “I already know all that.”

“Well…” he looked at him with a grimace, “Not to take away from what you’ve done, but until recently, being responsible isn’t something you’ve ever shown an affinity for. Not that I’ve shown all that much myself--”

“I can be plenty responsible,” he said taking umbrage. “I’ve been there for her all week and she’s still alive, isn’t she?”

Again, he chose not to include the near death by brownie incident.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, giving him one more chance to back out.

“Yeah,” he said firmly. “She should stay here with us.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” he agreed with a note of respect.

“Thank you,” Tommy said, letting out a pent up breath.

“Another thing,” Malcolm said slowly. “At the breaking ground ceremony for the library…”

“What?” he frowned.

“Well, you know we’re naming the library for your mother so I was thinking that, instead of Moira handling the shovel, maybe you…” he shrugged, “I mean, only if you want to.”

“You want me to help dedicate the new library to mom?” Tommy asked in surprise.

“I can’t think of anyone better to do it, can you?”

“Sure, yeah, no problem,” he told him, feeling a little shell-shocked. For the last several years, all his dad did whenever they were within shouting distance was remind him of how disappointed his mother would have been if she could see him, and now…whoa. “Are you sure you want me to do it though? Don’t I have to give a speech or something?”

“You don’t have to worry about giving a speech, son; just say what’s in your heart,” he said easily. “You know, you remind me of her so much,” Malcolm told him with a proud look.
“Me?” he practically squeaked.

“Your mom was a born caretaker, too; it’s why she became a doctor,” he said with a hint of melancholy. “Seeing you with Felicity, hearing Mrs. McGregor go on and on about how you’ve been letting her sleep with you when she has bad dreams—“

He flushed, “I didn’t—I mean, she just started doing that on her own.”

“No, it’s good,” Malcolm told him quickly. “I’m glad she trusts you enough to go to you when she needs comforting. I’m sure there were a lot of nights when you could have used someone and I was off…” he inhaled sharply and hung his head as if ashamed.

“It’s okay, dad,” he told him, feeling more than a little uncomfortable now. Not that it wasn’t true; there were lots of nights when he would have loved to have someone to go to, but because his dad was giving him a hell of a lot more credit than he deserved when it came to the younger girl. It’s not like he set out to do something nice for her after all; all he did really was not kick her out of his room.

“No, no it’s not,” Malcolm said somberly. “I can already tell that, someday, you’re going to grow into a good man, a good father and husband, and that’s not my doing; that’s your mother’s influence. She would be…so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” he said swallowing the lump in his throat. He shifted uneasily and glanced at the clock, “Uh, we should go soon. I should probably come up with something, you know, for the, um, not speech or whatever.”

Malcolm nodded then looked at him intently, “Just to be sure before I say anything to Felicity; are you sure you wouldn’t rather spend the summer with the Queen’s instead?”

“Yeah. Yes, I am,” he took a calming breath and turned to his father, “And thanks, dad; you know, for trusting me with Felicity. I won’t let you down, I promise.”

The two men came together in an awkward but heartfelt embrace. When they parted, Tommy smiled at his father, standing up a little straighter as a new and unfamiliar feeling settled in his chest. What it was he couldn’t say, but he kind of liked it.

The air was filled with the sounds of clapping and cheers as the last photo was taken and the gold spray-painted shovel was set aside signaling the end of the groundbreaking ceremony and the official start of their summer vacation.

Ollie grabbed Tommy’s hand in an exaggerated handshake as he stepped away from the podium, “Mr. Merlyn,” he said solemnly, “that was a fine speech; very impressive.”

“Mr. Queen,” he said with equal gravitas, “I appreciate the compliment, especially coming from a great orator such as yourself.”

“Well, the ladies think so anyway,” he grinned then wagged his tongue at him.

“Sick fuckin’ bastard,” Tommy snickered, losing it.

“I can’t believe it, man, can you?” he said with a huge grin. “We might actually graduate high school if we keep this up.”

“No joke,” Tommy admitted almost giddily.
“Tell you one thing, I will be so glad to get out of this place that I don’t even care that my parents probably had to pay somebody off in order for me to pass this year,” Ollie said ruefully.

“Your parents paid somebody off?” he asked in low tones so no one else would overhear.

“Well, they didn’t say anything but I sure as hell didn’t do it on my own,” he snorted. Before Tommy could ask anything further he clasped him on the shoulder warmly, “Hey, my mom and dad want me to take a few pictures real quick before we leave. They’ll probably want to take a few for you to send to your old man as well. I figure he already left by now, right? Malcolm never sticks around for these things. I wish we didn’t have to,” he muttered, already tugging off his own tie.

“Actually Malcolm’s here believe it or not,” he told him, his eyes seeking out his father who was standing up and motioning him over as Felicity stood by his side waving happily.

“Oh wow, that’s a first,” Ollie said in mild surprise glancing over at him then offering Tommy another grin, “Hey man, do you want to meet up together afterward and head over to Brandon’s?”

“Uh, I’ll probably have to catch up to you later. I think dad wants us to have a family dinner tonight at home first and then I’ll meet you there.”

“A family dinner?” he asked wryly.

“Fuck if I know, man,” he said with a shrug, “Malcolm’s in some kind of mood but as long as he isn’t threatening to disown me or send me to military school, I’m just gonna go with it.”

“True dat!” He grinned again, “Tommy Merlyn, future high school graduate.”

“Merlyn and Queen, soon to be Harvard freshmen.”

Both men erupted into snickers before embracing again and heading in opposite directions.

As he neared his dad and Felicity his smile broadened. The little girl was practically bouncing with excitement as Malcolm walked over to offer him a hearty embrace.

“I’m proud of you son,” he said warmly.

“Can I see?” Felicity asked excitedly.

“See what?” Tommy asked her. She pointed to the commemorative plaque the Superintendent had given him.

“Wow,” she said accepting it.

“It’s just a plaque,” he said a little sheepishly.

“It’s more than just a plaque, son,” Malcolm told him. “You should be proud; you really honored your mom today with that speech you gave.”

“It wasn’t much of a speech,” he said with a frown. “I mean, I didn’t even spend any time on it; I just talked about mom a little, that’s all.”

“No, it was really, really good!” Felicity said eagerly.

“Yeah?” he asked, giving her a crooked smile.

“Absolutely,” Malcolm nodded. “I think you finally found your talent; you’re a natural public
speaker. In fact, you handled yourself so well up there, the mayor even pulled me aside and said if you wanted to intern with his office next summer before you head off to Harvard, he’d hold a spot for you.”

“Yeah?” he said in surprise, “I mean, I was really nervous so I didn’t think…”

“No, you looked really good!” Felicity told him. “You even made people laugh a little.”

“Yeah, well,” he said running his fingers through his messy dark hair, “They were probably just laughing at me.”

His dad shook his head and clapped his hand on his shoulder, “Don’t make light of your accomplishments, son. Everyone was really impressed with how you handled yourself up there.”

The little girl beside him broke out in a deep pink flush of excitement, “The mayor said that someday you might even be mayor or even the governor. He told Malcolm it was like watching the…” She paused as if remembering exactly what was said, “Oh, he said, ‘It was like watching the emergence of a young John F. Kennedy’.”

“No way,” he snorted.

“He did,” Malcolm said, his mouth stretched in a wide grin. “He was especially impressed when I told him you’re going to be headed to Harvard in just a couple of years.”

He looked at his dad uncertainly, “I don’t know, dad. I mean, I know my grades were pretty good this year but…?”

“Look at it this way,” he said looking at him intently, “if you could manage a 3.8 without even trying, just imagine what you could do next year if you really put your mind to it.”

That’s true, he thought. He had yet to figure out how the hell he’d managed that though. He looked at his dad carefully but there were no signs of deception anywhere in his expression. Maybe Ollie’s parents paid off someone for him, too? But why would they do that? Ollie, yeah; they’d been bailing him out for a while now, but him? Yeah, he was practically their other kid, but still…

“You’re going to be at Harvard and, in just a little while, I’m going to be at MIT,” Felicity told him as she clutched the plaque to her chest and flushed happily. “And then maybe we could see each other all the time.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ll be out of school long before you get to MIT, kiddo,” he said, brushing off his mood and wrinkling his nose at her.

“Nope,” she said firmly.

“She’s right,” Malcolm confirmed, “Not much longer, right sunshine? Here, let me take that,” he said, taking the wood and brass plaque and tucking it under his arm.

She nodded happily, “It’s going to be Felicity Smoak, MIT class of ’09!”

“Wait, you’re… Seriously?” he looked at her in awe. “How many grades did you skip anyway? When I was twelve all I was thinking about was collecting Transformers.”

“Did you hear that they’re thinking about making a live action Transformers movie?” she asked excitedly.
“Really?” he said in surprise.

“It’s just a rumor right now but people are already saying it’s gonna be awesome,” she said emphatically. “Maybe when it comes out you could take me?”

“Yeah, okay,” he shrugged. “Why not?”

“Malcolm!”

Tommy turned to see Robert and Moira heading towards them with Thea and Ollie in tow. Felicity quickly moved to stand slightly behind and between Malcolm and himself, her hand clutching at his pants leg nervously. Without even thinking about it, Tommy placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder as the other family approached.

Robert and Malcolm immediately clasped hands and launched into a discussion about business while Moira gave him a cool smile and offered him an air kiss on each cheek, “Congratulations Thomas, that was a wonderful speech you gave. We were very impressed.”

“Thanks,” he said flushing slightly.

“We’re proud of both of you, in fact” she told him, reaching behind her for Oliver’s hand and squeezing it affectionately. “I can’t believe how much the two of you have matured over the last several months. My baby is finally growing up.” Oliver just gave him a longsuffering look like he would rather be anywhere else at that moment.

“Very proud,” Robert agreed with a wide grin, “Moira and I honestly thought all those nights he said he was going over to your house to ‘study’ were code for playing video games and getting into mischief while stuffing yourselves with junk food!”

“Robert!” Moira chastised him, throwing him and Malcolm an apologetic look.

“He’s right,” his dad said ruefully. “For a while there I thought I was going to have to enroll Tommy in a military school just so he could graduate.”

“Yeah, that was never gonna happen,” Tommy snorted.

Robert’s eyes landed on Felicity who was peeking out at them silently from behind Tommy, “And who’s this pretty little girl?” he asked, kneeling down slightly.

“This is Felicity,” Malcolm told them when she didn’t answer. He ran his hand over her hair, “Say hello to Mr. and Mrs. Queen, sunshine.”

“Hello,” she whispered, clinging even tighter to Tommy.

“Hi Felicity,” Robert said, getting down on her level and pulling an exuberant Thea forward, “This is Thea.”

Thea gave her a wide gap-toothed grin, “F’this’ty ith a funny name,” the little girl lisped.

“Felicity,” Malcolm sounded out carefully as he and the other adults chuckled but Felicity herself didn’t look very amused, she just reached up to squeeze Tommy’s hand as if seeking some kind of comfort.

“Fa-thil-ity,” Thea repeated making everyone laugh again.

“That was a good try, kiddo,” Robert said, running his hand over his daughter’s dark hair that was so
unlike he and his wife’s own pale blond locks.

“This is the little girl you’re sponsoring through your charity, isn’t it?” Moira asked, looking directly at Malcolm as she spoke. She then turned to Tommy, “Well, that was very nice of you to invite her to your mother’s dedication ceremony, Tommy.”

Something in the way she said that just put his teeth on edge but instead of correcting her (mostly because he couldn’t exactly figure out what he would say anyway since she was technically right) he just mumbled, “Yeah, thanks.”

“I fell off a hor-th and broke my arm,” Thea told her holding up her pink cast. “I al-tho broke out my teeth, th-ee?” she said, stretching her lips almost impossibly wide to show off the fact that she had lost both of her eyeteeth. “Do you have a hor-th, too?”

“No,” she said in a muted tone, so unlike the voice she usually used around the house that Tommy frowned at her.

“Thea,” Moira said with a slightly embarrassed laugh. “Not every little girl is lucky enough to be able to take riding lessons.”

“Oh,” Thea said, blinking up at her mother before turning back to Felicity, “You can th-are my hor-th. Do you like hor-thes? My hor-the’s name ith Panda ‘cau-th the-he ha-th th-pot-ths.”

Felicity looked up at Tommy helplessly and all he could do was shrug.

All he caught from that was ‘Panda’ and something that sounded like a word Mrs. McGregor would have tried to make him eat soap for saying when he was her age.

“Why don’t you go take Thea over by the koi pond,” Malcolm told Felicity as he pointed to the decorative pond and fountain just a few feet away.

“Okay,” she said reluctantly letting go of Tommy and accepting the much younger girl’s hand as Thea dragged her over to the pond chattering away about her, uh, horse.

At least he figured it was a horse she was talking about, because if Moira and Robert were springing for classes taught by ‘whores’ he would have heard about it by now.

On second thought, no, he wouldn’t have. Ollie would have kept that shit to himself.

“Such a strange little girl,” Moira mused.

“She’s just shy, Moira,” Robert said censuring her lightly.

“Yeah, Tommy calls her the creeper because she’s always creeping around the house, right Tommy?” Ollie joked.

“She’s not a creeper,” Tommy said, narrowing his eyes slightly and causing Ollie to frown at him in confusion. “And Felicity’s not really shy either, she just…I don’t know, gets nervous in unfamiliar surroundings sometimes,” he said defensively.

“Also, she’s not really used to being around children her own age,” Malcolm said, trying to smooth things over.

“She’s twelve, almost thirteen; Thea’s five,” Tommy shot back. “They aren’t even close to being the same age. Actually, Felicity’s more like thirty just in a twelve-year-old's body.”
“Listen to you, Tommy Merlyn; sounding like a protective older brother. Good man,” Robert said, giving him an approving look.

“Well, I mean, she’s not really my—“

“She’s so small for her age though,” Moira said, looking at her with a frown. She turned to Malcolm, “Is she…normal?”

Tommy flushed red at that, his posture stiffening in outrage.

“She’s fine; small-statured but otherwise perfectly normal,” Malcolm assured her in a way that raised Tommy’s hackles even further. “The doctors assure me she’ll have a growth spurt soon and catch up with the rest of the girls her age.”

He thought about saying something else but Ollie latched onto his arm and began dragging him away. As soon as they were out of earshot, Ollie turned to him with a frown, “Man, what is up with you all of the sudden?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, his eyes seeking out Felicity who looked decidedly uncomfortable as Thea continued to chatter away pointing at the fish under the water.

“You looked like you were going to jump down my throat a minute ago. Hell, you looked like you were two seconds from losing your shit altogether.”

He sighed and turned back to Ollie with a shrug, “I dunno; ever since the other day I’ve kind of been on edge when it comes to Felicity.”

Ollie’s expression sobered and he glanced at her nervously as well, “Yeah,” he said clearing his throat, “Has she said anything about that to anybody yet?”

“No,” he snorted dismissively.

“Think she will?”

“No way,” he said waving him off. “Felicity’s totally cool.”

“Good,” the other man said, obviously relieved. “Man, I’ve been sweating balls over that for days now. She’s still okay, right?” Tommy nodded and Oliver broke into a rueful grin, “We really dodged a bullet with that one.” He relaxed and clapped him on the shoulder, “I’m gonna drag my parents away before this becomes some kind of business conference between our dads and catch up to you later.”

“Later, man,” he nodded. He watched as Ollie jogged up to his parents who had apparently collected Thea as his dad approached with his cell pressed against his ear.

Malcolm laid his hand over the receiver and looked at him, “Hey Tommy, let me just take this call real quick while you find Felicity and go to the car. As soon as I’m done we’ll head over to the restaurant for lunch. Remo’s okay?”

“Okay.” He paused, “But, uh, not pizza.”

Malcolm held his hand over the receiver and frowned, “We always do Remo’s; I thought it was your favorite.”

“Yeah, but Felicity doesn’t like pizza and she had pasta the other day,” he told him. “I was thinking
we could let her choose; maybe someplace with,” he grimaced, “a salad bar or something.”

“Okay,” Malcolm said, his lips turning upwards at the corners, “You guys pick the restaurant and we’ll be on our way.”

He started towards the pond where he saw Felicity last but paused when Malcolm placed a firm hand on his shoulder, “And Tommy? I really am proud of you.”

“I know, you’ve said that like fifty times today,” he said dryly.

Malcolm smirked, “Well, since this might be my last chance to ever say it again, I felt like I needed to make the most of it.”

“Hah hah,” he said drolly. “I’ll go get Felicity.”

He made his way past the koi pond and azalea bushes, his eyes scanning the grounds until he caught sight of the bright blue of her sundress peeking out from behind the large oak where, ironically enough, he and Ollie had spent most of high school so far sneaking smokes in between classes.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he came around to see her staring at the tops of her shiny patent leather Mary Janes. “Are you okay?” He frowned.

“Do you really like me?” she asked in a small voice.

He blinked in confusion, “Yeah…why?”

She shrugged without looking at him, “That lady said I was basically just a charity case and that’s why you invited me.”

“She didn’t mean it like that,” he assured her even though, truth be told, it kind of bothered him the way she said it as well.

She peered at him over the thick rimmed glasses which had slid down her nose, “So you don’t think of me that way?”

He gave her a contemplative look before answering, “Can I ask you a question first?” At her curious look he asked the question that had been hovering at the edge of his mind ever since he’d talked to his dad and Oliver’s parents earlier, “Did you hack into the school’s server and change my grades so I’d be able to pass this year?”

“No,” she said weakly.

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Felicity.”

“No,” she repeated, her eyes dropping to the ground as she kicked the toe of her shoe into the dirt, “You still would have passed.”

“Seriously?” he scowled in a harsh whisper.

“I just changed them a little bit,” she said, looking up at him imploringly.

“How much is a little bit?”

Her brow furrowed, “Okay, maybe I changed them a little more than that but you still would have passed,” she said hurriedly then added, “Probably.”
“Probably?” He asked incredulously.

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“Why would you do that?” he asked her in confusion, “You barely even know me!”

“Well,” she began flushing crimson, “Malcolm said you were supposed to go to Harvard after next year and MIT is practically right next to Harvard so I figured that if you could go there then we could maybe become friends,” she shrugged. “When Malcolm told me your grades were kind of, um,” she gave him a guilty look. “Anyway, I knew Harvard wouldn’t accept you unless they improved so I just…”

“I improved them a little,” he finished wryly. “What about Ollie? Did you improve his grades ‘a little’, too?” The look on her face told him all he needed to know. “Okay, I kind of get why you would do that for me but you’d never even met Ollie before.”

She tilted her head up at him and bit her bottom lip, “Well, Malcolm said that you were looking forward to going to school with your friend and I figured that if he didn’t get to go then you might not go so…”

“Got it,” he said with a sigh then ran his fingers through his hair as he looked at her askance, “Were my grades better than his at least; you know, before you changed them?”

“Um, yeah?”

His face fell, “Seriously? I went to way more classes than he did.”

“He apparently has a natural affinity for geometry but you were a lot better in English,” she assured him. “Oh, and he totally flunked biology.”

“Ollie flunked biology? That’s surprising,” he muttered then scowled at her, “Okay, from here on out, no more changing my grades, got it?”

“Are you sure?” she asked uncertainly. “You still have a whole year to go and Harvard’s kind of… hard.”

He paused, “That’s true.” He debated that for a moment before finally shaking his head, “No; no more ‘helping’ me, got it? I have to learn to do stuff on my own eventually, might as well start now.”

“Okay,” she said somberly. “Are you mad?”

“No,” he said gruffly.

“Do you think I’m just a charity case and that’s why you’ve been so nice to me?”

He flinched. Had he been nice to her? Not really, he admitted silently. He’d called her cruel names both to her face and behind her back, never bothered to ask about her even though she’d technically been part of their family for almost four years…

Did a few days of being nice to the kid make up for four years of him being a total dick?

“Do you think I’m a charity case?” he asked her instead. “Is that why you changed my grades?”

“No,” she said shyly. “I just wanted to have the chance to become your friend someday.”

“You are my friend.”
“I am?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” he nodded slowly. “In fact, you’re practically a bro.”

“I’m a bro?” she asked wide-eyed.

“Hell yeah!” he snorted, “I mean, you could have screwed us over but stuck to the code by not ratting us out, you had our backs without us even having to ask; that spells bro to me.”

“Wow,” she breathed, looking away for a minute. She bit her lip again as she cast hopeful eyes in his direction, “So, if I’m a bro, then does that mean we’re really friends…like for always friends?”

“Sure,” he nodded. “Absolutely. I totally get the feeling that someday you might even have the potential to be my best friend, like a platonic life-bro…next to Ollie, of course.”

“Really?” she asked, her entire expression lighting up then sobered slightly, “I mean, of course,” she nodded sagely. “Bros.”

“Bros,” Tommy said, offering her a solemn chin bob.

“Tommy! Felicity! The car’s here!” they heard Malcolm yell out. Tommy held out his hand and she took it gratefully as they walked towards Malcolm who stepped inside the town car as soon as he caught sight of them.

“Dad said you hacked the FBI when you were seven and got busted,” he mentioned casually as they made their way towards the parking lot.

“Yeah, well, I’ve gotten a lot better about covering my tracks since then,” she said with a hint of chagrin.

“So could you hack into the SCPD and erase parking tickets and stuff?” he asked curiously.

“Duh,” she said flatly. “I hacked the FBI when I was seven, remember?”

“Good to know,” he nodded, filing that bit of information away.

“Tommy?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you’re my friend.”

“I’m glad you’re my friend, too, Sunshine.”
I can't promise to solve all your problems but I can promise you won't have to face them alone.

I saw that you were perfect and so I loved you. Then I saw that you were not perfect and I loved you even more.
They wound up having Japanese food that night because Felicity had never had hibachi before. He grumbled a bit when Malcolm suggested it but, truth be told, despite her bullying him into eating vegetables even though all he wanted was the steak and rice, it was pretty cool. He hadn’t been to hibachi in years himself, not since all the unnecessary bad puns and clanging of spatulas started seeming kind of old and overdone. He was usually like, ‘Dude! Stop making the butter fly and playing bongos with your spatula and just give me my food already!’ but seeing her eyes get big when the chef caught the egg in his hat then made the grill flame up in a huge fireball had made him laugh. Even Malcolm got into it by catching scrambled egg in his mouth and ordering a massive amount of food for the three of them because Felicity couldn’t make up her mind on what to order and basically wanted to try everything. It worked though because what she couldn’t eat, they devoured. By the time they got home that night they had a ton of leftovers he vowed to get to the next day before his dad could and Felicity was sound asleep, but it had been one of the best dinners he’d shared with Malcolm since…well, ever.

It did mean he was running late for the bonfire at Brandon’s though.

Normally he wouldn’t give a crap about being late to one of Brandon’s parties because he was always throwing a party and they tended to go on all night long and well into the next day. Like a lot of their mutual buddies in the elite Lost Boys Club that seemed to surround them, Brandon’s mom was usually MIA and his dad was too busy impregnating his secretary to give a crap about what he did, so his parties were legendary, even among kids whose folks could be regularly found on the covers of Forbes and Vanity Fair.

Brandon McNamara was political royalty through his dad just like Ollie was through Moira. Unlike the Dearden’s though, his father, ‘Mad’ Jack McNamara, was what was known as a kingmaker; the kind of guy used to pulling the strings behind the curtain. He was the kind of guy who decided who would and wouldn’t win the election long before the voters even knew who was running and that
gave him a lot of power, especially in Starling City. Other than Malcolm and Robert, his dad was probably the biggest mover and shaker in town. Brandon’s mom, Stephanie, on the other hand, was a dime a dozen society queen who spent most of her days in a fog of coke, pills, and her personal trainer or whatever golf pro of the week was there to give her ‘private lessons’. Between the two of them it was a dangerous mix of easy drugs and no accountability because nobody was going to risk busting Mad Jack’s kid for scoring dope or driving his jeep down a public beach while loaded.

They were all passengers on that same sinking ship; him, Ollie, and Brandon. The weariness that came from dealing with sycophants, fake ass people, and hanger’s on made them brothers and bonded them because in a world like theirs, the only people they could really relax their guard around was each other. It made for an empty existence where they all seemed to float from one high to another but always guaranteed one hell of a party in the meantime.

If he and Ollie were a little self-destructive, Brandon was the real deal. On the surface, he looked completely put together most of the time but, in truth, he was always about two seconds from falling completely apart. There were days that the other man scared the shit out of him and he was convinced that, sooner or later (probably sooner), he’d wind up going just a step too far or take one hit too many and wind up in the crumpled wreckage of his convertible at the bottom of a canyon or floating face down in his mom’s pool. That said, despite the Robert Downey, Jr. Less Than Zero teen zeitgeist going on, Brandon was a pretty cool guy. He was actually one of his best friends next to Ollie and, even with the dope show going on in the background all the time, a pretty stand up bro.

Which is why, as soon as he ambled onto the beach behind the sprawling mansion only a member of the 1% could ever refer to as a ‘beach cottage’, Brandon made a beeline straight for him with a bottle of Jack in one hand and a ‘Bro, we gotta talk’ expression on his face.

“Dude, let’s go take a walk,” Brandon said, shoving the Jack in his hand and spinning him around to walk in the opposite direction.

“Why?” He said, breaking away.

“It’s…” Brandon glanced over towards the raging bonfire and shrugged, “It’s just, y’know, the party is getting kinda lame and it’s hot so I figured we could cool off for a while and just hang.” He shot him a totally unconvincing grin and punched his arm playfully, “C’mon bro, we never just talk anymore.”

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “I’m just, uh, kind of a little jumpy from the bump I just had and need to mellow a little. Figured we could slow the roll with some booze, maybe smoke a bowl on the dune buggy? I’ll even let you drive.”

“Yeah, sounds fun, man, but I’m supposed to be meeting Laurel. Is she still here?” he asked, scanning the faces of the people gathered around the fire and spilling out of the house. “I didn’t miss her, did I?”

“Yeah; yeah, you just missed her,” he said faintly.

“Really?” he asked, automatically heading towards the house, “How long ago did she leave? Maybe I can still catch her?”

“Tommy, man, don’t!” he said as he jogged after him, “I mean, she’s long gone by now; like hours ago!”
He frowned and turned to look at him in confusion, “But you said she just left. Like just now.”

“I did?” Brandon asked, slurring his words slightly, “Uh…yeah, but,” he snorted, “fuck man, I’m high as dog shit; you can't take my word for anything right now.”

“Okay…” he said slowly, looking at him askance.

“I mean, I’ve been drinking and then I took a few hits of E, then a bump of coke and Ollie; shit man, he came in with some righteous acid and shrooms so I am like totally feeling my inner Jim Morrison right now,” he said swaying slightly. “The whole world is like—” He waved his hands in the air, gesticulating wildly and sloshing the whiskey he was holding out of the bottle.

“Fuck bro, slow your roll,” he said in concern. “Damn.”

“You’re right!” he said gesturing with the whiskey bottle and nearly drenching him, “When Tommy Merlyn is right, he’s right!”

“Yeah, dude,” he said eyeing him in concern, “I mean, there’s partying and then there’s winding up as a bloated corpse on TMZ partying. Maybe you should put down the Jack and sober up a little?”

“Yeah, you know, you are a good friend, Tommy Merlyn,” he said firmly. “Hell, you’re not just a friend, you’re a goddamn brother; a genuine stand-up bro, that’s what you are!”

“Thanks,” he said, backing away slowly as Brandon began to advance on him.

“Fuck man,” Brandon said, his eyes filling with emotional tears, “You know, seriously…” he lunged and pulled him into a tight embrace, the cold sting of the alcohol splashing on his neck and running down the back of his shirt, “I love you, man. I really fuckin’ love you, brother!” He pulled away slightly, his face a bit too close for comfort, “Goddamn, Tommy Merlyn. I…shit, I love you.”

“Uh…” Tommy eyed him uneasily, “Yeah, you aren’t gonna try to kiss me or anything are you, because you are way too drunk and I am way to fuckin’ sober to deal with that right now; no offense, bro.”

Brandon pulled his face forward and laid a very wet and uncomfortable kiss on his cheek, “I goddamn love you, man! I love you, I really do. You’re like…” he pulled him into another embrace, “You’re like the best of us, bro. Like, how I feel about you right now? It’s like some kind of ‘Captain, my captain!’ epic shit, you know?”

“Yeah, I was really hoping to avoid…that,” he muttered pulling away. “Okay,” he said pulling away slowly and inching down the beach, “Uh, you go sleep it off and,” he hitched his thumb over his shoulder, “I’m just going to go look for Laurel. Like now.”

“No, Tommy…!” Brandon called out as he stumbled after him again. “Man, wait! Come back!”

“Just go sleep it off and I’ll check in on you after I find Laurel!” he hollered back as he headed over to the fire.

“Tommy, just stay here, man! Don’t go!” Brandon called out plaintively again, sinking to his knees in the wet sand drunkenly.

He jogged backwards and waved at him, “It’s cool, bra! I’ll be back in a minute! Lay on your side, not on your back in the meantime, okay?”

“Hey, it’s Tommy Merlyn!” Jeremy shouted, also swaying on his feet slightly, “Tommy, my man!”
“Hey,” he said, coming up beside him.

“Look ev’rybody, the Wizard of Weed is in the hiz-house!” he called out sloppily, his pronouncement causing several of the partygoers to erupt in cheers. “Can you roll us a couple, man? I forgot what you showed me because I’m slightly fucked up at the moment.”

Slightly, he thought looking at the slovenly man in front of him. “Not right now, bra; have you seen Laurel?”

“Uhh…” he tilted his head back and frowned, “Laurel Lance?”

“Yeah, Laurel Lance,” he said in irritation. “The only Laurel either of us know, so yeah.”

This is why it was never a good idea to show up late to a Brandon McNamara party; after ten o’clock Gomorrah turns to Sodom and brain cells turn into fried egg PSAs.

Not that Jeremy had that many brain cells to begin with.

“That’s the sister with the little tits and the brown hair, right? Not the sister with the blonde hair and the juicy ones?” he asked.

“Never mind,” he said darkly, seriously giving thought to knocking the fat bastard on his flabby drunk ass. “What about Ollie; is he still here?”

“Yeah, man,” he said pointing towards the house and stumbling slightly, “He was scroggin’ on some random by the fire then went into Brandon’s crib to get his fuck on.”

“That sounds like Ollie,” he said wryly. “You know how long ago that was?”

“I don’t know, long enough for a squirrel to get a nut!” he said, snorting like a pig. “Hey!” he shouted turning towards the large group of revelers, “Did you hear what I said? I said Ollie Queen was a squirrel getting his nut! Because, you know, he was totally dry humping that chick, remember?” Someone shouted out ‘Shut the fuck up, loser!’ “You shut up!” Jeremy called back angrily, “Shut up or me and my friend, Tommy, will kick your fuckin’ ass, you—you—asshole!” He turned to him blearily, “Did you hear that? I totally called that guy an asshole.”

“Yeah…very clever,” Tommy said looking at the other man with no small measure of disgust.

He could barely tolerate Jeremy when he was wasted much less when he was sober.

“You wanna go kick his ass?” he asked him.

“Maybe later.”

“Cool,” Jeremy said before wandering back drunkenly towards the bonfire. “Tommy said he’s going to kick your ass later because you insulted me and he’s my friend!”

He resisted the urge to bang his head against something hard and instead scanned the crowd for a familiar face.

“Danny!” Tommy called out to another one of their friends who currently had his tongue down some girl’s throat and his hand up her blouse.

“What?” he asked belligerently, pulling away slightly.

Danny was a prick on his best day but he usually stayed fairly sober and right now he really needed
to talk to someone who wasn’t completely wrecked out of their skulls.

“Where’s Ollie?”

He screwed his face up in a sour expression, “Fuck if I know! Last I saw him he was trying to get into some girl’s panties. I think her name was Sara something.”

“Ollie’s screwing Sara Lance?” he asked in surprise. “She’s like fourteen!”

“Shit, I don’t care!” he said, “It’s not my dick in that.”

Fuck, if Laurel found out Ollie was busy popping her little sister’s cherry she was going to go nuclear and then her dad, *the cop*, was going to bust him for hooking up with jail bait. It wasn’t the first time Ollie’s dick had gotten him in trouble but, shit; this was a horse of a different color.

“How long ago did they leave?” he asked, suddenly more interested in finding the other Lance sister before his buddy did something they all would wind up regretting in the morning.

“Couple minutes,” he said irritably before going back to groping the redhead straddling his lap.

“Oh shit!” he muttered, practically running into the house. Hopefully, he was too stoned to get too far but he doubted it. If there was one thing Ollie Queen knew how to do drunk it was get laid.

“Where’s Ollie?” he shouted as he burst into the house which was awash in young teenage bodies in various states of undress as music pounded the walls and a haze of marijuana smoke choked out most of the oxygen in the room. Someone pointed upstairs and Tommy headed up two at a time, opening doors as he went.

Most were filled with the slapping sounds of flesh against flesh, but he only paused in his frantic search long enough to ascertain whether Ollie or Sara were among them. Finally, he came to the master bedroom and flung the door open to see…

He froze.

“Oh my God!” Laurel screamed, clapping her hands over her naked breasts as she scrambled off the top of Ollie to hide under the covers. “I thought you said you locked the door?!”

“Tommy?” Ollie said in surprise as he sat up in the bed, the covers low enough on his hips that it was obvious he was naked. “Oh man, I didn’t think you were coming!”

“Yeah,” he said numbly, “Makes two of us.”

“Get out!” Laurel screeched.

“Tommy, man, let me explain--!” Ollie said, reaching on the floor for his pants. “Hold up!”

“You’re leaving?” Laurel goggled at him. “Now?”

“That’s okay,” Tommy said, looking his ‘bro’ in the eye, “Stay; I was just leaving.”

“Tommy…” Ollie said pleadingly.

“Naw man, it’s cool. You two have fun,” he said then shut the door behind him and left.
He always wanted a tree house as a kid but his dad was never around enough to build him one. He could have asked Mrs. McGregor, had her tell one of the gardeners build it, but that seemed like cheating for some reason. He was a kid brought up by sitcoms so, as much as he wanted one, he wanted the Brady Bunch version of it more. He wanted Malcolm to sweep in with some gorgeous new step-mommy, his toolbox in hand, eager to bond over Ovaltine and penny nails together.

That didn’t happen.

Instead, he had a pool house with a widow’s walk on the roof. It did the job though and gave him a place to literally get above it all. He took another swig of the Johnny Walker Red he’d swiped from Brandon’s liquor cabinet and resisted the urge to either break down in sobs like a little baby or go find Ollie and pound the living dog shit out of him until the pain stopped.

Ollie fucked Laurel.

He slept with his dream girl. Even after telling him he didn’t care about her and knowing how he felt, he fucked her.

He even knew he was on his way to meet her and he still fucked her. Worse, he screwed her at a party in front of all of their closest friends knowing that he’d walk in and see that and knowing that everyone else would, too. This was like Caroline all over again, only it was worse because it was Ollie humiliating him publicly this time.

That was the worst part, he decided. Not losing Laurel, not even Ollie shitting all over him, it was that he did it in public knowing how badly Caroline burned him just a year before when he caught her hanging all over Carter and telling everybody what a shitty lay he was.

Caroline had been his first and, foolish as it sounded now, he loved her. He thought she loved him back but, as it turned out, all she was interested in was bagging Tommy Merlyn, not Tommy himself. She thought sleeping with the son of a billionaire translated to exciting parties and exotic vacations but what she got was a low-key guy who just liked hanging out with his friends and keeping things simple. Ollie was the one who brought him back from that, who nursed him through the pain of a very public break up, and yet, knowing what he’d already been through…

A sour feeling curled in his stomach when he realized that his best friend, his brother, the person he trusted most in this entire world, not only didn’t give a shit about him but had intended to hurt him on purpose. Why he had no idea, but facts were facts.

“You okay?”

He glanced behind him to see Felicity nervously looking at him through the open window leading to the metal balcony of the Newport style pool house. “You should be in bed,” he told her gruffly, watching her shiver in her thin pink nightie and bare feet.

Even in the summer, the temperatures could drop fairly quickly once the sun went down. He could barely feel it, hell, he could barely feel anything at this point, but he could see the goosebumps on her arms from where he was sitting.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she told him. “You weren’t in your room.”

“Yeah,” he said morosely as he took another drink.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, trembling slightly as she stepped out onto the rickety-looking metal framework of the widow’s walk.
“What makes you think anything’s wrong?” he asked her, frowning as he noticed her shaking from head to toe as she eased down beside him carefully. “If you’re that cold you need to be in bed.”

“I’m not cold,” she said, her voice shaky.

“Right,” he retorted, setting down the booze and shrugging off his flannel over shirt to drop it over her shoulders.

Felicity clutched the shirt around her and squeezed in against him tight, sighing in relief as he automatically dropped his arm around her, “What’s wrong?” He started to open his mouth, but she cut him off, “You’re drinking and you’re sitting on a roof in the middle of the night instead of hanging out with Laurel at that party you and Ollie have been talking about.”

His mouth tightened and he looked out across the trees to the thin dark line of the ocean, refusing to meet her eyes, “Yeah, well…”

“She decided she didn’t want to be your girlfriend after all?” she guessed.

Tommy snorted, “No,” he said acerbically, “Well, yeah. Seems she decided to be someone else’s girlfriend instead.”

She fell silent for a moment before speaking again, “That’s too bad.”

“Yup, too bad,” he huffed, glancing at the bottle again but not drinking. It was tempting, but she’d already seen enough of his fuck ups for one lifetime; he wasn’t going to compound it by getting wasted in front of her while sitting on the roof.

“Poor Laurel,” she said sadly.

He turned to look at her in surprise, “Poor Laurel?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I mean, she missed out on being your girlfriend and probably doesn’t even know how big of a mistake she made because she’s with some other guy who will never even come close to being as good as you. That’s kind of sad, don’t you think?”

Despite himself, his felt his lips twitch upwards slightly, “You are so full of crap.”

“No, I’m not,” she told him in a deadpan. “I mean, she doesn’t know it yet, but she just passed up on being the future First Lady of Starling City, maybe of the whole state!”

“What about the country?” he asked her, playing along. “What? I can be mayor or governor, but I can’t be president?”

“Nope,” she told him, “Because then you’d have to move to Washington DC and we couldn’t live together anymore.”

“Oh, so you’re never moving out then?” he asked, his mood lifting slightly.

“From Malcolm’s house, yeah, but then I’m going to move in with you,” she told him.

“With me?” he asked her. “What about when you get married?”

“He’s going to live with us, too,” she told him, her tone deadly serious and without even a hint of humor.

He eyed her carefully, “And you don’t think he’d have a problem with that; with the two of us--
“sorry, the *three* of us living together forever?”

“Nope,” she said simply.

“Sounds like a really understanding guy,” he nodded gravely. “What about if I get married then? What if my wife doesn’t want you to move in with us?”

“She’ll be okay with it,” she said confidently.

“How do you know?”

“Because she and I are going to be best friends,” she told him.

“Oh, you are, huh?” he hummed.

“Uh huh, just like my husband is going to be your best friend.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you’re not allowed to marry anybody I don’t like and I’m not allowed to marry anybody you don’t like,” she said easily. “That’s the rule.”

“That so?” he said pursing his lips.

“Yup,” she told him. “I’m not even allowed to date anybody unless you like them first.”

“Really?” he said arching his eyebrow at that. “I gotta say, I kind of like that rule actually.”

“But, in exchange, you can’t date anybody I don’t like either.”

“Now hold on there,” he said quickly. “What if I have the opportunity to date a supermodel and you don’t like her for some reason?”

She blinked at him, “Yeah, right.”

“It could happen,” he said with a mock scowl.

“Okay…” she said slowly. “If you meet a supermodel,” she took a second to roll her eyes, “who wants to date you but I don’t like her, I *might* consider giving you one free pass.”

“Just one?” He complained. “What if after we break up I meet another supermodel who also wants to date me?”

“Come on, the chances of you meeting *one* supermodel who would even consider giving you the time of day…” she began.

“I thought you were supposed to be cheering me up here?” he asked with a frown.

“Well, there’s cheering someone up and then there’s flat-out lying,” she told him.

“I could bag a supermodel,” he said confidently.

“No, you couldn’t,” she said wryly.

“Yes, I could,” he told her. “My dad’s a billionaire, remember?”

“Yeah, but supermodels only date musicians.”
Tommy opened his mouth to object then stopped, “Huh.” He considered that for a moment, “No, wait, supermodels don’t *just* date musicians.”

…probably.

“Name one supermodel not dating a musician,” she told him.

He blanked out at that but was spared when she answered her own question.

“Okay, well, some supermodels *might* consider dating a famous athlete, or an actor or maybe a race car driver but you don’t do sports, you can’t act, and you can barely drive, so unless you can play an instrument other than the air guitar there is no way you’re getting a supermodel,” she said matter-of-factly. “Ever.”

“I can drive,” he muttered.

“Not a race car,” she shot back. “Plus it can’t be like NASCAR or anything; it has to be like Lamborghinis and stuff over in Europe and, even then, it’s only if you’re Italian or French or something because you also can’t date supermodels and *not* be a musician *unless* you have a cool accent and you just sound normal, like a normal ordinary person who just says ‘bro’ a lot.”

He stared at her, dumbfounded. “Where do you come up with this stuff?”

“TV.”

“Whatever,” he muttered with a scowl.

“So who did she pick to be her boyfriend instead?”

He felt his cheeks flush in anger once again as he stared out over the property, “Ollie.”

“Oh,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, ‘oh’,” he snorted humorlessly.

“Now I really feel bad for her,” she said shaking her head.

“Why?” he burst out incredulously.

“Have you met Ollie?” she asked roundly.

He wasn’t even going to bother arguing with her about that one.

Instead, he just tightened his grip on the railing as he rested his forehead against the cool metal and said, “You know the worst part? He *knew* I was going to that party specifically to get with her and he hooked up with her anyway, plus he did it in front of everybody,” he said angrily. “He’s my best friend and of all the girls—no, no; you want to know the worst part?” He asked turning to her, “It turns out that they had already gone out last summer -twice- and he didn’t even bother telling me, then when I did find out, he said he didn’t give a crap about her and basically handed her to me on a silver platter before sliding in there and bagging her behind my back!”

“That doesn’t sound right,” she scowled.

“It’s not right!” he told her, “It’s a total violation of the bro code! Plus, he’s supposed to be my best friend! I mean, what the hell?”
“No, I mean, how can he just *hand* you Laurel?” Felicity asked him. “She has the right to be with whoever she wants to be with; you and Ollie can’t just decide that for her.”

He looked at her with hurt eyes, “I thought you were supposed to be on my side here?”

“I am on your side but not if you have your head up your butt,” she said with a snort. “You said it yourself, you weren’t dating Laurel first; he was. In fact, you weren’t dating her at all; you just *wanted* to date her.”

“Yes, but---” he made an irritated noise, “I mean, technically yeah, but--!”

“But what? You just said he dated her last summer.”

He glowered at her, “Yeah, but he also hooked up with another girl in the middle of their date then told her himself that they weren’t actually going out.”

“Ah,” she said pursing her lips.

“Exactly,” he agreed, staring back out across the property.

“So…is this Laurel like mentally defective or something?”

“No!” he said rounding on her again.

“Are you sure?” she asked dubiously. “Because, I mean, you were saying how you two totally connected on the phone the other day, then she makes plans to meet you at the party only to get together with a guy who left her for another girl in the middle of their date?” She looked at him steadily for a moment, “Wow, you ask me you dodged a bullet there.”

He scratched the back of his neck and looked at her feeling utterly perplexed for a moment, “But, I mean…huh?”

“No, think about it,” she told him nodding earnestly. “I don’t know her, but she must really have it bad if she could want to go back to him after all that.”

“No, but that’s just it!” he insisted, “The other day she acted like she hated him. She was talking about how much Ollie sucked and how she’d never go out with him again in a million years! In fact, that’s how I found out they’d even dated in the first place; her best friend and her sister started joking about how they hooked up last summer.”

“Did they talk about all that stuff in front of him?” she asked knowingly.

His eyebrows drew together at that, “Yeah…”

She nodded sagely.

“What?”

Felicity glanced at him from the corner of her eye, “Well, I mean, it’s…pretty obvious that she put her friends up to that so he’d notice her.”

That…actually made sense.

He screwed his eyes shut, “Seriously, you’re twelve; how do you know about all this stuff?”

“I watch a *lot* of TV. Plus I read.”
“Okay, fine,” he said in frustration. “Laurel had the right to pick anybody she wanted, okay? But Ollie was supposed to be my bro! He knew how I felt about her and he went there anyway!”

“Yeah, now that does suck,” she commiserated.

“Why would he do that?” he raged. “We’ve been friends since we were in diapers! Why would he try to screw me over like that? Practically everybody else in his life has already pretty much written him off as a fuck-up,” he stopped, “sorry.” She waved him off, “Anyway, I’m the last real friend he’s got and he totally screwed me!”

“Maybe he was testing you?” she suggested.

“That’s stupid,” he said dismissively.

“No, seriously, maybe he wanted to test you to see if you’d still be his friend afterward?” she blinked up at him, pushing her large lenses up her nose. “You said so yourself; everybody else, all of his friends and family members, think he’s a screw up so maybe he thought you might think he’s a screw-up, too. Maybe he figured you’d stop being his friend eventually so he wanted to see if you’d forgive him?”

“Oliver may be a dumb ass but that’s pretty stupid even for him,” he scoffed.

“But taking off and skipping out on both the midterms and the finals then just accepting the fact that he managed to somehow get a 3.8 GPA wasn’t?”

“Hey, even I thought for a minute there that…” he stopped, realizing that by finishing that sentence he wouldn’t be doing himself any favors. “You might have a point,” he said reluctantly. “Okay, assuming you’re right, what do I do now? Do I forgive him, do I beat the crap out of him, do I stop being his friend; what?”

“What do you want to do?” she asked him.

“I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking you,” he said pulling a face.

“Okay, do you want to still be his friend?”

“No,” he huffed then wobbled a bit, “Maybe. Kind of, because he’s still my best friend but then again he completely fu—‘ he bit his tongue, “screwed me over so I’m pi-- mad at him right now.”

“If he had been honest and told you he had the hots for Laurel would you have been cool with it?”

“Maybe,” he admitted. “I don’t know because, honestly, knowing Ollie, he just hooked up with her because she was there.”

“Okay, so do you want Laurel now?”

“Hell no,” he said gruffly. “At this point I wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot-pole and somebody else’s di--, uh, hands,” he said carefully.

“So what if you could keep Ollie as your friend while kind of getting revenge?” she asked slowly. “That way you could have closure and the two of you could move on.”

“Closure?” he asked dubiously.

“Sometimes I watch Dr. Phil.”
“Dr. Phil?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted. “Oprah’s better though.”

“Closure,” he mulled that over. “What did you have in mind?” Tommy asked her carefully.

“Well, if I’m right, and I usually am because I’m kind of a genius,” she offered him a mischievous grin, “Actually, not ‘kind of’, I am a genius. Anyway, the only reason he went after Laurel was to get a reaction out of you and the only reason Laurel went after Ollie is because she thought he didn’t want her, so what if you act like you don’t care?”

“I’m…lost,” he frowned.

“What I mean is that Ollie is going to be expecting you to be mad at him but if you pretend to be happy that he’s with Laurel or, better yet, that you don’t really care either way, then he’s kind of stuck.”

“Stuck? How is he stuck?”

She sighed and gave him a long-suffering look, “Think about it; he just tried to screw over his best friend by taking away the girl he had a crush on. If he really wants you to still be his friend then he can’t ever break up with Laurel. Or, at least, not for a really, really long time.”

“I’m still lost,” he said furrowing his brow.

“If you act like you don’t care about Laurel but that you’re happy he’s with the girl he must care so much about that he would risk ending your friendship over her; he’s stuck,” she told him. “He has to keep dating her; he has no choice. If he breaks up with her right after that, or cheats on her with another girl, then it’ll look like he was just trying to hurt you on purpose for no reason.”

“He’ll still cheat on her, trust me,” he said flatly.

“Maybe, but not for a while,” she said confidently. “He’ll have to pretend to be happy she’s his girlfriend until you guys are back to where you were. Plus, it will really confuse him because then he’ll wonder why you were able to let her go so easily. It would really help if you had another girl.”

“You want me to use another girl to make *Ollie* jealous?” he asked slowly. “Yeah, our bromance is pretty intense but not that intense.”

“No, I don’t want you to *use* anybody,” she said disparagingly. “It has to be someone you really like so that you can show Ollie you’re okay but also because you deserve to be with a girl who likes you for real.”

“But I don’t like any other girls, just Laurel,” he said sullenly. “Ollie knows that. I spent a year just staring at her before I ever got the courage to even talk to her.”

“There has got to be another girl you could like just as much, if not more than Laurel,” she said dismissively. “Like I said, I’ve never met her but, trust me, she’s not the only girl in the world.”

He shot her a dirty look but thought about it before answering her reluctantly, “Well, there’s McKenna.”

“McKenna?” she asked curiously.

“Laurel’s best friend,” he admitted. “Ollie had kind of a thing for her which is why I never went
“Is she nice?”

“Yeah,” he said shrugging. “I mean, she’s gorgeous and smart; not destined to be class valedictorian like Laurel, but really sharp.”

“You should ask her to the party.”

“I can’t—party?” he asked in confusion. “What party?”

She waved him off, “I’ll get to that later, but first you need to call her and invite her over here tomorrow.”

He blinked, “Uh, why?”

“So I can meet her and decide if I like her,” she told him.

“But wait—“ He ran his fingers through his hair in confusion, “How is me hooking up with McKenna any better than him hooking up with Laurel?”

“You’re not, you’re becoming her friend,” she told him carefully.

“Her friend?” he repeated.

“Yeah, because a friend is ten times better than a girlfriend.”

“How do you figure?” he asked chuckling, “Because, trust me, the stuff I would do if I had a girlfriend is *way* more fun than just hanging out with my buds.”

“Not really,” she said wrinkling her nose slightly. “I mean, I get the kissing and stuff, but you can actually hang out and be yourself with your friends; with a girlfriend you have to be someone who isn't you all the time.”

"I don't follow," he told her.

"Well, when you want someone to like you, you pretend to be the kind of person they want you to be, not the person you are, but when you're with your friends you can just be you. Do you think that’s what Ollie is doing with Laurel right now? Just hanging out with her being the real Ollie and talking about the same stuff he talks to you about, or is he pretending to be someone else so she’ll pick him to be her boyfriend?”

No, Ollie and Laurel were not ‘hanging out’ and they certainly weren’t embroiled in some kind of deep conversation at the moment.

“Plus, it would also bug the crap out of Laurel which would really bug Ollie then because, not only is he stuck, but now he’ll wonder just like Laurel what it is he missed out on.”

“Wait, Laurel…huh?” he said shaking his head.

“Well, what I was thinking is that Laurel obviously had to know you had a thing for her because you weren’t exactly subtle—“

“Hey!” he objected.

Felicity tilted her head and looked him in the eye, “Look, you said it yourself; Laurel only wanted
Ollie because she couldn’t have him so, it stands to reason, that she didn’t want you because she thought she already had you and where’s the challenge in that?"

"The challenge?" he repeated with a scowl.

"Yeah, and because Ollie acted like he didn't care, that made getting him more of a challenge, so once she sees that you never really cared, that will bother her a lot, trust me.”

“I never said any of that, though,” he pointed out. "Plus, you've never even met Laurel so how can you possibly know what she was thinking?"

“It was implied,” she told him. “It’s called ‘subtext’.”

“I know what subtext is,” sort of. “I actually passed that class, remember? What I’m saying is what makes you think Laurel even likes me like that?”

“She doesn’t like you,” she told him.

"Thanks," he said dryly.

“No, it’s not about her liking you; it’s about you liking her.”

“Okay…”

“It’s a control thing,” she told him. “Laurel only wants what she can’t have which is why, even though she’s really smart, she wanted Ollie. Once she sees you don’t want her either then that will bother her just like it bothered her when Ollie acted like he didn’t want her. Plus, since Ollie is stuck with her she won’t want him anymore because she already has him.”

He looked at her dubiously, “How much Dr. Phil do you watch anyway?”

“A lot,” she answered, “and the other day me and Mrs. Mack were watching it together in the kitchen when he had this whole segment about women in toxic relationship cycles which is how I know she’ll probably be expecting you to be all depressed and stuff but when you act like you don’t care then it’ll drive her out of her skull!”

He looked at her in amazement, “Where do you even--?” He closed his eyes, “I need to start watching more TV.”

“You really should try watching Teen Nick,” she told him. “They have a ton of shows about this stuff all the time and it’s a lot better than Dr. Phil because they also have cartoons, but if you really want to see some crazy girlfriend/boyfriend stuff, then you should hang out with Mrs. Mack during her stories.”

“Her stories?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Felicity nodded wide-eyed. “On one of her stories there’s this girl who was married to this one guy, then she married his dad, then she married his brother, and now she’s married to her own brother only she doesn’t know it yet. It’s pretty sick, actually. Oh! And every once in a while someone gets possessed by the devil!”

He goggled at her, “The devil?”

She nodded, “Only then Mrs. Mack starts talking about Jesus and saints and how we all need to start attending church more regularly because the devil is real and she doesn’t want that to happen to us,
then I have to remind her that I’m Jewish, which leads to her pointing out that Jesus was Jewish, and…” She took a deep breath, “Trust me, that’s just not a rabbit hole you want to go down with her.”

He let that sink in before speaking again.

“There’s no way that’s going to work, you realize that right?” he asked her. “Real life and TV are not the same thing.”

“Yes, they are,” she told him. “That’s why it’s called *reality* TV. Besides, it’s not like we’re dealing with a couple of geniuses here. Unlike me who actually is a certified genius, so…”

“Laurel happens to be very smart,” he said defensively. “She’s set to be valedictorian, remember?”

“Please, like being valedictorian is hard?” she scoffed. “You are putting *way* too much stock in that. Heck, I could make *you* valedictorian and *Ollie* salutatorian with just a keystroke.” He uttered a muttered ‘Watch it!’ but she ignored him, "Plus, she’s hooking up with Ollie,” she reminded him, “’Nuff said.”

“He’s not that bad,” he grumbled, “You know, when he’s not being a total asshat, that is.”

“The other day, right before he nearly *killed me*,” she emphasized, “he giggled for ten minutes because when he opened the brownie mix it sounded kind of like a fart.”

Tommy rubbed the side of his temple and grimaced, “Fine.” He exhaled roughly, “They’re still not going to buy it though. No matter how this goes down I’m still going to wind up looking like a pathetic sad sa—uh, pathetic.”

"Which is why we’re also throwing a party.”

He looked at her blankly, “What?”

“Think about it; if you were all depressed then you wouldn’t throw a party, right?” she asked him.

“You want me to throw a party?” he asked slowly.

“Why not?” she asked him. “You can ask Ollie and Laurel and McKenna and maybe some other people, and I can have Mrs. Mack get hotdogs and hamburgers and stuff for the grill, and you could throw a pool party, because everybody loves pool parties, right?”

“Ollie hates pool parties,” he told her. “He hates swimming; I’m pretty sure it’s because he hates anything that messes up his hair.”

“Seriously?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said with a half shrug, “He’s really intense about his hair.”

“You mean he meant for it to look like that on purpose?”

Tommy managed to hold it together for all of two seconds before he started laughing uncontrollably. Pretty soon they were both chortling through their tears with no end in sight.

“He *snicker* he thinks that *snort* it makes h-him look like he doesn’t *snerk* care!” Tommy managed as he wiped the tears off his cheeks.

“Well, *snicker* he’s not wrong!” Felicity giggled, “I still don’t *snort* understand h-how he gets it
t-to look like that!"

“L-like what *snerk*?”

“Like there’s some kind of *hee hee hee* dead animal up there! *breathless gasps* It l-looks like s-somebody skinned a lap dog or something! *Oh god, stop! I’m gonna pee!*”

“It does!” Tommy said, turning purple as he struggled for oxygen, “It’s like his h-head is covered with one of those shit-zoos or something!”

“I-it’s SHIH ZHU!!!” she shouted as she clutched her stomach.

“That’s what I said! SHIT ZOO! HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!”

By the time the hilarity storm was over they were leaning on each other heavily, both out of breath and completely wrung out with only the occasional snicker escaping.

“He really is a shit-head sometimes,” Tommy snickered.

“Then we should definitely have a pool party,” Felicity said, wiping her eyes on one of the sleeves of his borrowed shirt before wiping her nose as well.

“Dude!” he said, “Respect the grunge!”

“I don’t have a tissue,” she told him. “Besides, I’ve seen how you treat your clothes. If you haven’t ruined it by now with all the stuff you drip all over yourself, what’s a little snot gonna do?”

“Still, a bro doesn’t use another bro’s clothes as a snot rag; not cool,” he told her.

“It’ll come out in the wash,” she said rolling her eyes at him.

“Whatever,” he told her before sighing. “You know the really sucky part? I’ve already halfway forgiven him and he hasn’t even apologized yet,” he griped.

“Yeah, well,” Felicity said with a grimace as she swung her legs off the edge of the walk in time with his own, “like you said, he’s your best friend.”

“He’s more than my best friend,” Tommy admitted quietly, “He’s my brother; like my full-on, brother from another mother, bro for life, brother. Every messed up crazy thing I ever did was with Ollie. Every time I was upset about my mom, or Malcolm just took off again without so much as saying goodbye first, Ollie had my back.” He looked at her sadly, all of the euphoria from their laugh-fest having drained away, “He knew every secret I ever had and then some; he was my bro, Felicity,” he said helplessly.

“He still is,” she assured him.

“You think?” he asked her hopefully.

“Sure,” she nodded. She scooted a little closer, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

Felicity looked at him curiously, “What kind of secrets did you tell Ollie?”

“What didn’t I tell Ollie?” he said easily before looking at her curiously as well. “Don’t you tell your best friend stuff?”
“What do you mean?” she asked with a frown.

“I mean, don’t you tell your best friend everything?”

“No,” she said in a subdued voice.

He frowned, “Why not?”

“Because…” she hesitated before looking at him through her dark eyelashes, “I mean, well, you’re kind of my best friend. Actually, you’re kind of my only friend.”

“Me?” That surprised him. “What about at school?”

She avoided looking him in the eye, “All the kids in my class are a lot older than me,” she told him.

‘So?’ he felt like asking. Half the time Felicity made him feel like he was the kid and she was the adult. “So who do you hang out with?”

“No one really,” she told him. “Mostly I hang out in the library or the computer lab and when I’m not doing school work I write Malcolm. Oh, and sometimes I help in the cafeteria so they can teach me how to cook stuff which is fun.”

Well, that was shitty. He shifted uneasily as he tried to think of something to say but came up blank.

“It’s okay,” she said with a half-smile as if reading his mind, “I get to hang out with you all summer, right? That’s something.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, looking at her carefully, “Can I ask you a question now?”

“Sure,” she said, staring at her bare feet as they swung back and forth through the open air.

“How…” he swallowed, “How long was your mom gone before you tried to look for her?”

A silence fell between them before she looked at him hesitantly, “I don’t know,” she said at last. “I was a lot younger then so it’s kind of hard to remember. She would leave a lot, but she usually came back…only…only the last time she didn’t.” Her cheeks burned dark red and her breathing increased slightly, “It would get kind of scary sometimes when I had to be in the apartment all by myself. I didn’t—I didn’t like being alone at night,” she said glancing up at him, obviously embarrassed. “I was okay, though. I did like I always did and waited. I didn’t tell anybody she was gone and if people asked I’d say she was sleeping like she told me to, but then the landlord came in one day asking about the rent and I didn’t know what to do. I just told him she wasn’t there so he said that he was keeping her welfare checks along with our TV until she paid up or we’d have to leave.” She crossed her arms, propping them on the rail, and tucked her face into them, her voice so low and muffled he had to strain to hear her. Without thinking about it, he reached out and stroked her back in small comforting circles like he had the night she had the allergic reaction. “He took the EBT card with the grocery money on it, too; said we could have it back when Donna made good on what she owed. I couldn’t tell him or anybody that she was gone because she said if I told I’d get sent to the group home.”

The way she said the words ‘group home’ send shivers up his spine. The seemingly innocuous words seemed to carry some hidden horror for her.

“Sometimes the lady next door would give me food but she was visiting her sister out of town,” she said quietly. “Luckily, it was early in the week when the landlord came so I had school. I’d get breakfast and lunch and I’d offer to help at the cafeteria sometimes or ask kids to give me their rolls.
and jello cups then take them home but Friday was coming and it was taco day.” She looked at him, her expression solemn, “Not only was it taco day, which was like the best day ever, but we also got chocolate pudding cups and there was no way anybody was giving them up. Mrs. Wiseman was still gone and the landlord took away our TV and stuff so I couldn’t trade anybody for anything, plus Donna’s phone had been shut off for a while. I didn’t know what to do or who to call.”

Tommy ran his hand over his mouth and swallowed hard, his stomach lurching as she spoke. It was as if he could almost feel the fear she must have felt back then.

“The social workers asked me why I didn’t tell a teacher but Donna used to tell me what they did to kids like me in the group home,” she said hollowly. “She said if I ever told, that’s where I’d wind up and I just…” she took a shuddering breath, “So I thought if I could find her then maybe she’d come back.” She frowned and looked up at him again, “It wasn’t just about the rent and stuff either; I missed her.”

“Did—?” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat, “Did she ever hurt you? When she was there did she hit you or anything?” he asked, dreading the answer but needing to know nonetheless.

“No,” she said quietly. “She mostly didn’t do much of anything. Most of the time she was too tired. She’d come home and sleep on the couch and I’d help her with her medicine sometimes.”

“Her medicine?” he frowned.

She nodded, “She had to have shots or she’d get really sick. Sometimes she’d be shaking and I’d have to put the needle in for her.”

At first he thought that she might have been a diabetic or something but then he realized what kind of shots the woman had probably needed to take so as not to get ‘sick’ and clenched his jaw, “Then what?”

“Sometimes she’d be really nice,” she told him. “She had lots of friends who would come over to visit. Afterward, they’d give Donna money and she’d buy me stuff.” She looked at him, “That’s kind of why I wanted to have a party; I never got to stay for any of the ones she used to have with her friends. Sometimes they’d ask her if they could party with me, too, but she always said no and made me go play across the street in the park until they left.”

Tommy somehow managed to keep his expression calm as he breathed out slowly, his fists clenched tight. He didn’t know whether to scream or burst into tears. He did his best, but he couldn’t disguise the strain in his voice as he spoke, “Did she ever come back?”

She shook her head, “I tried to find her, but I got nervous and must have made a mistake which is how they busted me. I thought for sure I was going to the group home, that’s what they said anyway, the social workers.” The way she said ‘social workers’ wasn’t much better than how she said ‘group home’. “I wouldn’t talk though,” she told him. “I never ratted, not once; no matter what. Then Malcolm came and he made them leave me alone.”

“How?” he frowned.

“I don’t remember much, but he came with this lawyer who said his name was Al Owl and Mr. Owl told them that Malcolm was my guardian so I got to go with him instead of into the group home.”

Al Owl? He thought in confusion and frowned, “Are you sure that was the guy’s name? I’ve never heard of anybody who works for dad named Mr. Owl.”

“That’s what he said,” she shrugged. “Mr. Al Owl.”
“So then Malcolm took you back east to Gotham?” he asked her.

“First we stayed in a fancy hotel in Vegas,” she said. “He introduced me to a man he said was his friend and he talked to me for a long time.”

“Who?” he asked, frowning again.

“I don’t remember,” she said bumping her chin against the cold metal rail, “Reggie something.”

“Reggie?”

“Yeah, he was really nice,” she said softly, squinting in the darkness as if remembering, “Reggie O’Gould, something like that.”

Reggie O’Gould? Weird. “What did he talk to you about?”

She shrugged again, “Just about school and stuff. He told me I was pretty then asked about my glasses and my allergies then they starting speaking in some other kind of language and he left. I remember that before he said goodbye, Mr. O’Gould called me his ‘special treasure’, gave me a doll, then told Malcolm to take good care of me no matter what, and that was it.”

“He called you his ‘special treasure’?” he frowned.

“Malcolm said it was what he called pretty little girls he liked, kind of how Malcolm calls me ‘sunshine’ sometimes,” she smiled. “I liked Mr. O’Gould but I never saw him again after that. I asked if we could visit him once, but Malcolm said he lives in an ashram in Tibet, so…”

Yeah, the ashram, he thought with a hint of bitterness. “So what happened after that?”

“Nothing. We just went to Gotham and I started writing Malcolm after that.” She looked at him uncertainly, “You’re not…?”

“What?” he frowned.

She bit her bottom lip, “You’re not gonna tell anybody what I told you, right?”

“Course not,” he assured her quickly. “But you don’t have anything to be ashamed of, just so you know. I mean, you did…” his jaw tightened, “You did better than most people could have done and you were just a kid.” He felt himself choking up again and rubbed his hand over his eyes, unsurprised to feel the moisture of tears under his palm.

“Are you okay?” she asked in concern.

Unbelievable, he thought, chuckling slightly, “Yeah,” he said dismissively. “Allergies.” He inhaled sharply and offered her a patented Tommy Merlyn pirate’s smile, “Like I said, you did better than I ever could have done in your position so you shouldn’t be ashamed of anything, okay?”

Felicity, however, didn’t look convinced, “That lady, Ollie’s mom?”

“Moira.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, “When she looked at me it made me feel bad, like I was dirty or something.”

“She shouldn’t have made you feel like that,” he said with a hint of anger because, yeah, Moira had been acting off that day. Moira was kind of aloof most of the time but she was usually pretty warm
around kids. For some reason though, she looked through Felicity like she was beneath her or something and it really bugged the shit out of him because he froze up and had no idea what to say while it was happening. It wasn’t that she was being mean or anything, more like she was establishing boundaries, letting Felicity know that she wasn’t really one of them which was weird because she never even looked at her. The whole time she was talking her eyes were on Malcolm. Maybe that’s what bothered him the most about that day; that Moira spoke ‘about’ Felicity and not ‘to’ her as if she were some sort of thing rather than a person.

“I don’t like it when people look at me like that,” she said in low tones.

“Who else looked at you like that?” He scowled.

“A few people,” she hedged. “Some of the kids at my school hacked my records and started telling everyone that my mom was a bad person,” she said quietly. “I know Donna wasn’t…” she looked down at her feet, “Anyway, that’s what Ollie’s mom made me feel like.”

“What happened to the kids who did that to you?” he asked, his blood boiling as he thought about going up to Gotham to hand out some well-deserved beat downs.

“I didn’t rat or anything,” she said with a hint of affront.

“It’s not ratting if you tell on people who are being mean to you.”

“Yeah, it is,” she argued.

“So they just got away with it then?” Okay, now he really was taking a trip to Gotham.

“No, I just didn’t rat.”

He looked at her with a frown, “So did a teacher catch them, or…?”

“No, I just handled it on my own.”

“How?”

“I drained their canteen funds and the stipend allowance in their school accounts so they couldn’t buy any books or snacks. Plus, I gave their computers a virus so that every time they’d hit a key it sounded like farts and the more they tried turning down the volume the louder it’d get. I also may or may not have done to their grades what I did to you and Ollie’s only in reverse.”

“Wow,” he breathed.

“I mean, they eventually fixed it because they were hackers, too, just not elite like me,” she told him matter-of-factly. “They didn’t mess with me again after that, though. I also went back and made sure to erase Donna’s records from the system so it never happened again.”

“You are…kind of terrifying, you know that?” he said, looking down at her in a whole new light.

“Thank you,” she said brightly.

“I’m not going to tell anybody,” he promised her. “Bros remember?”

“Bros,” she said copying his own solemn chin bob once more.

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, scrubbing roughly before getting up, the thin metal of the widow’s walk bouncing slightly under his abrupt movements. “Okay, we should go to bed. It’s
getting really late and we can figure out all the rest of this stuff with Ollie tomorrow." He watched as another shudder ran through her small frame and frowned, "Are you still cold?"

"No," she said shakily, her fingers wrapped tight around the metal railing.

"You're shaking," he pointed out. "Come on; get up and we'll go inside where it's warm." He waited for her to get up then looked at her in concern when she didn't, "What's wrong?"

"I don't want to let go of the rail," she said quietly.

"Why not?"

"I'm scared of heights."

He blinked, "If you're scared of heights then why would you climb out onto the roof?"

"You looked like you needed me," she said simply, her eyes huge behind the thick lenses she wore. He looked down at her, his chest tightening with emotion, and picked her up. She yelped in fright as the ground suddenly fell away then clutched at him tightly as he carried her through the open window and into the pool house. He didn't put her down either, even after he walked them downstairs and headed out across the lawn back to the main house.

Felicity relaxed in his arms, her head tucked under his chin as he breathed in her smell; baby powder, the bright citrusy scent of her shampoo, and that little bit of sunshine that always seemed to cling to her even in the middle of the night.

"You know, even if we have a party, Ollie's still never going to believe that I'm fine with him snagging Laurel like that," he said easily as they entered the house.

"I'll think about it some more then, like you said, we'll come up with something tomorrow," she yawned sleepily as he carried her up the stairs, "Tommy?"

"Yeah, Sunshine?"

"Can we sleep in my bed tonight? Yours really is kind of hard."

"Sure."
This gets a bit more serious but it's important to know for later. Enjoy!
Chapter Four: She Needs Me

Tommy walked into his dad’s bedroom the next morning as he was getting dressed, grim determination in his bearing and expression.

Malcolm looked up in surprise as he finished knotting his tie, “Hey son, I’m kind of surprised to see you up this early. I thought you got in late last night.”

“I left the party early,” he said, leaning against the door frame. “By the time I got there it was pretty much over anyway.”

“Fizzled out, huh?” Malcolm asked with a crooked smile as he tossed some extra socks in his suitcase that was lying open on the bed.

“Something like that. Are you taking off again?” he nodded towards the bags.

“I have a big meeting with some investors in China. I should be gone for a few days, no more than a week.” He glanced up at him, “Are you sure you’re going to be okay with Felicity?”

“Yeah,” Tommy nodded. “Actually, Felicity is what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What about her?” Malcolm asked as he adjusted his suspenders then sat on the edge of the bed.

“I want… I want her to stay here,” he told him. “With me. You know, in Starling.”

“I got that, which is why I told you I wasn’t going to put her in the Princeton program,” he said in mild confusion.

“No, I mean…” he took a deep breath, “I mean I don’t want her going back to Gotham at the end of the summer. I want you to enroll her in Starling Prep with me here.”

“Son…” he began, his expression tense.

“I can take care of her,” he promised. “I can. I know you’re busy and you travel a lot, that’s fine, but between me and Mrs. McGregor--”

“Tommy, I can’t,” he said, his face flushing slightly. “We can’t.”

“Dad, seriously,” he frowned, taking a few steps into the room. “I can be responsible, I swear. I
promise I won’t screw it up.”

“It’s not that…” Malcolm said, his eyes dropping to the floor as he took a deep breath. “It’s just…it’s not possible, son. I’m sorry; Felicity needs to stay in Gotham.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “But why? You said you trusted me with her.”

“I do,” he nodded, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“Then prove it,” he demanded. “Don’t send her back to that school; let me take care of her.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said quietly.

“I’ve never asked you for anything, Dad,” Tommy said, his tone hardening. “Not once! I never asked you for anything, not even when you’d leave for months at a time without so much as a goodbye or a phone call.”

“I know,” he said in a subdued voice.

“Then give me this.”

“I can’t.”

“You owe me,” he said angrily. “You said it yourself just yesterday; you owe me! All I’m asking is that you not send her back to Gotham at the end of the summer. Let her stay here and—”

He cut him off, “Tommy, this is your senior year and then you’re headed for Harvard, remember? What happens when you leave? You’ll be gone and she’ll still have at least another year before she graduates and heads off to MIT.”

He paused, “I already thought of that and I was thinking that I could maybe take a year off—“

“No,” he said firmly.

“A lot of people take a year off,” he argued.

“Not to do this,” he said firmly. “If you want to take a year off to travel or intern at Merlyn Global, fine; but—“

“So if I bummed my way through Europe, or accepted an internship at Merlyn Global where I’d be doing nothing but getting coffee and hanging out in the mailroom while people kiss my ass in order to get to you, that would be okay, but my taking that time off to be with Felicity isn’t?” he argued, “That’s a bunch of bullshit and you--!”

“Tommy!” Malcolm said, stopping him mid-rant. “It’s not about that. The truth is—“ He got to his feet and paced slightly as he ran his fingers through his hair.

Tommy glowered at him, “The truth is what?”

“The truth is…” he took a deep breath, “I can’t.” As he began to argue again, Malcolm held up a hand to stop him, “I mean I literally can’t; I don’t have the authority to take her out of school like that.”

“But you’re her guardian,” he said slowly.

“I am, yes,” he nodded, “but it’s complicated and—“
“Then explain it to me in small words because I thought being a guardian meant you were kind of like a parent,” he said angrily. “That means you can take Felicity out of that school and enroll her anywhere you want to. God knows you’ve threatened me with military school enough!”

“I am her legal guardian but I’m also her father’s executor which means I’m legally bound to the terms of his will,” he grimaced. “He left very specific instructions regarding her care and he was adamant that she stay enrolled at the Gotham Academy for Gifted Students until she graduates.”

“So what? He’s dead,” he said bluntly. “Just get that Mr. Owl guy on the phone and tell him she wants to stay here with us.”

“Mr. Owl?” he asked in confusion.

“Yeah, the lawyer; the one Felicity said came to get her with you in Vegas. She said his name was Mr. Owl.”

“Mr. Owl,” Malcolm repeated, looking mildly concerned. “What else did she tell you?”

“Just some stuff,” he said, looking down at his shoes, “Nothing much.” He looked back up at him, “The point is that you’re her guardian and, you said it yourself, she’s too isolated at that school. At least here she’ll be with people who can take care of her. Can’t you just, I don’t know, sue somebody or get a court order or something?”

“Son…” Malcolm rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly, “It’s…complicated; it’s a…trust issue.”

“So, what? She won’t get her inheritance if she goes to a different school?” He scowled, “That’s bullshit!”

“Tommy, son, it’s a good school,” he said, his voice calm but his expression tense, “It’s one of the top boarding schools in the country and they only accept the best and brightest. Felicity is good there, she’s been there for a long time and the entire staff loves her. It’s her home.”

He blew out a frustrated breath and said, “Fine, you know what? If it’s so great then maybe you should enroll me there, too.”

“What?” the other man looked up in surprise.

“Send me to Gotham,” Tommy said off-handedly. “I can finish out my senior year back east with Felicity.”

“Tommy, what has gotten into you?” he asked in confusion.

“I’m not sending her back there alone,” he said plainly, “so either send me to Gotham Academy or have her transferred here to Starling.”

“What about your friends, everything you have going on here; Ollie?”

“I don’t care about any of that stuff and Ollie will be fine,” he shrugged.

“I know you care about Felicity, and you have no idea how happy that makes me, but she’s doing perfectly fine at the—” he began.

“No, she’s not!” Tommy snapped. “She’s not happy there and…” He took a centering breath, “Send me to Gotham if you can’t bring her here. Choose one or the other but if you don’t let me go, then we’re done.”
“Done?” he frowned.

“I get my inheritance from Grandpa Bob and Nana when I turn eighteen. I’ll take off and you’ll never see me again,” he said firmly.

Malcolm smirked, “Son, your mom’s parents were comfortable but they weren’t rich people and they tended to be very conservative in the way they invested. They set up that trust at a time when inflation rates were a lot more stable and it’s mostly in tea bills that have a set growth potential…”

“There’s at least a million dollars in there,” he argued. “That’s plenty of money; more than most people have.”

“For someone used to living on a budget, maybe,” he agreed, “but you’ve never had to worry about money a day in your life. A million dollars might look like a lot of money to a person who’s never had it but…” he shook his head and sighed, “What are you going to do, son? Get an apartment up in Gotham?”

“Yes.”

He looked at him in bemusement, “Then what? Get a job?”

“Yes,” he said defensively.

“You’ve never worked a day in your life and you want to get a decent job in Gotham with zero references and no college education?” he asked wryly. “Plus, do you have any idea how expensive Gotham real estate is? A million dollars might buy you a decent condo but then you’d still have to pay maintenance fees, utilities, food…”

“I don’t need a million dollar condo,” he retorted. “I can rent something cheap, live off of the interest until I figure it out, but I’m not leaving Felicity up there alone.”

“Do you know how much money that is?” his father asked. “Maybe twenty-five grand a year before taxes, *if* you’re lucky. Frankly, you’d make more money per year working at an entry level position in the mailroom at Merlyn Global.”

“Like I said, I’ll figure it out,” he said stubbornly. “Between that and whatever job I get I’ll be fine until Felicity graduates.”

“Why are you so determined to do this?” he asked again. “Did Felicity say something to you? You said she’s not happy; did something happen at her school? What don’t I know? If you tell me, I can contact the headmistress and have it taken care of.”

“No, it’s not…like that,” he said in frustration, “It’s just—she’s alone and I know what it feels like to be left behind or forgotten and she doesn’t deserve that.”

Malcolm flinched as though he’d been struck then glanced at the door pensively, “Is Felicity up yet?”

“She’s downstairs helping Mrs. Mack with breakfast,” he said, his jaw set.

“Close the door and sit down,” he instructed him. “Please,” he added when he hesitated. As soon as the door shut he indicated for him to sit down on the chair near the bed as he got to his feet. He paced back and forth, his eyes troubled, “Okay, what I’m about to tell you…” He paused, “You can never tell Felicity, do you understand?” he said in low tones, “You can never tell anyone.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.
“I mean it; no one can know about this, not even Ollie and especially not Felicity. I’m trusting you with this, son,” he said with an almost frighteningly intense expression on his face. So much so it sent chills down his spine.

“I won’t tell anybody,” he promised. “What is it?” Tommy said giving him an assessing look. His father seemed almost…afraid, and Malcolm Merlyn was never afraid; not of anything or anyone ever.

“What I’m about to tell you is…” he expelled a harsh breath, “It’s dangerous information; information I shouldn’t even be…” Malcolm leaned toward him, his eyes dark and penetrating. “It’s about the circumstances surrounding Felicity’s birth and why she can’t come here to live with us permanently.”

“What does that mean, ‘the circumstances surrounding her birth’?” Tommy asked, his brow furrowing.

“Felicity’s parents…” He took a deep breath, “First off, they weren’t actually married to each other.”

He felt his lips twitch upwards in comic relief, “Uh, dad, that’s not exactly a shocking revelation.”

Malcolm, however, was not amused, “Not only weren’t they married, but they’d never even met.”

“I don’t…” Tommy said shaking his head in confusion.

“Donna and Felicity’s father had never met each other; they’d never even been within a thousand miles of each other. She didn’t know who he was; she was a surrogate.”

“Now I’m really confused,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “If Donna was a surrogate, which is nuts because who the hell would ask a crack ho to carry their kid, why did she have Felicity with her all this time? Where were her real parents?”

“That’s where things get complicated,” he said with a rueful look as he sat down on the edge of the bed across from him. “Felicity’s biological father…” He stopped and wrung his hands in front of him nervously.

“What?” he asked, seeing the strange look his father was giving him, “It’s you, isn’t it? Felicity’s my test-tube sister, isn’t she? Oh God, is mom her bio-mom? She is, isn’t she? What did you do; have them take her eggs, or harvest them or whatever at the hospital after she died? Holy crap! This is like some serious messed up shit! How could you keep something like that from me this entire time?!”

“No!” he said quickly, “Where would you even--? I did not have them harvest eggs from your mother’s dead body! Where the hell would you even come up with something like that? What’s wrong with you?” he demanded angrily.

“Sorry, I--!”

“That’s sick!” Malcolm spat, flushing crimson. “And why the hell would I--?”

“I don’t know, I’m sorry!” Tommy said quickly.

“Where would—what—why would you even assume I’d do something like that?” he burst out, his face ruddy with outrage.

“Well, you gave me that weird look! What else was I supposed to think?” Tommy backtracked helplessly.
“What you were supposed to think was anything but that! I’m not Felicity’s father and your mother isn’t her ‘bio-mom!’” Malcolm said with a scowl. “First off, do the damn math, Tommy! Your mother was still alive when Felicity was born! Secondly, if she was our daughter don’t you think we would have raised her ourselves or told you about her?” he growled.

“Uh, you never tell me anything so, yeah,” he shrugged.

Malcolm glared at him, “Well I’m telling you now; Felicity is not your sister.”

“Okay,” he said still looking at him slightly distrustfully.

“She’s not your sister!” he said firmly.

“Okay, Jeez!” he said, throwing his hands up in defeat before looking at his father carefully, “But… just for the record; you’re absolutely positive that there is zero chance of me having any surprise siblings out in the universe, right?”

Malcolm gave him a cold look, “I am perfectly aware of exactly how many children I have. Unfortunately.”

“And you never did anything while you and mom…?” He let his voice trailed off.

“Absolutely not! Your mother and I were completely devoted to each other,” he said with an edge of anger. “I was the only man in her life and she was the only woman in mine!”

“Just checking,” he said sheepishly.

“Consider it checked,” Malcolm bit out. “How you could even doubt my loyalty to your mother is beyond me.”

“Sorry, dad,” he said in a much more subdued tone.

“You should be!” he barked. “Where in the hell you would even--” His lips twisted in a grimace and, for a second there, Tommy honestly thought Malcolm was going to skip the usual threats and just clock him in the jaw.

“I am,” he said quickly, “I’m very, very sorry.”

“Fine,” the other man said, rubbing his hand across his mouth, his jaw still clenched in anger.

“So, uh, you were saying about Felicity?” he asked a bit more respectfully this time.

“Felicity,” Malcolm threw him one last stern look before continuing, “Back in the 90’s, laws about surrogacy were almost nonexistent. Even now, less than half the states in this country address it at all and it’s even illegal in some countries. Of course, there are ways around that sort of thing but there were…further complications as well,” he said grimly.

Tommy sank back into the chair slightly, “Like what?”

“Felicity’s biological father was a very powerful man. He wanted an heir but his wife had died several years before and he was old and in failing health. He did have three children already; a son who he believed had passed away and two daughters whom he was estranged from. And by estranged, I mean that both his daughters were suspected to have been behind a few assassination attempts against him and each other.”

Tommy’s jaw dropped, “Are you serious?”
Wow, and he thought he and Malcolm’s relationship could get tense. “Who was this guy?”

“As I said, a very powerful man; I can’t tell you anything more than that,” Malcolm said enigmatically.

“Why not?” he frowned.

“Because,” his jaw clenched, “it’s for your own safety, son; her father was…you might say he was someone with a great deal of power and reach, and who lived a very dangerous lifestyle. He was also extremely old world in that he believed he needed a son to carry on his legacy. Both of his daughters and some of his enemies were looking to fill the power vacuum his death would cause and he knew that if he attempted to father a child then they would go after the mother before it was born, so some of his advisors suggested hiring a surrogate who could secretly carry the child to term, then he could have the child educated in this country, far from the reach of his enemies. He agreed and a search for the perfect ‘vessel’ began.”

“Vessel?” Tommy repeated.

Malcolm nodded.

“Okay, now I know you’re screwing with me,” he grimaced. “Are you seriously telling me Felicity is some kind of secret princess?” When Malcolm didn’t respond but merely continued to stare at him with that same level gaze, Tommy felt all the blood drain from his face, “Oh shit, seriously?”

“He wasn’t a king exactly,” Malcolm told him after a moment’s pause, “More like a clan leader or General. He was powerful, however, and to some people he was seen as a visionary and a leader, but to others…”

“What?”

“Well, some people saw him as a…” He cleared his throat, “Well, a…terrorist.”

Holy fuck, Tommy swallowed. “Terrorist?”

“Do you understand now why you can’t say anything?” Malcolm asked him, blowing out a frustrated breath. “Her father made a lot of enemies, powerful enemies, and if anyone knew Felicity was alive and who her father was they’d come after her and us.”

“Got it,” he said breathing out shakily. Something occurred to him then, “This is an IRA thing, isn’t it?”

Malcolm’s eyebrows drew together at that, “What?”

“That’s why they came to you, isn’t it? Because our family is from Scotland?” Tommy said, his eyes getting big. “Oh wow, I didn’t even know Scottish people could be in the IRA.”


“We’re secretly members of the IRA, aren’t we?” Tommy murmured in a low whisper. “If we are, that’s cool. I mean, not cool as in ‘bombing people is cool’ because it’s not; not cool at all! I just mean ‘cool’ as in ‘I can keep a secret’ kind of cool.”

“No,” Malcolm said dumbfounded, “Where the hell did you get the idea that this had anything to do
with the IRA?"

“Because of that guy,” he said with a significant look.

“What guy?”

He shifted closer to his father, “The guy Felicity told me she met with you and Mr. Owl; the Irish
guy.”

“What Irish guy?” Malcolm scowled.

“Reggie O’Gould; he’s her father, isn’t he?”

Malcolm looked at him blankly for a moment before looking away, his hand covering his eyes as if
pained, “Felicity said his name was ‘Reggie O’Gould’?”

“Yeah, it’s him, right?” Tommy asked.

Malcolm ran his hand over his mouth and looked towards the ceiling for a moment before speaking,
“No, no her father’s name isn’t ‘Reggie O’Gould’, nor am I a secret member of the IRA.”

“Oh, okay,” he said feeling almost disappointed. Not that he wanted his dad to be a political
extremist, but still.

“However, he is connected to this,” he added. “it’s a sort of, um, I suppose you could say it’s an alias
he sometimes uses so you can’t ever mention the names…” he cleared his throat, “‘Reggie O’Gould’
or ‘Mr. Owl’ to anyone, understood?”

“Okay, I promise,” he told him, then frowned. “So who was this guy and why did he pick Donna to
be his Baby-Mama? Also, how was he a terrorist and where is he from if he isn’t Irish because
Felicity definitely isn’t Middle Eastern?”

Malcolm took a deep breath, “No one really knows where he’s from originally. As for what he was
involved with, while he wasn’t in the IRA, he was a political activist and a very powerful man who
had contacts in, shall we say, less than reputable places.”

“Was he in the mob?” Tommy asked, suddenly beginning to feel a bit excited. “Is she like a mafia
princess or something?”

“You could say that,” he said reluctantly. "As for why he picked Donna as his surrogate, he didn’t.”

Tommy looked at him askance, “Huh?”

“He didn’t choose her, “ Malcolm told him. “That’s what led to all of this to begin with. He wanted
to find a surrogate so he…delegated.”

He blinked, “Delegated?”

“He contracted the job of finding a suitable woman to carry the child out to someone else,” he
explained. “He didn’t want to be connected to her in any way so he had someone else do it for him
using very specific criteria. He wanted someone smart, attractive, and who would be open to
carrying his child to term then giving it up because, even though he was the biological father, legally
he had to ‘adopt’ her in order to legitimize her since this was a surrogate pregnancy and the mother
was also the egg donor. He also needed someone his enemies couldn’t find which is why he insisted
there be no contact between them. She was to believe that his employee was the father and he would
take possession of the child then deliver it to him. He also wanted his child’s mother to be both smart and beautiful and Donna, although she lacked the same level of intelligence Felicity possesses, had street smarts and was very attractive, at least that’s what I was told. She was a grifter, specializing in low level identity theft, check kiting, and tourist scams, and she used her looks to her full advantage. She got in deep with some of his associates who introduced her to his middleman. It was agreed that if she would carry the child to term that all her debts would be erased, she would be given a home and all her expenses would be paid, plus she’d receive a million dollars as payment in exchange for granting him full custody.”

“But this O’Gould guy wasn’t her father, right?” he frowned. “Was he the middleman then or what?”

“He’s...well, he’s the man who became her father’s heir after he...died,” he said reluctantly.

“So it was his son? Didn’t he die, too?” He asked.

“Like I said, it’s complicated,” Malcolm said wearily. “All you need to know is that after Felicity’s biological father died, his estate was passed down to another member of the family.”

Tommy took a moment to absorb that, “So if he paid her a million bucks then why didn’t Donna give her up?”

“She didn’t give her up because he never paid her.”

“Why not?”

Malcolm sighed, “As I said, he wanted a boy and when he found out it was a girl he wanted her to terminate and try again.”

“What an asshole,” he scowled.

“Well, as I said, he was very old world about some things and the whole point of doing this was to have a son. Donna refused to terminate, not out of any moral objections but because she wanted her payday so, rather than argue the point, they renegotiated. He offered to pay her a lesser amount for the girl and agreed to take her off her hands if she would agree to a second pregnancy, this time with the understanding that he would only pay if she had a son.”

“Uh…” his nose wrinkled at that, “Look, I may not have paid a lot of attention during biology class but…”

Malcolm grimaced in sympathy, “I don’t have all of the details but my understanding is that he hired a doctor to ensure that only male sperm were used as a simple insemination was the least invasive method available but obviously that failed because she became pregnant with a girl instead. With the second pregnancy, she would have to agree to undergo IVF which was far more invasive but, in exchange, he would double her fee. Donna agreed because she wanted to keep the money. In the meantime though, she began to grow restless. She was more than half-way through one pregnancy and already looking at another as he wanted her to undergo the treatments as soon as the baby was born. She began using drugs and alcohol to alleviate some of the boredom and stress.”

Tommy felt his stomach clench, “She used drugs when she was pregnant with Felicity?”

“Yes,” he said, his expression grim. “She managed to hide her substance abuse from the man’s employee but one night, when she was around 26 weeks into her pregnancy, she went out, scored some drugs, and got into a serious car wreck. This led to Felicity being very sick at birth. The doctors doubted she’d survive and said, if she did, that she’d have a 1% chance of being normal without any
sort of developmental delays. Additionally, they said that because they had to put her on high dose oxygen due to some breathing issues, there was a good chance she’d go blind.”

“But Felicity is fine,” he scowled. “I mean, she wears glasses and she’s a little small, but she’s fine.”

“At the time they didn’t know that,” Malcolm pointed out. “The man hired to find Donna and watch over her panicked. He basically dropped the ball and was afraid his employer would come after him, so he told him that the baby died, then warned Donna to keep her mouth shut and her head down if she knew what was good for her which is why he never claimed her.”

He swallowed, “So why didn’t she just put Felicity up for adoption and why didn’t social services take her away at birth?”

“I don’t know,” Malcolm said honestly. “My best guess is that Donna took off with her before they came; we just don’t know. I’d like to think that her mother genuinely did care about her but she just didn’t have the coping skills necessary to raise a child on her own. She tried for a while I think. I managed to find out from a private investigator that she held down a few waitressing jobs from time to time, but she couldn’t stay away from the drugs in the end. Like I said, I’d never met her so I really can’t say for sure.”

He scratched his head, “So how did you get tangled up in all this?”

“That’s…it’s complicated.” He leaned forward, resting his knees on his elbows before speaking, “Someday when you join the company, you’ll find out that sometimes you have to dance with the devil in order to get things done. In this case, I met…Reggie,” again he hesitated slightly over the name, “at the ashram in Tibet after your mother died. We became close since we were both running away from things,” he gave him an apologetic look, “I was running from my grief and he’d faked his death in order to get away from his father’s world. After his father died, he came back to claim his estate and settle the in-fighting once and for all. Once things were settled we began a business relationship based upon the trust and friendship we’d built together. It was mutually beneficial since I needed to break into some markets throughout Asia and Russia where his family already had a foothold and he, in turn, wanted to legitimize his family’s interests and do away with the past. As he began to dismantle his father’s illegal holdings, certain parties became upset and thought he was pushing them out. The man who knew about Felicity and Donna joined forces with one of the daughters and began to talk.” He took another deep breath and looked squarely at Tommy, “You see, Felicity was meant to be his sole heir and his most recent will reflected that. Without the baby, his lawyers were forced to go by an earlier will which named his son as his sole heir. His sisters, still up in arms over their brother’s return, felt they could use her to claim the entirety of their father’s estate. Once that happened, Felicity’s life would be forfeit; they’d claim her, get the estate then once that was done…”

“They’d kill her?” he asked incredulously.

“ Probably,” he nodded. “Already there were people hunting for them. When Donna disappeared he knew he needed to act quickly in order to save her life.”

He ran his hand over his mouth as he absorbed that, “You think they killed her mom?”

“Either that or she took off at the first sign of trouble and figured Felicity was safer on her own. After all, they wanted Felicity, not her; she was expendable. She was an identity thief which would explain why she never popped up again, but who knows? It may well be that she overdosed and her body was just never identified. In any case, Felicity was in danger and he didn’t know who else to trust. He couldn’t take her so he asked me to become her guardian instead. He knew that I had powerful connections here in the States and that I could see to it she was kept safe.”
“Not that I’m ungrateful, but why would you do that?” Tommy asked with a frown.

“He was my friend and I wanted to maintain our professional and personal relationship,” Malcolm shrugged. “Besides, she was just a child; I couldn’t say no. I was only supposed to handle her trust, not actually take custody of her, but as time passed we became close. I wanted her to have a family and asked for permission to bring her into our home on the odd holiday. They reluctantly agreed but they wanted her enrolled in Gotham Academy for the same reason many powerful people send their daughters there; the education they can provide is second to none, the facility is secure, practically impenetrable, in fact, and they know people on staff who can keep them informed of her progress. I doubt they’d agree to allow me to remove her from their care permanently.”

“I don’t know, dad; this whole thing sounds pretty crazy,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, his brow furrowed in confusion. “It just…something seems off.”

“Tommy, son, would I lie to you about something like this?” Malcolm asked, reaching out to squeeze his knee comfortingly.

“I…guess not,” he said although, truth be told, he wasn’t all that sure. “Okay, I get all the secrecy but can you at least ask them? Starling Prep is pretty elite, too; lots of kids whose parents are rich or politically connected go there. I mean, I get what you’re saying, but it stands to reason that we could protect her better if she was here with us and not on the other side of the country. You could even agree to hire her a bodyguard or something.”

“I can try,” Malcolm said reluctantly. He got up from the corner of the bed and looked down at him, “Remember what I said, though; Felicity can’t know about this and neither can anyone else. If this gets out her life and ours could be in jeopardy.”

Tommy frowned and shifted in his chair uncomfortably, “Okay, but Dad, if she’s really in that much danger shouldn’t we go to the cops?” he asked him. “The FBI, CIA, somebody?”

“We could,” Malcolm said slowly, “but Tommy, these are very powerful people who have contacts everywhere. If they’ve paid someone off…”

“You think they paid off the cops?” he asked in surprise.

“All I know is that Donna’s case never went anywhere,” he told him. “She disappeared and yet no one went looking for her. Maybe that’s because she had a record and the cops just weren’t that interested, but who knows? Not only that but, even if they aren’t on the take, they’ll most likely take Felicity into protective custody and we’d never see her again.”

He blanched, “They can’t do that, can they?”

“They can do whatever they want,” Malcolm told him. “I have some pull, but that only goes so far. In fact, because of who we are, they’d probably want to make an example out of me just to prove that no one is above the law. I would probably go to jail for my part in all of this even though all I was trying to do was protect her.”

“Shit,” Tommy breathed.

“Look, I never wanted to burden you with this. This was my choice, not yours, but I did it to keep you both safe. However, now that you know, I’m trusting you to keep this a secret, do you understand?” he said firmly then waited for his nod. “I know you care about her, son; I do, too. The best thing you can do for her and for yourself is forget about everything I told you and continue to do well in school so that you can go to Harvard after you graduate.”
“Okay, so I get why Felicity might not be able to come here, but why can’t I still take a year off or go to college in Gotham instead?” He asked him.

Regret filled his father’s expression, “Again, I didn’t want to lay this at your feet, son, but the truth is that if you don’t go to Harvard then Felicity can’t go to MIT.”

“What?” he blinked.

“I can’t risk her going to MIT alone and she’s always wanted to go there, ever since she was old enough to know what MIT was,” he said in low tones. “I’ve been putting off telling her that she can’t go for a while now but, after your grades improved, I thought there was a chance I wouldn’t have to.”

“So wait, if I don’t get into Harvard then where is Felicity supposed to go?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “She may have no choice but to hold off going to college until she’s a legal adult. If that happens then it’s likely she’ll be removed from our custody. I have no idea where they’d send her but I imagine it will probably be somewhere far from here.” At Tommy’s crestfallen expression he hastened to add, “However, that’s not something you should worry about. No matter what happens, Felicity will be safe, I promise. If you want to take a year to travel or go to school somewhere else, we’ll figure it out.”

“No, I’ll do it, Dad,” he said quickly. “I don’t need to take a year off. If Felicity wants to go there then I’ll do what you said and go to Harvard.”

“Tommy…”

“I can do it, okay?” he said getting to his feet, “I was planning on really buckling down this year anyway so we’re good.”

“I don’t want to put any undue pressure on you, son,” Malcolm said, clapping his hand on his shoulder.

“This is my choice,” he told him. “I can handle it.”

“Tell you what,” Malcolm said slowly, “You show me how responsible you can be for the rest of the summer, maybe start by cutting down on the partying and really stepping up to the plate with Felicity, and I’ll try to get them to let me transfer her to Starling Academy in the Fall.” He started to speak but Malcolm cut him off, “I said I’ll try; no guarantees, and I know you’ve been really on the ball when it comes to her but it’s only been a couple of weeks. I need to see more. If I think you can handle it, I’ll go to bat for you, I promise.”

“Thanks, dad,” he said gratefully.

“Another thing, son, you know Robert and Moira are some of my closest friends and I like Ollie, I do, but I don’t feel comfortable with Felicity spending too much time around him or some of your other friends,” he said firmly. “The drugs and the drinking bother me.” Tommy started to object but he cut him off, “Don’t even bother to deny it because I’ve already heard Robert talk about how out of control he’s gotten this past year, and I can’t have her exposed to that.”

“I…agree,” Tommy said after a moment’s pause. “I’ll be sure to keep that stuff away from Felicity and, as for Ollie…” he grimaced, “If he does come over I’ll make sure he knows he has to be completely sober.”

“The first time I hear from Mrs. Mack or anyone else that Ollie or any of your friends exposed
“Felicity to that stuff…” Malcolm warned.

“That won’t happen, I swear,” he said resolutely.

“Also…” He gave him a steady look, “I know you’ve experimented with pot; I’m not an idiot. I know what marijuana looks and smells like, and I will admit to doing a few things myself when I was your age that I’m not particularly proud of, but that stops now. If I catch you with drugs then she goes straight back to Gotham.”

“I won’t—I haven’t,” he said hurriedly. “I stopped as soon as Felicity came to stay with us and I got rid of all of that stuff. If you don’t believe me, you can search my room.”

“I believe you,” Malcolm said easily, “but that also means you can’t do that stuff when you’re out either. That means no drinking, no drugs; nothing. If you get caught then they might take her away from us.”

“I’m done with that stuff,” Tommy said again. “All of it.”

“Okay,” he smiled then pulled him into a quick embrace, patting him on the back before releasing him. “Tommy, I want you to know that I’m very proud of you, I really am, and I trust that you’ll do right by Felicity and our family.”

“Thanks, dad,” he nodded. “I won’t let you down.”

Malcolm’s grin widened at that, “I know you won’t, son.”

As soon as the town car pulled out of the drive, Malcolm put up the partition and dialed.

“Why are you calling me?”

He pushed down his annoyance at the other man’s insolent tone as he answered, “I need to speak to Ra’s al Ghul.”

“For what reason?”

“I need to speak to him in regards to the treasure that was placed in my care.”

There was a pause, “What about the treasure?”

“That’s between the master and myself,” he said coldly.

“When you speak to me, you are speaking to Ra’s al Ghul,” the other man said with a hint of anger.

Malcolm’s lips quirked upwards at that, “I don’t think so.”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Magician,” the other man’s voice dropped to an icy registry. “Think twice before seeking to disrespect me or usurp my position with our master.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?” Malcolm asked. “That ‘our master’ would choose me to guard his most precious treasure instead of you, his ‘First’?”

“The girl is nothing,” he said dismissively. “A mistake; a failed experiment. She is inferior and he cares nothing for her which is why he chose you to care for her in the first place.”
“If she’s so unimportant then allow me to speak to the master directly.”

He could practically hear the other man seething with anger from the other end of the line, “Hold.”

A few minutes later another voice came over the phone, “What is it you wish to speak to me about, Saher?”

Malcolm bowed his head slightly out of habit as the voice of Ra’s al Ghul came over the line, “Master. I wish to speak to you in regards to the treasure placed within my care.”

“And what of the treasure?” he asked. “I trust all is well?”

“Yes, master,” he told him. “In fact, I was hoping that you would give me permission to take her into my household on a more permanent basis.”

“And what does that mean, ‘a more permanent basis’?”

Malcolm felt a chill run down his spine at the other man’s tone and took a moment’s pause before answering, “I wish to keep her here in my home rather than send her back to Gotham in the fall, master.”

“Oh?” he said with deceptive calm. “And why is this?”

“My son, Thomas, has grown quite attached to her and she to him. She’s become important to my family and, according to my son, has expressed a desire to remain here. You instructed me to see to it her wants were met and she wants nothing more than to be a more permanent fixture within our household.”

Several tense moments passed before he heard the other man’s voice once more, “You wish to make my treasure your own, Magician? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Malcolm froze, “I...meant no disrespect, master. I…”

“No,” Ra’s said cutting him off. “No, I will allow this. I will grant your request, Saher, but only if you agree to make my treasure your own.”

“I don’t understand,” he said in confusion.

“Although, as the First said, her value to me is less than what I had hoped for, she is still one of my treasures,” Ra’s said with quiet assurance. “I have no place for her here, but I still wish for her to be cared for as she is still my child. As such, I will gladly grant your request so long as you swear to me that she will be in all ways your child as well. She will be treated as such within your household, her status will be equal to that of your blood heirs, and she will have equal claim to your estate upon your death.”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “I already think of her as the child I never had. I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible and send Al Owal copies of any and all legal documents.”

“That is good,” the other man said in a pleased tone. “In addition, you will give her an education and a position of respect within your company should she wish it. You will also see to it she makes a suitable match when the time comes. I am not so stuck in the past that I would insist on an arranged marriage but I do expect you to make sure that the man she eventually chooses is worthy of her.”

“Yes, master.”
“Another thing,” his voice took a dark turn, “I am not unaware of your ambitions, Saher. I chose you specifically because you are a man who seeks to conquer. I understand the loss you felt at your wife’s death and the thirst for vengeance that comes with it, but I have forbidden you from taking the actions you seek.”

“I haven’t…” he frowned.

“Do not seek to deceive me, Magician,” the other man said tersely. “I have been made aware of your plans as well as the troubles brewing between you and the other.”

His brow furrowed at that, “The other, master?”

“Al-Mamlaka al-MuttaHida.”

The Queen’s Gambit; in other words, Robert.

“There is no trouble between myself and Robert Queen,” he assured him.

“That is not what his concubine tells us.”

Malcolm’s lips curled up in a sneer, “Isabel Rochev? She’s nothing but a bitter woman and one of Robert’s many conquests. He cut her loose recently so I’d take anything she says with a grain of salt.”

“Oh?” he said in an almost bored tone. “Then what she told us about your continued plans in regards to this ‘Undertaking’ isn’t true then?”

Malcolm felt his heart clench in his chest but kept his voice steady, “Correct. As I said, it’s merely the rantings of a bitter and unhinged young woman.”

“Hmm, and I suppose she was also lying when she said that you left your bastard in the belly of Queen’s wife?”

“What?” he said in surprise.

“The girl; she’s yours, is she not?” He asked. “Is that why you seek my treasure, Magician? Because Queen has taken yours as his own?”

“Isabel told you that Thea’s my daughter?” he asked numbly.

“You did not know?” Ra’s asked in amusement.

“No,” he said quickly. “Master, it’s not true; I assure you that if I—”

“I do not care about your petty dramas, Saher; only that you show me obedience and loyalty. I fear, however, that your friend may not be as trustworthy. Especially if he is as indiscriminate in his affairs as he appears to be. It upsets me that this Rochev woman would be so bold as to approach me with this information; it means that Queen has no control over his women and has been indiscreet in his dealings with them and with us. While I find your own actions somewhat distasteful, we have all been lured in by a beautiful woman at one time or another and I can at least admire your wisdom in choosing a woman like Moira Queen. This Rochev woman, however…”

“Say the word and I’ll slit her throat myself,” he swore.

“No need,” Ra’s told him. “She’s nothing. Robert Queen however…”
“Robert is loyal, I assure you.”

“You trust him?” Ra’s asked. “Even after you have cuckolded him? And do not bother denying it a second time, Saher. I knew of your affair long before the Rochev woman brought it to my attention.”

“I told Robert about my affair with Moira years ago and he forgave me,” he admitted.

It was the truth. He’d always had an attraction to Moira but had never acted on it until that one weekend almost six years previously. Robert had temporarily moved out of their home and into The Marchioness following the revelation that he had gotten his secretary pregnant. Moira, understandably upset over the whole thing, had seduced him in revenge and he, having been celibate since Rebecca’s death, allowed it to happen. Shortly after their affair, the secretary ‘disappeared’ and Robert moved back home. Malcolm, feeling guilty over his betrayal of their friendship, admitted the affair and Robert immediately forgave him for it. In the back of his mind though, he always questioned the timing of the pregnancy but Robert and Moira both insisted that Thea was the very image of his late mother so he let it go. Now he had to wonder what other secrets Robert had been keeping from him but he couldn’t let Ra’s know that.

“I trust Robert Queen like my own flesh and blood,” he said resolutely.

“Even after his disastrously indiscreet relationship with the Rochev woman which has led to her allegations that he is still planning to take part in this so-called Undertaking?” he asked. “Are you willing to gamble the lives of your children on that?”

He froze.

“Listen well, Malcolm Merlyn,” Ra’s said in a low threatening growl that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, “I grant you custody of the treasure; I will put her in your care and trust you to see to her happiness. In exchange, however, you will again swear your loyalty to me and the League.”

“Yes, master,” he said without hesitation.

“I will be watching you. Although she is weak, as I said, she is still my treasure. If any harm comes to my precious one or to the city she calls her home, I will hold you personally responsible.”

He swallowed, “Yes, master.”

“Blood for blood, Magician,” he warned him. “So long as my treasure is safe, so are yours.” His breath caught in his throat at that, “For now I will choose to believe that Queen’s whore is, as you say, merely a woman scorned. However, should I discover that you’ve lied to me or that the man you have vouched for plans to disobey my orders, I will take my retribution. Do you still believe in what this man says? That he is loyal to both you and the League?”

“If Robert betrays you or the League then I will kill him myself; you have my word,” he promised.

“I will hold you to that, Magician,” he told him just before ending the call.
For Queen Aeron who is having a tough week and asked for a happy. Here's your happy. And, of course, for Eilowyn who wanted me to mention the final scene in Gigi. Here ya go.

Enjoy the fluff, y'all!
I read once that the ancient Egyptians had fifty words for sand & the Eskimos had a hundred words for snow. I wish I had a thousand words for love, but all that comes to mind is the way you move against me while you sleep & there are no words for that.
Chapter Five: You Are My Sunshine, My Only Sunshine

He woke up to a face full of curls and sunshine and pulled the small body closer for a moment so he could savor the feeling before opening his eyes and looking down with a sleepy grin. Felicity’s mouth was wide open and she was drooling, her hair looked like a rat’s nest, and her breath had a definite sour milk scent from the hot cocoa they drank just before bed. Still, she was his and that was enough for him.

His dad had called the night before to tell him that he’d gotten permission to take her out of her school and enroll her in Starling Prep in the fall. There had been the usual warnings about holding up his end of the deal and so on but all he could hear was that she was his. She was his. Even though Ollie had crapped all over their friendship, even though Laurel was someone else’s girl now, Felicity belonged to him and he was happy; really happy.

And more than a little bit scared.

Could you be scared and happy at the same time?

He was turning seventeen in just a few days and, for all intents and purposes, he was now a parent. His arms tightened around her as if he were reassuring himself that she was really there and she wasn’t going away. Still, it was intimidating taking responsibility for another human being. Of course, he didn’t think of Felicity as his kid, but that’s basically what he was when it came down to it.

He let that sink in. No, not parent; a big brother maybe?

Actually, no, he frowned. Well, yeah. No…

It was weird; he couldn’t really define what they were. Sometimes Felicity felt like his kid, someone he had to protect from the world. Sometimes she was a friend, sometimes a little sister, sometimes it was like having his mom back in the form of a (almost) thirteen-year-old girl. All he knew for sure
though was that she was his; she belonged to him and he wasn’t letting go. Crazy as it sounded even to him, she was the missing puzzle piece he didn’t know he’d been searching for this whole time; the person who filled all those empty places that had been left behind the day his mom died and Malcolm took a runner.

He looked down at her and chuckled as she made a weird snuffling noise like a pig and buried her nose into his armpit. He didn’t even care about the damp spot of drool on his t-shirt; he was just happy.

She was his; his little bit of Sunshine.

His dad had warned him not to tell her yet, that this arrangement was contingent on his towing the line, but he had the sudden urge to wake her up and tell her anyway. Part of him thought it was weird that he didn’t feel the least bit resentful over the idea of giving up partying and hanging out with his bros to take care of a little girl, but he honestly didn’t care. The only reason he ever partied to begin with was to fill time along with the empty place that Felicity now occupied. He didn’t need it anymore, he had her now.

“Wake up, Sunshine,” he said in a sleep-fogged voice.

“No…” she grumbled and drew the covers over her head.

God, she was adorable even when she was being a grouch.

“Come on, Sunshine; I have something I have to tell you.” He shifted in the bed until he was on his side facing her, her head still lying on his arm under the covers. He attempted to draw them down and off her face (attempted being the key word there) but she was holding on tenaciously to the last vestiges of sleep along with the brightly colored duvet.

“No talking; sleeping,” she said in a surly tone muffled by the thick comforter and sheets.

Light poured in through the French doors leading to the balcony causing the early morning dew clinging to the glass to act as prisms casting rainbows on the walls. In fact, the whole room was flooded with light and color. Unlike his room which was kept dark by a combination of black out curtains, blinds, and teenage angst in the form of morose colors and disarray, Felicity’s windows were covered in sheer filmy drapes that let the sun in. The effect was beautiful even if it wasn’t conducive to sleeping in which is why she normally preferred sleeping in his bed but, ever since the night he caught Laurel and Ollie together, they’d been sleeping in hers. Despite all that, he had to admit the part of him not complaining about needing just fifteen more minutes, liked living in the light for once.

“C’mon, I want to talk!” he said, shaking her slightly. He almost felt like a kid on Christmas morning as he thought of how happy she’d be once he told her she never had to go back to Gotham ever again.

“No talk,” she mumbled, pulling the covers tighter over her head. “I’m gonna sleep five more minutes.”

“Felicity, wake up,” he rolled his eyes at her antics before snatching the covers down and exposing her grimace to the sunlight. “Mrs. Mack has breakfast on; I can smell the bacon from here. Besides, I have a surprise for you. A few surprises actually.”

“What?” she asked squinting at him crabily.

“You know, you are definitely not a morning person,” he said wryly as he extricated his arm from
behind her head to prop up his own as he looked down at her in amusement. “How do you want them; from good to great or vice versa?”

“Just tell me,” she whined as she kicked out with her feet against the mattress.

“Well, first off, I thought we could talk to Mrs. Mack about letting me redecorate my room.”

“Yeah?” she said with a frown as she opened one eye to peer blearily at him.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “I figured we could get a bed like yours since my mattress is crap and then you could help me pick out paint and stuff.”

“Really?” she asked perking up slightly. As soon as her mouth began to curve into a smile he felt his own answering grin come out to greet it.

“Yeah, but no pink,” he warned her. “Or purple, or stuffed animals, and definitely nothing girly like dust ruffles or flowers or anything. It still has to look like a guy’s room, okay?”

“Okay,” she said eagerly. “Do we get to do the painting and stuff ourselves?”

“Eh, probably not a good idea,” he said slowly. “Mrs. Mack will probably just hire a contractor or some decorators or something.”

“Oh,” she said slightly crestfallen.

“But,” he said with a pause, “You get to be in charge and tell them what you want; furniture, paint, bedding, the works. I thought we could go to a furniture store and look around in order to get a few ideas, catch some lunch; we could make a whole day of it, just you and me…and possibly Mrs. McGregor unless I can talk her into letting us do it by ourselves, but you know how she can be so…”

“Cool!” she said brightening up again.

“And we still have to plan the party,” he reminded her. “We could do that, too. Go to a party store, maybe pick up some stuff for the grill…”

“Did you call McKenna? Is she coming over?” she asked eagerly. “Maybe she could come with us?”

“Ah…” he grimaced, “No.” Damn, he was kind of hoping she’d forgotten that part.

Felicity’s face fell, “She’s not coming?”

“No…” he cringed, “I mean, she might; I just haven’t actually gotten around to calling her yet.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

He ducked his head, “Um…”

She punched him in the gut causing him to expel a pained breath, “You chickened out? Seriously?”

“I didn’t chicken out,” he said, rubbing his stomach with a wince.

“What do you call it then?” Felicity demanded.

His brow furrowed and he tilted his head, “Okay, yeah; I chickened out.”

“Why?” she asked him. He shot her an embarrassed look and she sighed, “You’re scared of a girl?”
“I’m not scared,” he denied gruffly. “I’m just…”

“Scared,” she supplied.

“Little bit, yeah,” he said reluctantly.

“Why? It’s not like you’re asking her to be your girlfriend or anything,” she reminded him. “You’re just asking her to be your friend, remember?”

He snorted at that and flopped down on his back, his arm cradling the back of his head against the pillow, “Right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, sitting up and looking down at him with a frown.

“It means that if I call her then she’s going to automatically assume it’s because I want to hook up with her.”

“Why would she think that?” she asked in confusion.

He looked at her, “Because men and women can’t just be friends.” Tommy shrugged, “It’s biologically impossible.”

“What?” she said incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“Yup,” he told her.

“Why?”

“It’s a gonad thing.”

“A gonad thing,” she repeated slowly.

He nodded, “It’s like hormonal; the minute a guy starts liking a girl or a girl starts liking a guy the hormones in their gonads kick into overdrive and friendship turns into an extended make out session.”

She looked at him askance, “First off, do you even know what gonads are?”

“Yeah, do you?” he frowned.

“We do have health class at the Academy, so yes,” she told him. “We even had to watch a movie where a bunch of girls at a slumber party compared boobs while they practiced kissing pillows in front of each other and talked about Frenching.”

“What?” he blinked, sitting up and staring at her, “Seriously?”

She nodded, “Then they talked about cramps. It was fairly traumatic.” She looked at him curiously, “Did you guys have to watch a movie?”

“Actually yeah, but yours sounded better,” he frowned.

A lot better.

“What happened in the movie they made you guys watch?”

“Mostly it was about a bunch of guys holding notebooks in their laps after they popped a—” he
paused and glanced at her, “uh, button.”

She tilted her head, “A button?”

“Oh huh,” he lied. “Do girls really do that?”

“Do what?”

“Kiss pillows and compare…stuff?” he asked.

“Not that I’ve ever noticed.”

“Oh,” he lay back on the bed, “Well, that’s disappointing.”

“Whatever,” she said dismissively, “Now what did you mean when you said boys and girls can’t be friends?”

“I meant that they can’t be friends,” he told her.

“Yes, they can!”

“No, they can’t,” he said firmly. “Men and women being just friends is an urban myth like Dewitos.”

“Dewitos?” she wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah,” he said turning to look at her, “You know that urban myth about how they’re supposed to come out with a Doritos-flavored Mountain Dew?”

She looked at him in distaste, “Doritos-flavored Mountain Dew?”

“Yeah, it sounds like a potentially good thing that could actually happen someday but probably never will.”

“How is a Doritos-flavored soda a good thing?” she shuddered.

“Are you kidding me?” he asked raising a superior eyebrow, “It’s *Doritos* and *Mountain Dew* all at the same time; it’s like, why haven’t they done this already? Kind of like cheese flavored pork rinds with ranch; talk about a no-brainer.”

“Cheese what?!”

“Cheese flavored pork rinds with ranch,” he told her. “You know, with that powdered cheese that turns your fingers orange on chips only with ranch, too.”

“That sounds disgusting,” she said flatly.

“Why?” he shrugged. “I mean, you like bacon, right? Basically, pork rinds are bacon Cheetos—“

She gaped at him, “Bacon Cheetos?”

He nodded, “Exactly, and bacon and cheese go together and everybody likes ranch so cheese flavored pork rinds with ranch.” He paused, “I wonder if I could get a patent on that or something because you just know it’s happening sooner or later.” He shrugged again, “Anyway, the point is that even though it sounds good, it never happens in real life, trust me.”

Felicity, still seemingly awestruck by the brilliance that was cheese flavored pork rinds, paused for a
moment before shaking her head, “But I’m a girl.”

He looked at her askance, “Yeah, so?”

Her brow furrowed, “So I’m a girl and you said we’re friends, remember?”

“You don’t count,” he said dismissively.

“As a friend?” she asked in a hurt-filled tone.

“No!” he said drawing his eyebrows together in annoyance, “As a girl! Of course you’re my friend, jeez!”

“Oh.” She sat back then frowned again, “But I am a girl.”

“No, you’re not, you’re a bro; there’s a difference,” he said off-handedly.

“Oh, okay,” she said still looking confused. “So if I can be a bro then why can’t McKenna?”

“I don’t know why; she just can’t.”

“But why?”

He sighed and turned onto his side again to face her, “She just can’t, okay? Like I said, it’s a gonad thing.”

“I really don’t think you know what any of those words mean and, if you do, then you’re definitely misapplying them in this situation,” she said shaking her head with a frown.

“Gonads are your junk,” he said irritably.

“Your junk?” she repeated wide-eyed.

“Yeah, your junk, and there’s girl junk and boy junk and they excrete all these junk vibes and stuff that counteract each other.”

“Junk vibes,” she said slowly. “Like pheromones?”

“Exactly,” he nodded. “The point is that it’s a scientific medical fact that men and women can’t be friends once their mutual junk becomes activated.”

She blinked then wrinkled her nose slightly, “Activated?”

“Yeah, activated,” he confirmed. “You know, puberty.”

“Oh,” she nodded then tilted her head with a slight look of disgust, “‘Puberty’. Did you ever notice how that word kind of sounds like something really disgusting? Pew-burt-tee,” she said repeating the word slowly. “It sounds like a really smelly fart and burp combined like when you have a bad stomach from eating too much junk food.”

“Huh,” he thought about that, “‘Puberty’,” he sounded it out. “Yeah, actually it kind of does. Like, ‘Hey man, don’t go in there; we had chili dogs for lunch and I totally let loose with a giant puberty.’”

“Gross,” she agreed. “Well, does that mean that when I get activated we can’t be friends anymore?”

“No,” he assured her. “You got in there before the statute of limitations was up so your bro status is
automatically grandfathered in.”

She pushed the hair off her face and peered at him myopically through narrowed eyes, “You’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this stuff, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” he admitted as he lay back on his pillow. “Pot has a way of making you wax philosophical. Ollie used to say I should write a book called, ‘The Wizard of Weed’s Book Of Zen,’ or something. It would probably be a best seller.”

Felicity's jaw dropped at that, “You smoked drugs before?”

“Uh…no? Yes? I don’t know how to answer that question…” he stuttered suddenly feeling cornered.

Okay, so maybe this responsible parenting thing wasn’t going to be quite as easy as he thought.

Making a split second decision, he decided to just lay it all out on the line. He turned onto his side again and looked at her steadily, his face flushing in embarrassment, “Okay, yeah; I used to smoke pot, okay? But not anymore, so you shouldn’t do that because drugs are bad.”

Yeah, that…that sounded responsible and adult-like, right?

“When?” she asked wide-eyed.

“When what? When did I last smoke weed?” he asked her.

“Yeah.”

Okay. “You remember when I thought Ollie gave you a pot brownie last week? That was the last time I smoked it and—“

“I did marijuana?” she exclaimed.

Oh shit.

“No,” he said quickly.

“Oh my God, I did drugs!” she said in a panic as she sat upright. “I’m a drug user!”

“No, no, no!” he waved her off as he sat up as well.

She grabbed her head and began to breathe in and out rapidly, “I’m a pot head! They showed this film in school about how it fries your brain cells! I have brain damage! I can feel myself getting stupider already! Wait, ‘stupider’ isn’t even a word! Oh God! I’m a junkie! A stupid junkie with brain damage and now I’ll have to go to rehab and--!” Her eyes widened in panic, “This is like an after school special! Oh God, I need an intervention!”

“No!” he said, grabbing her shoulders and forcing her to look at him, “You did not use pot!”

“But you said--!”

“No,” he said, attempting to calm her down. “Ollie made pot brownies, yes, but the brownie you ate just had nuts!”

“Are you sure?” she asked tremulously, her eyes filling with tears. “Because I think I can feel the pot in my brain still.”
“First off, that’s not how pot works, and secondly I’m sure that you did not eat a pot brownie,” he said soothingly.

“But how can you be sure?” she asked again, her mouth wobbling. “You weren’t even there when I ate it.”

That’s true, he thought before shaking it off, “I know because Ollie told me—“

“But he was all full of pot, too!” she insisted. “What if he got confused and mixed up the brownies? He’s not that smart!” She began to whimper slightly, “They said in health class that if you do marijuana that it can affect your chromosomes and stuff so that your kids will come out all messed up! I might not ever be able to have kids now!”

“They did?” he frowned.

“Yeah!” she nodded vigorously. “Plus, there’ve been all kinds of studies that say that you lose like eight to ten IQ points if you do pot and that you never get them back!”

“Even if that were true you’re a genius, right? I’m sure you can spare a few measly points…” he said uncertainly.

“Plus, it can cause cancer, psychosis, heart attacks—“ She clutched her hand to her chest and looked down as if making sure hers was still beating. “And if you’re a guy it can lower your sperm count and make you sterile!”

“Now I know for a fact that’s not true,” he huffed. “The other stuff, maybe, but if that was true then a lot more guys would be lighting up, let me tell you.”

“No! It’s a medical fact! In school—!”

“Ohkay, stop,” he said, grabbing her shoulders as he attempted to calm her down. “You didn’t eat a pot brownie, okay? Besides that was days ago—“

“But--!” she began wide-eyed.

“Felicity!” he said firmly, “Just listen, okay?” He sighed then sat back, “Okay, now, while drugs are bad,” he emphasized, “a lot of the stuff they tell you in school is just there to scare you into never doing it.”

“But there was a book…?” she said, calming somewhat.

“Yeah, there are lots of books,” he said with a superior look, “that doesn’t mean they’re right. Look, I’ve been smoking pot for a while and I’m, like, plenty smart, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said slowly.

“Exactly,” he said grinning broadly. “Look, the point is that I used to smoke pot but I quit and you shouldn’t do it, okay?”

She nodded uncertainly, “Okay.”

Yeah, I got this, he thought. He relaxed slightly as he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, “Listen, adults lie to kids all the time,” he said airily. “Me, though? I’m never going to do that with you. Me and you; we’re always going to be honest with each other, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded.
“Yeah,” he snorted dismissively, “it’s like when they tell you that sex is this big deal and that if you do it you’ll get a disease or get some girl pregnant the first time—“

“You’ve had sex, too?” she asked, her eyes bugging out of her head once more.

Tommy froze, “Um…”

“How old were you when you did it?” she asked in amazement.

“Uh, fifteen…almost?” he answered reluctantly. “And by almost I mean pretty much fifteen since my birthday was the very next day, so…”

Felicity blinked, “Wow.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” he said quickly.

“Yeah it is,” she told him. “That means…” she looked up at him again, “That means I could be having sex in—!”

Whoa! “No!” he said loudly, “You’re not having sex when you’re fifteen! In fact, you aren’t having sex ever!”

“But you said that—?”

“Forget what I said!” he told her, “Forget everything I said! Drugs and sex are bad and you should never do them!”

“But—?”

“Never! Because they cause brain damage and diseases and you’ll get pregnant—!” he told her as he got out of bed and ran his fingers through his hair as he stared at her in her little pink nightie with the teddy bears embroidered around the neckline, “Just—just go brush your teeth and get dressed so we can have breakfast!”

She looked at him in confusion, “But you said that…”

“No more!” he said scowling, “Just repeat after me: Drugs and sex are bad and I will never do them!”

She tilted her head as her eyebrows drew together in confusion, “Really?”

“Yes, really!” he huffed.

“Drugs and sex are bad and I will never do them,” she repeated obediently.

“That’s right; just say no! Now…go brush your teeth,” he said gruffly as he pointed towards her en suite.

As he watched her get out of bed and walk slowly into her bathroom a thought occurred to him that maybe this parenting thing wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought it’d be after all.

Mrs. McGregor gave Tommy a stern look as she set his juice in front of his plate at the kitchen table, “Dinnae dreep ony o’ that syrup oan yer sark, dae ye hear me Tommy Merlyn?”
“Yes, Ma’am,” he said absentmindedly as he dipped his bacon in syrup then watched Felicity spread cream cheese and fruit preserves all over her French toast. He was trying to come up with a way to ask Mrs. Mack about redoing his room when Felicity suddenly spoke up.

“Mrs. McGregor?” she said sweetly as she batted her eyelashes up at the older woman.

“Aye, sweetheart?” the older woman said over her shoulder as she began wiping down the counters.

“Tommy was wondering if he could redecorate his room because it’s kind of depressing and his bed is uncomfortable.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s ‘depressing’ exactly,” he muttered. “A little dark but—“

The older woman paused in her work then nodded before going back to her cleaning, “Aye, it’s a bawherr depressing, isnae it. Ah dinnae think his faither wid hae a kinch wi’ it. Ah will steid a ca’ wi’ th’ decorators th’day.”

“What did she say?” Felicity whispered.

“I’m not sure but I think that was a yes,” Tommy said slowly.

“Mrs. Mack?” she said again.

“Whit’s it, darlin’?”

“Tommy said that maybe I could help him pick the furniture and paint and stuff so we were going to go out and take pictures of the stuff we liked to show the decorators,” the girl said in a sweet voice as she batted her eyelashes endearingly.

The older woman turned to Tommy with a beaming smile, her hand reaching out to give his cheek a fond pat, “Och, noo isnae that crakin’ o’ ye tae dae, Tommy Merlyn? Keek at ye bein' sae lovingly kind tae wee Felicity! Ye'v become sic a gentleman.” She put her hand on her hips and looked between the two of them, “’N' juist whin did th' twa o' ye plan oan huvin this wee excursion? A'm needin' tae ken sae ah kin record mah stories while a'm oot chasing efter th' twa o' ye.”

Both Tommy and Felicity looked up at her blankly.

She frowned at them, “Weel, whin did yi'll waant tae gang or dinnae ye ken?”

“Uhhh…?” Tommy said in confusion.

“Oh!” Felicity said, her features lighting up in comprehension, “Actually, since we’re just going to be taking pictures and stuff we figured we could just go by ourselves that way you wouldn’t have to go to any trouble.”

“Tis na trauchle, loue,” she assured her. “Forby, if th' mattress is in a brassic a shape as ye say we cuid at least git that handled th'day ’n’ lea th’ rest fur th’ fancy wummin yer faither hires tae see tae th’ furniture ’n' pentin. Forby, thir's na telling whit this wild laddie wid pick fur hisSEL f thare wasn't someone wi' sense thare tae halt him. He'd likelie bring hame yin o’ they freish fangled cooncil juice kips or something that runs aff o’ th' mechanicals.”

“I am so lost…” Tommy said under his breath. “Something about a mattress and something to do with juice…”

“Actually, Tommy was going to invite a friend of his named McKenna to come with us,” she told
her causing Tommy to turn and look at her in horror as she pretended to ignore him.

“McKenna, hmm?” Mrs. Mack said, crossing her arms over her chest and looking at them both suspiciously. “’N’ juist wha is this ‘McKenna’ then? She isnae yin o’ yer hussies noo is she, Tommy Merlyn? Ah dinnae think yer daddy wid appreciate haein a body lik’ that aroond oor wee Felicity, dae ye?”

“Uhhhh no?” he said, taking a shot in the dark.

“No, ma’am,” Felicity answered quickly. “She’s not his girlfriend, just a friend. Also, she’s a very nice girl; a good *Catholic* girl,” she said with emphasis. “In fact, I think Tommy said something about her uncle being a priest, right Tommy?” Felicity asked before elbowing him under the table.

“Uh, yeah!” he said quickly. “I’m…pretty sure she said…something like that anyway.”

“A guid left footer lassie? ’N’ her uncle’s a priest ye say?” She appeared to contemplate that for a moment, “Gey weel then. Bit afore ye twa gang aff wi’ this body a’m waantin tae hae a keek at her masell. Yer father tellt me tae keep an yak oan th’ twa o’ ye while he wis gaen ‘n’ ah dinnae waant ye gaun aff wi’ some body o’ questionable morals. Juist fur her uncle’s a priest it doesn't mean she's an angel. Mony a guid fowk haes spawned themselves a black an aberdonian’s burd.”

This time they both looked confused.

“Weel, urr ye aff tae ca’ her oan th’ phane or whit?” she asked sternly.

“Huh?” Tommy asked.

“I think she wants you to call McKenna and have her come over,” Felicity whispered.

“Oh,” he said before pulling out his cell phone and staring at it. “You know, maybe we shouldn’t invite her along. Mrs. Mack is already here and—“

“Whit’s th’ kinch noo?” Mrs. Mack asked as she put her hands back on her wide hips once more and scowled down at them.

“I am not!” He sputtered, shooting the younger girl a dirty look. “I’m just…it’s just early and she might not be awake yet or she might have other plans…”

The older woman’s mouth curved upward in a knowing grin, “Och, ah see. Sae ye'r sweet oan this lassie. ’N’ ah suppose tis wee Felicity wha is acting as matchmaker atween th’ twa o’ ye then?” She gave the little girl a wink, “That bein’ sae, ah definitely wantae catch up wi’ th’ lassie that haes Tommy Merlyn a’ turned aroond ’n’ chasing efter his ain tail. Gie th’ lassie a ca’ ’n’ hae her come ower.”

“I—“ He grimaced and looked between the two of them, “Fine,” he got up from the table to leave when Mrs. McGregor stopped him.

“Ye dinnae need tae lea th’ buird tae mak' yer ca'. Gang oan!” she commanded.

“Since when is it polite to use your cell phone at the table?” he asked defensively.

“Since we both know that if you leave the room you’re just going to chicken out then come back here to say that she had other plans when, the truth is, you never even bothered to ask her to begin
with,” Felicity said easily.

The older woman nodded, “Aye, whit she said.”

“Fine,” he said huffily. He began to dial.

“N’ pat it oan that speaker phane settin’ sae we kin a’ hear,” Mrs. Mack told him as she sat down beside them.

Tommy threw her a murderous look but did as she asked anyway.

//Why Tommy Merlyn, as I live and breathe,// McKenna said as her voice was piped over the tinny speakers.

“Hi, um…” he stumbled, suddenly losing his nerve until Mrs. Mack’s foot shot out to give him a sharp kick in the shin. “Ow, crap!” he exclaimed, rubbing his lower leg with a wince.

//What?// McKenna chuckled.

“Nothing, I , uh, bumped something,” he took a second to glower at the beaming woman sitting across from him. “Anyway, I was wondering if you weren’t busy if you’d like to hang out a little. Today. You know, like now?” he asked her, “I mean, I totally get it if you’re busy so…yeah.”

//Why?// she asked suspiciously.

“Smart lass,” Mrs. Mack whispered to Felicity who snickered.

“Well, um…” Tommy stuttered.

“Hi,” Felicity said, making a last minute save. “I’m Felicity.”

//Well, hello Felicity,// McKenna said in mild confusion.

“Tommy and I wanted to go out to look at furniture and stuff but Mrs. McGregor—“

“Hello, dearie,” Mrs. Mack waved at the phone that was lying between them.

“—said that we couldn’t go unless Tommy brought someone with good sense so he wouldn’t pick out anything—“

“Inappropriate,” Mrs. McGregor said firmly.

“Yeah, you should know you’re on speaker phone,” Tommy said glumly.

McKenna laughed, //Okay, so you thought to call me?//

“Well, Tommy said you’re one of the smartest people he knows,” Felicity told her. “And that’s saying something because I’m a certified genius.”

“She is ower clever, ah will gie ye that,” Mrs. McGregor said broadly. “Plus, ah tellt Tommy he coudnae hae a’body aroond young Felicity wha wasn’t trustworthy ’n’ he said yer uncle wis a priest.”

//My uncle’s not a priest,// McKenna said in confusion as Tommy froze.

“No?” Mrs. McGregor said as she turned a jaundiced eye on him.

//No, but I do have two aunts that are nuns though,// she said.
“Yeah, I must have gotten the two confused,” Tommy laughed nervously. “Priests, nuns, aunts, uncles; whatever.”

//I’m surprised you even remembered that,// McKenna said stunned.

“Ye hae twa aunts in th’ convent? Whilk order?” Mrs. Mack asked in surprise.

//Sacred Heart,// she answered. //They actually teach at the high school. I was going to go there but I got a scholarship to Starling Prep instead.//

“A scholarship?” Mrs. Mack said approvingly. “Weel she is a clever yin then. ’N’ did ye gang tae Catholic schuil afore that?”

//Yes ma’am, all the way up to junior high.//

“Weel that settles it then,” the older woman said with a firm nod. “Wid ye be willing tae tak’ oot pairt o’ yer day tae supervise thae twa while thay gang ’n’ pick oot a freish kip ’n’ some furniture then?”

//Uh, huh?// she asked in confusion.

“She’s asking if you wouldn’t mind babysitting me and Tommy while we go pick out some stuff for his room?” Felicity asked her.

“I don’t need a babysitter!” Tommy said, his cheeks ruddy with embarrassment.

“Aye, ye dae,” Mrs. Mack shot back.

//Sure, I…guess so,// she said slowly.

“When kin ye be ’ere?” the older woman asked.

//Uh…fifteen minutes?//

“Braw!” she said clapping her hands together. “Hae ye hud yer breakfast yit?”

//No, ma’am.//

“Weel, hurry ower ’n’ ah will set ye a steid at th’ buird. Howfur dae ye tak’ yer eggs?” She asked.

//Huh?//

“Mrs. Mack said she’d make you some breakfast but she wants to know how you take your eggs?” Felicity translated.

//Oh, uh, over easy.//

“Braw! Noo Tommy, son, tell th’ guid lassie cheerio the nou sae she kin hurry oan ower afore her breakfast gets cauld,” the plump older woman said, already moving towards the stove.

“Okay, um, I guess I’ll see you in a few,” Tommy said reluctantly.

//Okay, bye,// she said before ending the call.

“That was completely humiliating,” Tommy muttered.

“Weel, she seems lik’ a crakin’ young lassie,” the older woman praised humming pleasantly under her breath as she put some more bacon in the skillet. She turned to face them, her eyebrows drawing
together in concern, “Ainlie ah wonder how come it's that none o' th' young fowk nowadays cannae seem tae ken plain simple speakin’. Ah ken ah hae a bawherr bit o’ an accent bit tis nae that solid tae follow whit a’m saying, is it? Ah mean, ye twa seem tae be able tae ken me braw, richt?”

The two of them looked first to her then to each other before nodding and saying in one voice, “Yes, ma’am.”

As they sat in the back of the limo headed towards the upscale furniture store Mrs. McGregor told them to go to, McKenna looked first to Tommy then to Felicity curiously. At the housekeeper’s insistence, they took the town car along with his father’s driver. Her exact words were, “Ye dinnae need tae be driving lik’ a bat oot o’ hell wi’ baith Felicity ’n’ this ither lassie in th' motor wi’ ye. ’N' dinnae think a dinnae ken aboot they parking tickets, Tommy Merlyn. Juist be glad ah sent in a check whin ah did th' monthly household expenses ’n' didnae tell yer daddy!”

After which Felicity whispered that next time he got a ticket to let her know so she could erase it from the system before they mailed out the notification.

She was definitely a handy little thing to have around, he’d give her that. Between her hacking, her newfound ability to understand at least some of what Mrs. Mack was saying, and her own sunny disposition that seemed to lighten everyone’s mood, life around the Merlyn mansion had sure gotten a lot easier.

“I had no idea that you had a little sister, Tommy,” McKenna said in mild surprise.

“I’m not his sister.”

“She’s not my sister,” they said simultaneously.

“But you guys live together?” she asked, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

“It’s…complicated,” Tommy said weakly.

“We’re platonic life bros,” Felicity told her.

“Platonic life bros,” McKenna repeated in amusement.

“Yeah, I got grandfathered in,” she shrugged.

McKenna’s eyebrows shot up, “Huh?”

Tommy shot her a quelling look before turning to the other woman, “Yeah, it’s a…inside joke.”

“Oh,” she nodded. “So…not that I’m not up for a ride in a limo, but why did you guys invite me along? I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume that neither of you really needs a babysitter, right?”

Tommy flushed.

“Mrs. Mack was afraid that we’d pick out something weirdly inappropriate so she told us we had to find someone with actual taste,” Felicity broke in for the save.

Sort of a save, Tommy added sarcastically.

She laughed slightly, “And I was the first person you thought of?”
“Who else was he going to ask; Ollie?” Felicity snorted, “Have you seen his hair? He wears it like that on purpose.”

Tommy buried his face in his hands and groaned as McKenna snickered.

“Yeah, it’s not good,” she agreed. “It looks like a really bad wig, doesn’t it?”

“Tommy and I agreed it looks like a dead Shih Zhu,” Felicity informed her.

McKenna began to laugh at that while Tommy glared down at the younger girl, “Hey!”

“Well, we did!” Felicity said defensively.

“Yeah, but you’re not supposed to tell anybody!” he groused.

“What? Like it’s a secret that his hair looks like that? It’s not like he wears a hat!” Felicity shot back.

And at that, McKenna began to laugh so hard that tears began streaming down her cheeks.

A while later they were in the store looking on as Felicity consulted with several of the in-house decorators. As the girl chatted excitedly about all the different options available to them, McKenna turned to Tommy with a curious look.

“I think it’s really nice that you’re letting her pick all the stuff for your room. I mean, I have three older brothers and a sister, and there’s no way they would ever let me even step inside their rooms at her age much less decorate them.”

“She’s not my sister,” Tommy reminded her. “Besides, it’s pretty much her room, too,” he shrugged.

“What do you mean?” she asked in confusion as they trailed behind the group. “I’ve seen your house, remember? I’m pretty sure you guys don’t have to share a room.”

“Felicity…” he sighed, “Sometimes she has bad dreams so it’s just easier for her to sleep with me rather than having her get upset then making her get up in the middle of the night to come look for me.”

“Oh,” she said, looking at him with a slight smile.

“Yeah, well,” he said, ducking his head with a flush. “It’s no big deal. Besides, she doesn’t have them if there’s someone there with her and it’s just the two of us most of the time since my dad’s always out of town on business. I mean, there’s nothing weird about it or anything,” he said quickly as he looked up at her.

“Oh,” she assured him. “I used to sleep in my parent’s bed all the time when I was a kid. I would even crawl into bed with my sister when she’d let me.”

He shrugged, furrowing his brow, “Yeah, well, we don’t exactly have that option.” He flushed suddenly and gave her a self-conscious look, “What I meant to say was--!”

“I get it,” she said cutting him off, her own eyes haunted. “My dad got shot on the job so I know what you mean.”

“I didn’t know that,” he frowned in sympathy. “What did he do? Not ‘what did he do to get shot,’” he corrected, “I meant, what was his job?”
“Yeah, I figured that was what you meant,” she said dryly. “He was a cop,” she told him. “He died when I was three.”

“I always thought your dad was a lawyer,” he said with a curious look.

“He is,” she told him. “I mean, technically he’s my step-dad but he adopted me when I was six so he’s my dad.”

“Oh. Hey, can I ask you something, and have you not get offended by it?” At her nod he asked, “If your dad is a lawyer then why are you at Starling Prep on a scholarship?”

“You seriously have no idea how much tuition is at that school, do you?” she snorted.

“Not really, no,” he answered reluctantly.

She smirked, “My dad’s an ADA which means he doesn’t exactly pull in the big bucks, but he’s thinking about running for DA eventually or trying for a bench seat.”

“That’s good,” he said, if for no other reason than to fill space.

“Glad you approve,” she said in amusement. He began to stutter out an apology, but she cut him off, “Besides, Laurel and Sara both go to Starling Prep and their parents aren’t super rich.”

“True,” he shrugged. “I just figured it had something to do with their mom or her side of the family, though.”

“Nope, they’re both on partial scholarship, too,” she told him. “Actually, that’s why we became friends in the first place; all of us come from cop families. I mean, my sister, Mel, is a cop in Gotham and I have three ‘step’-brothers who are all in law enforcement; one’s a detective in Central City, one’s in forensics here, and the third one followed in my dad’s footsteps and became a lawyer.” She grimaced slightly, “Although he’s the odd one out since he became a public defender.” McKenna looked at him curiously, “Can I ask you a question now?”

“Sure,” he said off-handedly as he kept his eye trained on Felicity.

“Did you just ask me to join you guys today so you could get the scoop on Laurel and Oliver?”

Tommy took a centering breath and glanced at her, “You want the truth?”

“Yeah,” she said watching him carefully.

“I could honestly give a shit,” he said bluntly.

Her eyebrows rose in disbelief, “Seriously.”

“Seriously,” he confirmed.

She looked at him askance, “Bullshit. You had it bad for Laurel and everybody knew it.”

“Apparently she didn’t,” he said with a lopsided grin.

“Yeah, well, she did,” McKenna said dryly.

He let that sink in for a second before shrugging it off, “You know, if she did, then I’m even more glad that she picked Oliver instead.”
“Really?” she asked again in disbelief.

Tommy sighed and waited until Felicity had stopped near a sleigh bed before turning towards her, “You want to know the truth about why I invited you along?”

“Yeah,” she said, her dark eyes searching his expression carefully.

“Her,” he said hitching his thumb towards Felicity.

“Felicity?” she asked in confusion.

“She wanted to meet my friends, only I don’t trust any of my so-called friends to be anywhere near her,” he told her without an ounce of humor. “The last time I left Ollie in a room alone with her he nearly got her killed.”

“What?” she gaped at him incredulously, her eyes going straight to the younger girl, “What happened?”

“She has a nut allergy and he gave her a brownie with nuts,” he said wearily as he ran his hand over his hair. “It wasn’t really his fault; I knew he was making brownies but I didn’t know he was using nuts and I forgot to tell him that she was allergic.”

“Damn,” she cringed. “I have a cousin with a nut allergy and she once had to have a trach put in because her throat closed up. She still has a bad scar right here.” She touched the hollow of her throat and Tommy’s face darkened as he swallowed. “She nearly died. That must have been scary as fuck.”

“Yeah, well, luckily I got to her in time,” he said taking a shaky breath. His eyes sought her out again before he spoke, “Can I tell you a secret? Just between me and you and you have to promise not to tell anyone?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, moving slightly closer to him.

“I convinced my dad to take her out of her boarding school and put her in Starling Prep next year so I could take care of her here,” he said quietly. “He’s always gone so it’s going to be just us but, really, we’re all we’ve got anyway so we might as well be together. The thing is though, he’ll only let me keep her if I can keep my shit together and prove I can be responsible.” He looked at her uncertainly, “I mean, you kind of know me from hanging around Ollie and stuff. Do you think she’ll be okay? With me, I mean?”

“Honestly?” she asked.

He nodded and braced himself for the words he was sure were coming next.

“Before today I would have said ‘hell no’, but after seeing you with her?” She glanced between them, “Yeah,” she said with a crooked grin.

“Really?” Tommy asked hopefully. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Yeah, trust me I wouldn’t lie about something like that,” she told him. “The truth is you haven’t taken your eyes off her once and not just because we’re in a store full of strangers. The whole time we were at your house and in the car it was the same way. I mean, my older sister and brothers could barely stand me. Every time I’d open my mouth they’d tell me to shut up but you seem to hang on her every word and she’s the same way with you. I mean, it’s pretty obvious that you two genuinely like each other as friends and not just as siblings—not that you’re siblings,” she said wryly, holding her hands up in a submissive gesture. “To tell you the truth, I’m kind of jealous. I would have loved
McKenna took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, “Goddamn you, Tommy Merlyn.”

“What? What did I do?” he asked in confusion. As he turned to face her he noticed the tears forming in her eyes and blinked, “Are you okay?”

“No,” she said damply as she wiped at her eyes with her fingertips.

He reached into his pocket and took out a folded handkerchief then handed it to her, “Here; Felicity has allergies so I started keeping something in my pocket just in case.”

“Are you serious?” she sobbed, looking down at the cloth in disbelief.

“I have Kleenex, too,” he said in alarm as he reached into his other pocket.

McKenna gave him a hard look between her tears, “I swear to fucking God, Tommy Merlyn; if you are messing with me and that kid turns out to be an actor or something as part of some elaborate hoax to get into my pants…”

“What? No! Whoa,” he said, throwing up his hands defensively. “Not a hoax and I’m not trying to get into your pants, I swear!” He froze, “Uh, not that I don’t find you attractive because I do; I do find you attractive. In fact, I was kind of crushing on you for a long time—“

“Really?” she asked, her hand pressing to her chest as she grinned at him.

“Yeah, but you always seemed to have a thing for Ollie and he always acted like he reciprocated—I mean, he did! He totally had the hots for you, so I never went there which is why I started focusing on Laurel instead,” he said quickly.

“I kind of wish you had said something,” she sniffled, her cheeks growing pink and she lowered her gaze. “I mean, yeah, sure, I thought Ollie was cute. I mean, he’s gorgeous…except for the hair,” she admitted with a toothy smile. “It does kind of look like a dead Shih Zhu.”

He snickered and shoved his hands in his pockets, fidgeting nervously, “I kept telling him to do something with it but he said it was part of his unique ‘style’. I mean, what are you gonna do short of forcing him into a Super Cuts at gunpoint?” he shrugged.

“The point is, I would have gone out with you if you asked,” she said shyly.

Tommy tilted his head to the side and shrugged again, “Like I said, Ollie had a thing for you and I didn’t want to step on that.”

“He didn’t seem to have that problem when it came to you and Laurel,” she pointed out.

Tommy grimaced, “Look, I don’t know why Ollie did what he did but, if what you told me was true; Laurel wasn’t really interested in me anyway so it’s just as well. Besides, like Felicity pointed out to me the other day, if Ollie liked Laurel so much that he was willing to tank our entire friendship to be
with her, then he must really love her. If that’s true then I’m happy for him.”

“Really?” she asked incredulously.

“Okay, well, I’ll admit I was royally pissed off for a minute or two,” he confessed. “Really, really fucking pissed, but then I talked to Felicity and that went away. I realized that I never even really liked Laurel, just the idea of Laurel. Apparently I didn’t even know her at all so it’s no big loss. I’d never so much as asked her out so if she chose to be with Ollie than that’s her right. She’s not property, I had no ‘claim’ on her, and even if we had dated she’s still her own person and so is Ollie; I have no right to stand in their way or even be angry. As far as I’m concerned, it’s cool.”

She looked at him steadily, “Did Felicity come up with that whole speech?”

“Every last word,” he admitted.

“Felicity’s a pretty smart kid,” she said with a smile as she bit her bottom lip and looked up at him through a dark fall of lashes.

“Yeah, she is,” he said softly, his eyes seeking her out once more as she looked at a chest of drawers and some nightstands.

McKenna stepped closer, “So…?”

“So?” he asked glancing over at her.

“So are you going to ask me out on a date, or what?” she asked rolling her eyes.

He shifted uneasily, “Um, I would; I mean, it’s pretty obvious that Ollie has moved on with Laurel, but the truth is I can’t. Not right now.”

“Why not?” McKenna asked, not offended, merely curious.

“Felicity,” he said simply. “If I want to keep her with me then I have to give up the partying, the drinking; everything, and I can’t be around it either.”

Her eyebrows drew together in consternation, “You know Tommy, yeah, I drink and have done a little partying but I was never a fiend about it if that’s what you’re worried about. Even then, I’d never do that stuff in front of a kid, I swear.”

“Yeah, I know,” he hastened to explain. “I’m not trying to insult you; what I meant to say was that most of my days and nights from now until graduation are going to be spent at home with her,” he said carefully. “I’m not going to be available for dates or parties, and I know you’re not going to want to hang out at my place watching old musicals and drinking hot cocoa with us when you could be out having fun. I’m just—I’m just trying to be honest here. I’m really sorry if I led you on or offended you.”

“No, I get it,” she nodded, her expression relaxing. “To be honest though, the partying has been getting kind of old so…”

He looked at her in surprise, “Really?”

“Yeah, and I happen to like old musicals and cocoa, plus Felicity’s a great kid…”

“Yeah?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” she smiled.
He looked between her and Felicity and his face fell slightly, “The thing is, I would love to be friends with you McKenna, but right now, with everything on my plate between her and getting into college, I can’t really afford more than that.” He took a deep breath and gave her a wary look, “But if you’d like to hang out with us, be our friend; my friend, I’d like that, but I’ll understand if you want to tell me to go to hell. I’ll even pay your cab fare if you want to go home,” he said, already reaching for his wallet.

“Put it away, Merlyn,” she said giving him a playful slap on the arm. “I don’t need cab fare and I would love to be ‘just friends’.”

“You sure?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes, but only if I still get to hang out on the couch with you guys watching old movies and drinking cocoa.” She leveled a stern finger at him, “And there better be marshmallows or I will be way pissed. And not the little hard ones that come in the instant powder mix; the great big ones or the fluff in the jar, either one of those will do and the cocoa better be everything you promised and more.”

“I think we can arrange that,” he said in relief. Taking a chance, he asked, “So what are you doing later tonight?”

“Why; what do you have in mind?” she asked playfully.

“Well, after this we’re going to the party store so Felicity can plan a big cookout for my birthday this weekend…”

“I do love a party,” she grinned.

“And then lunch,” he told her. “I have to warn you there will probably be vegetables involved and Felicity hates pizza so expect healthy crap.”

“I can deal with that,” she nodded gravely.

“Then later, dinner in the kitchen with Mrs. McGregor while she and Felicity gossip about their favorite soap operas…”

“Oh please tell me it’s Passions,” she said with feigned awe. “That show is my jam.”

“Then later we get to sit around the TV room drinking the aforementioned cocoa with the big marshmallows while watching Gigi,” he finished.

“Damn, Tommy,” she breathed, her lips quirking up playfully. “Gigi? Talk about a panty dropper.”

“So are you in?” he asked, spreading his palms as he held his arms out to the side.

“I am *so* in,” she assured him.

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For the rest of the day they were like the Three Musketeers. The three of them spent the morning in the furniture store, giggling and laughing as they tried out all the different mattresses, both Felicity and McKenna quickly nixing his suggestion of a waterbed…

“But it’s waveless, see? Says so on the tag,” he protested. “And I always wanted a waterbed.”

“No,” they both said as one.
…before he finally settled on a very soft and thickly pillow-topped queen-sized mattress similar to Felicity’s. Afterward, they went for Chinese food (where he was forced to eat broccoli against his will), then to the party store where the two girls huddled together in order to conspire about something he suspected would not end well, at least not for him.

By the end of the night, Felicity laid sprawled between them, her feet in McKenna’s lap and her head in his as he played absently with her curls while they watched the credits roll on the screen.

“I love that movie,” McKenna said sniffling happily.

“Can I ask you something?” Tommy asked quietly, “Gigi?”

“Yeah?”

“So she was a hooker, right?” McKenna slapped him playfully on the arm and he winced, “What? She was, right?”

“No!” she said gruffly, careful not to wake the sleeping girl between them.

“So what was she then?” he asked, honestly confused.

“She was a courtesan.”

“How is that not a hooker because I’m starting to wonder if I should’ve let Felicity even watch this movie in the first place.”

“A courtesan isn’t a hooker,” she snorted. “She’s a…I don’t know, a professional mistress.”

“How is that not a hooker?” he repeated.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she scowled at him, “The point is that it was a good movie,” she told him. “Especially the last part when Gaston finally realizes that Gigi isn’t the girl he thought of as a little sister but that he’s fallen in love with her…”

“Yeah, that was weird,” he muttered under his breath.

“…and then he asks her to be his mistress but she turns him down only to take him back!” McKenna sighed, “Oh! And then at the dinner at Maxim's when Gaston gets mad because he realizes he doesn’t just want her to be his mistress, but that he really has feelings for her, so he takes her home and wanders the streets all torn up about it before racing back to Mamita's so he can ask for Gigi's hand in marriage!” she squealed in delight.

“This is really sad, you know that right?” he asked her. “You said you wanted to be a cop.”

“I do, you jerk!” she said, punching him in the arm again.

“What kind of cop swoons over a pervy guy hooking up with a girl he’s known since she was twelve?” he snorted as he rubbed his arm with a wince.

“It’s a good movie,” she insisted. “Even you were smiling in the last scene when they were married and riding in the carriage through the park.”

“What can I say? She looked hot,” he joked.

“Ah, you suck,” she told him.
“Is the movie over?” Felicity asked sleepily.

“Yup,” he told her as he helped her sit up. “You ready to go to bed, Sunshine?”

She yawned and nodded.

“Go on upstairs and I’ll be up after I walk McKenna to her car,” he said, dropping a kiss on the top of her hair.

She nodded then turned to the other woman, flinging her arms around her neck in a hug, “Thanks, McKenna; are you coming back tomorrow to help finish planning the party?”

“I can,” she said, looking between them, “I mean, if you guys don’t mind me hanging out with you again?”

“No, that’s cool,” Tommy shrugged.

“Yeah,” Felicity grinned sleepily and hugged her again. “Night.”

“Night night,” McKenna said, hugging her back.

“Hey, don’t forget to brush your teeth,” Tommy told her as she headed for the stairs.

Felicity narrowed her eyes at him, “I’m not the one who has to be reminded about basic hygiene around here, remember? ‘Oh, that sound was just the house settling,’ my butt!”

McKenna snickered as Tommy flushed scarlet, “Yeah, well, it’s an old house,” he muttered. “Anyway, just—I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Right…” Felicity said broadly as she ascended the staircase.

“C’mon hero; walk me to my car so the boogie man doesn’t get me,” McKenna said smacking his arm again as she got up and moved past him.

“Ow,” he complained, rubbing his arm as he trailed after her, “I think you left a bruise that time.”

“Don’t be a wuss!” she laughed.

“I’m not a wuss,” he grumbled. “You’re just freakishly strong.”

When they got to her car outside she smiled at him, “I had a really great time tonight, Tommy.”

“I’m glad,” he said stuffing his hands in his khakis and shifting his weight nervously.

“Hey, stop acting so bashful,” she teased. “It’s not like I expect you to kiss me or anything, remember? I told you, I’m good with just being friends.”

He offered her a grateful smile, relaxing slightly before his eyebrows drew together in a pensive expression, “Hey, there’s something I should tell you real quick.”

“What?” she asked, her smile fading slightly as she looked at him in concern.

“Well, if we’re going to be friends, and I do really want to be friends, then I need to be honest about something.” Tommy took a deep centering breath, “All of this was Felicity’s idea; you know, inviting you over tonight and stuff.”
She shrugged, unconcerned, “Yeah, I know; you told me, remember?”

“No, see…” He paused, “Okay, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but—“

“You invited me over to make Laurel jealous,” she finished for him.

“Kind of, yeah…” he said, looking at her cautiously.

Her eyes twinkled with mischief, “I know. Felicity told me the whole plan when we went to the bathroom together at the restaurant.”

“She did?”

McKenna nodded.

“So you already knew?”

“Yeah, I mean it wasn’t hard to figure out,” she said with a dismissive gesture.

“We weren’t trying to use you or anything—“ he said quickly.

“I know,” she said dryly. “I already went through all of that with Felicity.”

“And we’re still cool?” he asked in surprise.

“More than cool,” she assured him. “In fact, I have a confession of my own to make.”

“What is it?” Tommy asked.

“Well, actually, Felicity sort of called me on the carpet for this already…” she took a deep breath and bit her lip nervously. “She’s actually kind of an intimidating little thing when she gets loud, you know?”

Tommy’s brow furrowed once again in confusion, “Felicity got loud with you? What did she say?”

She grimaced, “Well, when we got to the ladies room she locked the door and said we needed to talk then basically let me know everything that happened that night. Of course, I imagine you gave her the G-rated version, but I’d already heard the triple ‘X’ one from Laurel—“

“Yeah, that’s something a guy wants to hear,” he muttered.

“Anyway, she called me out on the little power play Laurel put me and Sara up to last week at school.”

“She was right about that?” he asked in surprise.

“That Laurel asked us to bring up the fact that she and Ollie had a thing in front of you guys? Yeah,” she confirmed. “Even though it kind of backfired on her. She wanted to make Ollie jealous and hoped you guys would start arguing over her, but you didn’t fall for the bait.”

“She wanted us to fight over her?” he repeated slowly.

She flushed again, “Pretty stupid, huh? I didn’t want to do it but she was pretty desperate to get Ollie’s attention at that point. She also called me out on the fact that Laurel was going to pump me for information later.”
“What?” he frowned, “Why would Laurel do that? She already has Ollie and I haven’t spoken to him since the night it happened; he’s been avoiding me and, frankly, I haven’t exactly been calling him either.”

“God, how is it I didn’t grab onto you when I had the chance?” she muttered in exasperation. “Tommy, she’s not looking for information on Ollie; she wants to know about you and how you feel about her.”

“Why?” he asked, taken aback.

“Look, Laurel is my friend, okay? I love her but, even though she looks really together most of the time, the truth is her ego is really fragile,” she told him. “I mean, she looks so strong and confident but, half the time, she’s two seconds from an all-out panic attack or a crying jag and she takes whatever kind of emotional reassurance she can even if it sometimes comes at someone else’s expense.” She leaned against her little Miata and crossed her arms over her chest as she looked at him apologetically, “I’m not saying it’s right, but she’s usually not like this. Not this bad, I mean; she can be, but it’s never gone this far before…”

He shook his head, “What are you talking about?”

She cleared her throat, “Listen, I know I said this already but she’s my friend and that’s the only reason I even agreed to this in the first place but I honestly---!”

He cut her off, “Just tell me.”

She nodded and took another centering breath, “Okay, so things didn’t go so well with Oliver after you left.”

He blinked, “They didn’t?”

“No,” she said ruefully. “After you walked in on them Ollie got dressed and took off without so much as saying a word to her and he hasn’t even called her back.”

He leaned back onto the car, stunned, “What?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “So Laurel has been a total wreck. I mean, this is the second time they’ve had sex where he didn’t even bother to call her afterwards—“

He turned to her in confusion, “Wait, that wasn’t the first time they hooked up?”

Her eyebrows rose towards her hairline, “No; Ollie didn’t tell you?”

“No,” he said quietly as he let that sink in.

“To be fair they were both pretty wasted that night,” she shrugged.

“But Laurel doesn’t drink,” he told her.

“Oh yes she does,” she said wide-eyed. “She might not do it where people can see her doing it but, like I said, Laurel has issues, okay? I mean, she’s not an alcoholic, but she doesn’t like people seeing her out of control. Anyway, they hooked up and then she tried to get him to talk to her, kept showing up at different parties and hanging out with him, but he acted like nothing ever happened. I don’t know if he genuinely forgot, or if he was playing her, but after he left she was devastated.”

“I…” he looked at her helplessly, “I mean, I’m sorry Ollie was an asshole but why are you telling me
this? What does any of that have to do with me?”

She turned to rest her elbows on the car roof and folded her arms in front of her, “The thing is, when Laurel’s pride gets hurt she starts looking for affirmation wherever she can find it. Something goes wrong and the next thing you know she’s trying out for head cheerleader or going for the highest SAT scores; anything to reassure herself she’s still got it. So tonight…” she swallowed.

“What?” He prompted her again.

“She wanted me to come over to see how devastated you were by her hooking up with Ollie,” she said shamefacedly.

“Oh,” he said quietly.

“She’s not a bad person,” McKenna hastened to add. “I’d like to think that I’m not either, but I’d understand if you wanted me to stay away from here on out.”

“So what are you planning on telling her?” he asked instead of answering her right away.

“What should I tell her?” she asked carefully. “I mean, to be honest, she’s so mad at Ollie right now that if you really wanted to get with her she’d probably say yes, especially if she thought you still had those kinds of feelings for her.”

He thought about that, he really did. He forced himself not to react, to instead roll that around in his head until he was ready to answer her.

“You want to know the truth?” he asked her at last.

“Yeah,” she said guardedly.

“I really don’t care,” he said smiling slightly, a feeling of relief rising from his chest. “And I’m not saying that because I’m mad, even though I probably should be, but I wasn’t lying earlier when I said that, aside from Felicity, nothing else really matters to me. I don’t have time to play games right now and, even if I did, as big of a fuck up as Ollie can be, he’s still my brother. I don’t know why he did what he did, but I’m just not willing to go there. Not anymore.”

“So you’ve moved on?” she asked, her dark eyes assessing him carefully.

“Truthfully?” Tommy shrugged, “I moved on about twenty minutes after it happened.”

“Yeah, you told me; Felicity,” she said with a grin.

“Felicity,” he nodded. “I guess it wasn’t true love after all,” he sighed. “Hey, you know what? Tell Laurel whatever you think she needs to hear, okay? I’m not mad at her but, at the same time, I only have room in my life for one person and that’s Felicity. I get that she’s feeling vulnerable and things are hard for her, but I just can’t deal with that. I honestly hope she and Ollie get it together and that we can someday all be friends again but, like I told you, my partying days of wild sex and teenage angst are over.”

“Okay, then that’s what I’ll tell her,” she nodded. “What about us? Are we still good?”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I mean, I can’t exactly be mad at you for that. You were honest at least.”

“Ditto,” she told him.

He nodded in acceptance, “Anyway, Felicity likes you; I like you, and she feels comfortable around
you so, if you want to come back and hang out, you’re more than welcome to.”

“I’d like that,” she agreed quietly.

“One thing though,” he said meeting her gaze steadily, “After you tell Laurel what you need to tell her, I don’t want to hear anything else about her and Ollie’s relationship and I don’t want you telling her or anybody else about me and Felicity. I’d love to be friends but I don’t want to expose Felicity to any more of this bullshit than I have to, okay?”

“Agreed,” she told him. “In fact, I’m probably going to be putting a little space between me and Laurel as well.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“No,” she stopped him. “This was my decision and it’s been a long time coming. The truth is, seeing you today with Felicity…” she expelled a rough breath, “I mean, a month ago—hell, a couple of weeks ago you were the Wizard of Weed and I was doing a strip tease on Brandon’s bar on a dare, and now you’re like a real grown up.” She gave him a rueful look, “No offense, but the day Tommy Merlyn gets his shit straight and starts acting like a responsible adult, that’s the day I need to start reassessing a few things in my own life and I am so over this back and forth ‘Do you like me? Check yes or no’ middle school crap; seriously.”

“Okay then,” he said with an easygoing grin.

“Also, Felicity told me her plan for Ollie and Laurel and frankly, at this point, they deserve each other,” she said flatly. He laughed at that and her lips curled upwards in a mischievous grin, “Still friends?” she asked, holding out her hand.

“Still friends,” he agreed, shaking it warmly.

McKenna leaned in and dropped a soft kiss on his lips before winking at him, “See you tomorrow, Tommy Merlyn,” she said as she got into her car, chuckling at the stunned expression on his face.

“Uh, bye,” he swallowed as he stepped back so she could pull away.

“And Tommy?” she called out, rolling down her window.

“Yeah?”

She smiled at him, “You’re going to do great.”

“Thanks,” he said, feeling the warmth invade his chest as he watched her little white car disappear down the drive.

After Tommy took a quick shower and put on a pair of flannel lounge pants he slipped into Felicity’s room to go to sleep. His new mattress was supposed to be delivered along with the rest of the furniture they’d ordered after consulting with the in-house decorator. Rather than going with the lady who did Felicity’s room, they decided to just go with him because it was just easier and Felicity liked the guy. Plus he really paid attention to what she had to say even though she was just a kid and that was enough for him. He went ahead and confirmed it all with Mrs. McGregor who didn’t have a problem with it (in fact, she was actually a little relieved because she apparently thought the decorator Malcolm normally used was ‘too snooty’), let the store know to charge everything to Malcolm since he already had a corporate account there, and they said they’d come by the next
morning with paint chips for all of them to look over. Until then, they decided to keep using her room.

He slipped in bed beside her and she immediately stirred, her body pressing against his as she buried her nose in the hollow of his shoulder.

“Hey, Sunshine?” he murmured quietly, his arm pulling her close.

“MMMF?” she grunted.

“There’s something I need to tell you only I’m not sure if I should.”

“What?” she mumbled.

“It’s about your school in Gotham.”

She opened one eye and looked at him blearily as she lifted her head from his chest, “What about it?”

He gathered his courage before speaking, “I asked Malcolm to take you out of your school and enroll you with me at Starling Prep instead.”

“What?” Felicity blinked in surprise.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I thought you could live here in Starling with me from now on.”

She sat up suddenly, “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s…” Her eyes went huge, “awesome!”

“Okay, but there’s a catch,” he warned her.

“What?” she asked eagerly.

“The deal I made with Malcolm is that in order for you to stay I can’t screw up,” he told her. “In fact, he specifically told me not to tell you so if I did screw up your feelings wouldn’t get hurt.”

“You won’t screw up, I won’t let you!” she said excitedly.

“I don’t know about that,” he said carding his fingers through his still damp hair nervously. “Usually if there’s a way to mess something up I’m pretty good at finding it.” He looked her in the eye and breathed out slowly, “Felicity, I don’t want to hurt you, but if I screw up…”

“You aren’t going to screw up,” she said firmly. “And, if you do, we’ll fix it.”

“What if we can’t?” he asked her, the fear gnawing at the lining of his stomach.

“Look, if I have to go back then that’s okay, too,” she said placing her small cool hand against his cheek. “I’m just happy you even asked because it means you really do like me.”

“Of course I really like you,” he frowned, moving her hand from his face so he could warm it in his.

“No, I mean you like me enough to want me to live with you, like for always,” she said with a beaming grin. “You like me enough to give me a real home.”
“This was always your real home,” he said firmly.

She threw her arms around him and squeezed him tight, “I love you, Tommy.”

He smiled and hugged her back, his nose buried in her riotous curls, “I love you, too, Sunshine.”

They sat there for several long seconds just holding each other before she pulled away slightly, “Did McKenna talk to you about what I told her at the restaurant during lunch?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you mad?”

“Why would I be mad?” he asked in confusion.

“Because I told her our whole plan before asking you first?”

“No,” he said easily. He arched his eyebrow thoughtfully, “Actually I’m glad you told her because it made me reassess a few things about me, Laurel, and Ollie. I think I’m going to call him tomorrow and let him know I’m fine with him being with Laurel and that we’re still bros.”

She frowned, “But we’re still totally going to mess with their heads and get revenge, right?”

“Of course, that’s a given,” he assured her.

She grinned then settled into his side once more.

“I love you, Tommy; goodnight.”

“Night night, Sunshine. I love you, too.”
This chapter is dedicated to Eilowyn because she asked for it.
The sun never stops shining, sometimes you just have to look beyond the clouds to see it.

Everybody wants happiness, Nobody wants pain. But you can’t have a rainbow without a little rain.
Chapter Six: Sunshine After the Rain

Tommy scowled at the small television on the kitchen counter, “I don’t like that Julian guy. There’s something really off about him; like a ‘creepy dude who hangs out in a van in front of a playground’ kind of off.”

“Shh!” the three women hissed at him.

“Seriously though, he’s got this whole ‘Norman Bates’ vibe going on,” he said, gesturing towards the screen. “Like, any minute now, he’s going to start sucking his thumb while talking about what people taste like because he ate a baby for lunch or something.”

“I’m with you, man,” Brandon said shaking his head. “That dude has major creep factor.” He tilted his head slightly, “Actually he kind of reminds me of my dad.”

McKenna sighed in exasperation, “Of course he’s creepy, he’s the son of the frickin’ devil!”

“Aye, the lassie is right; that Julian is th’ spawn o’ th’ de’il his-self! ’N’ ah will tell ye another thing, that faither o’ his is even worse!” Mrs. Mack said before crossing herself hastily, “Baith o’ thaim wur sent fae th’ gey bowels o’ hell!”

“They’re gay?” Brandon asked dumbly. “I thought he was hooking up with the black doctor chick?”

“They’re not gay!” McKenna snorted.

“But Mrs. McGregor just said they were gay,” he said with a frown.

“‘Gey’!” The older woman said with a frown, “As in ‘very’!” She shook her head and looked to Felicity, “Whit cannae th’ young folk nowadays ken plain, simple speakin’?” She huffed, “You’d think ah wis talking in a foreign leid or something.”

Felicity looked to Tommy who just shrugged. She took a breath, “I don’t know?”
She scowled and nodded sharply at that, “A dinnae ken either bit tis enough tae drive a body barmy! Ye young fowk wi’ yer texting ‘n’ fiddling aboot wi’ yer phones. It gets sae frustration wi’ they pure weird letter wurds ye fowk seem tae juist mak’ up wi’oot rhyme or reason!” She harrumphed, folding her arms under her generous bosom, “Some days it mak’s me wantae forgoat mah guid Christian ways, it does!”

“Me, too?” Felicity said after a moment’s silent consultation with Tommy.

She made another triumphant huff, “Aye, ye’r a guid lassie, Felicity. Wise beyond yer years!” She turned a steely eye towards both Brandon and Tommy, “Ye mak’ note o’ this yin; Felicity kin ainlie be a bawherr o’ a wee thing bit she’s git a guid heid oan her shoulders!”

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” Tommy said uncertainly.

She then looked at Brandon pointedly. The other boy swallowed, “Um, yeah? Uh, yes…ma’am?” he said, glancing at Tommy helplessly.

“Aye,” she said smugly. “’N’ that goes fur McKenna, tae!” She gave the girl beside her an approving look. “Ye’v git a sound heid oan yer shoulders ‘n’ thae wee jimmys wid dae weel tae pay attention ‘n’ follow th’ braw example ye set fur thaim ‘n’ nae win’ up lik’ th’ fowk oan th’ tellybox wha gang gallavanting aboot ‘n’ getting intae a’ kinds o’ devilish mischief a’ th’ time.” She grimaced and muttered, “If mah ain son, Jamie, weren’t sae stuck oan that jezebel burd o’ his, a’d speil matchmaker atween th’ twa o’ ye in a heartbeat. He needs a guid lassie lik’ ye ‘n’ nae some trollop lik’ that Siobhan wi’ her put upon airs ‘n’ hussy ways.”

“Thank you, ma’am?” McKenna said after a moment’s hesitation.

Tommy’s eyebrows drew together in frustration as he gestured towards the television again, “And how is it that TC guy can’t see through that Liz chick? What is he; an idiot? I mean, how freaking obvious is it that she’s using him?” He turned to see Felicity, McKenna, and Brandon all giving him pointed looks, “What?”

“Nothing, man; just watching this freaky soap opera, that’s all,” Brandon said, looking back at the TV and away from him.

“I didn’t say a word,” McKenna said with a snort.

“Seriously, what?” he asked.

“I’m not saying a word,” McKenna said shaking her head.

“Me neither,” Brandon agreed.

He looked to Felicity, “What am I missing here?”

“What you’re missing here is that you’re the idiot,” she said flatly before turning back to watch the soap that had them all enthralled.

“I’m not an idiot,” he said, taken aback.

She looked at him, “Liz…Laurel,” she lifted her brow tellingly.

He paused, “Gotcha.” He looked from the television to her again, “You also might’ve had a point about the daytime television thing, too.”
“Told you so,” she smirked. “Just wait until Dr. Phil comes on. Trust me; it’s like Jerry Springer if Jerry had a degree in psychology and a Texas accent.”

“I love Dr. Phil,” McKenna sighed. “Those people make my relatives look normal.” She wrinkled her nose slightly as another character came on screen, “Ugh, Ethan; that guy is such a douche.”

“He looks like a douche,” Tommy agreed.

“Actually, he reminds me of Ollie a little,” Brandon said, fixing the screen with a critical eye.

“Which is why he’s a douche,” McKenna told him, ignoring the look Tommy was tossing her way.

“He’s got way better hair though,” Felicity added helpfully.

“Yeah, no dead shih zhus on him, huh?” McKenna snickered.

“Plus, he’s a right fit wi’ a crakin’ round bahookie,” Mrs. Mack said as she ran a glittering eye over the man’s form.

“Ah, I hate that I understood that,” Tommy mumbled, shutting his eyes in disgust. “That’s not going to leave my brain any time soon.”

“I like his butt, too,” Felicity agreed. “I like the way he wears his khakis all tight and stuff.”

“What? Stop looking at his pants!” Tommy growled as he opened his eyes to glare at her, “You’re too young to be noticing that….stuff!”

“No, I’m not,” Felicity said, still smiling dreamily at the screen.

“Me, neither,” Mrs. Mack agreed with a wicked grin.

“I bet you could bounce a quarter off of those abs…and the rest of his parts, too,” McKenna said, giving him the once over as well.

“A’d gie up a bawherr o’ coin fur that,” Mrs. Mack said with a bawdy wink as she elbowed the girl beside her.

“Gross,” Tommy said in disgust. He looked to Brandon, “Can you believe them?”

“Women,” he snorted before giving the actor a second look, “He is a snappy dresser though, huh? I bet I could totally rock that look,” the other man mused appreciatively, ignoring the dirty look Tommy was directing towards him.

“You people make me sick,” he said flatly.

It was the day after their trip to the furniture store and he and Felicity had just woken up and were heading down to breakfast when the doorbell rang.

“She’s got way better hair though,” Felicity added helpfully.

“Yeah, no dead shih zhus on him, huh?” McKenna snickered.

“Plus, he’s a right fit wi’ a crakin’ round bahookie,” Mrs. Mack said as she ran a glittering eye over the man’s form.

“Ah, I hate that I understood that,” Tommy mumbled, shutting his eyes in disgust. “That’s not going to leave my brain any time soon.”

“I like his butt, too,” Felicity agreed. “I like the way he wears his khakis all tight and stuff.”

“What? Stop looking at his pants!” Tommy growled as he opened his eyes to glare at her, “You’re too young to be noticing that….stuff!”

“No, I’m not,” Felicity said, still smiling dreamily at the screen.

“Me, neither,” Mrs. Mack agreed with a wicked grin.

“I bet you could bounce a quarter off of those abs…and the rest of his parts, too,” McKenna said, giving him the once over as well.

“A’d gie up a bawherr o’ coin fur that,” Mrs. Mack said with a bawdy wink as she elbowed the girl beside her.

“Gross,” Tommy said in disgust. He looked to Brandon, “Can you believe them?”

“Women,” he snorted before giving the actor a second look, “He is a snappy dresser though, huh? I bet I could totally rock that look,” the other man mused appreciatively, ignoring the dirty look Tommy was directing towards him.

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It was the day after their trip to the furniture store and he and Felicity had just woken up and were heading down to breakfast when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it!” he called out to Mrs. Mack. “It’s probably just McKenna!”

“Na yelling in th’ hoose, Tommy Merlyn; we’re civilzed fowk ‘ere!” she shouted back from the kitchen, “An’ a’ ask her howfur she wants her eggs!”

He and Felicity exchanged grins and shrugged before both heading to the door.
“Hey, Mrs. McGregor wants to know how you want your eggs?” Tommy said as he opened the door…

…only to find Brandon leaning against the doorframe, his chin sporting several days of beard growth and his dark sunglasses hiding what were undoubtedly bloodshot eyes given the smell of liquor and pot that seemed to hover around him like cologne.

Brandon ran his hand through his already artfully disheveled hair and shrugged, “Anyway is fine by me as long as it’s scrambled.” He looked down at a gaping Felicity with a raised eyebrow, “Who’s the runt?”

“Who’re you?” Felicity shot back.

“Felicity, go wait for me in the kitchen,” Tommy said, eyeing Brandon warily.

“Why?” she asked with a frown.

“Just go,” he said in a firm tone. “Now.”

She looked at him like she was going to argue, but something in his expression must have told her that this was one time he was putting his foot down. Instead, she just shot the intruder one last curious look before silently nodding and doing as she was told.

Tommy walked outside, shutting the door behind him before eyeing his friend carefully, “What are you doing here?”

Brandon stepped back, “I figured I’d swing by and check on you since you haven’t been around for a while. Is something wrong, man?” he asked in confusion.

“No, it’s just that I was expecting someone else, that’s all,” he said easily.

“Oh,” he said, looking from Tommy to the door then back again, “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“No, man; I’m not,” Tommy said without rancor.

“Seriously?” he laughed.

Tommy nodded.

The other man’s face fell at that. “Are you mad at me or something?” Brandon asked with a hint of hurt.

“Naw, bro, I’m not mad at you, I just can’t invite you in,” he said in a quiet but firm tone.

“Why not?” he asked, removing his dark sunglasses and blinking against the harsh morning light as it hit his irritated eyes.

“Because you’re wasted, that’s why,” he told him.

“I’m not wasted,” he denied immediately. “I’m still a little buzzed but I’m good. Besides, why do you care if I’m a little hung over? It’s not like I’m planning on puking in the petunias or whatever.”

Tommy started to answer him but became distracted as McKenna’s little white Miata pulled up in front of the house behind Brandon’s Jag, the brand new fire engine red XKR convertible looking like everything the much older Mazda was desperately trying to be and more. She turned off the engine and got out of the car, her eyes immediately catching sight of Brandon as she jogged up the.
steps, “What’s he doing here?” she asked, her nose wrinkling slightly as the smell of liquor and weed hit her nostrils. She turned to glare at Tommy, “Tell me you didn’t let Felicity--?”

“No,” he said immediately, “In fact, Brandon was just leaving.”

“What? Why?” Brandon asked looking between the two of them and not even bothering to hide the hurt in his eyes, “What did I do?”

“You showed up here drunk and high, you dumbass,” McKenna said throwing him a disapproving look.

“I’m not high!” he insisted.

“Bullshit, you reek!” She told him.

“So? Like the two of you never came home a little partied out before?” he snorted.

“Not around Felicity, we didn’t,” she said, crossing her arms.

“You mean that kid?” he asked, hitching his thumb towards the door. “Who is she anyway? What, the housekeeper’s grandkid or something?” He shrugged, “Just send her away; what’s the big deal?”

“She’s not the housekeeper’s granddaughter, she’s Tommy’s…” McKenna paused, “She’s Tommy’s,” she said at last.

“She’s Tommy’s?” Brandon repeated slowly. “Tommy’s what? Kid?”

“Yeah,” McKenna said with a hard look towards the other man, “She’s Tommy’s kid; right Tommy?”

“Sort of,” he said reluctantly. “Well, no, but…for now, yeah. I mean…” he wavered, “Okay, yeah, she’s my kid, okay? Kind of,” he added. “…but, you know, just…” He sighed, “Felicity’s mine, okay? That’s all you need to know and I can’t have this around her so you can’t be here.”

Brandon snorted, “Unless you got started in elementary school, dude, you might want to get a paternity test because that ain’t your kid.”

“She’s not--” he grimaced, “She’s not my kid but I am responsible for her and you can’t be here, not like this, I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” he said, his eyes softening as his smile dropped, “Um, like I said, I just wanted to come by and make sure you were okay after the other night. I figured you might want to talk or something, that’s all. I’m just trying to be a stand-up bro and maybe help Ollie out a little; help clear the way for him to come and apologize in person.” Brandon shifted his weight and glanced away for a second, “He came by the party last night looking for you, but you didn’t show so he asked me if I wouldn’t mind extending the ‘Ollie’ branch, so to speak…”

Tommy closed his eyes for a second before turning to McKenna with an apologetic look, “Hey, can you go in and sit with Felicity for a while; make sure she doesn’t come out here?” Brandon’s frown deepened further at that, but he remained quiet, his eyes darting warily between them as he shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his rumpled chinos.

“Yeah,” she said, sparing Brandon one last look of disapproval before heading inside.

Brandon waited until she shut the door behind her before speaking, “I mean, I get that showing up a
little fucked up from partying all night was kind of uncool but if you’re not pissed over it then why’s McKenna?” he asked with a frown. “Unless, of course, you are pissed at me?”

“I’m not pissed.”

“Then why’s McKenna being such a bitch?” he asked bluntly. “Also, why the hell is she even here? Since when are you doing her? What; is it a revenge fuck or something? You’re screwing Laurel’s best friend so she knows you’re over her?”

“First off, she’s not being a bitch and we’re not ‘screwing’ each other,” Tommy told him, his irritation with the other man beginning to boil up to the surface, “Secondly, I could give a shit about Laurel or what she thinks. McKenna’s upset with you being here because she’s my friend and she’s worried that Felicity will see you like this and that can’t happen so, I’m sorry man, but you need to go and don’t come back, okay?”

The other man’s jaw dropped at that, “Seriously? Like don’t come back until I clean up a little or ever?”

Tommy took a deep breath, steeling himself as he said what he knew he had to, “I’m sorry man, I like you, I do, but if I want to keep Felicity I have to cut some people out of my life and, unfortunately, you’re one of them.”

“What? Why?” he asked, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion and hurt. “I can see how you’d be pissed at Ollie, but why me? Tommy, man, we’re friends—best friends! It’s always been me, you, and Ollie!” He swallowed and fidgeted once more, “Is this because of him and Laurel hooking up at my party? Because, man, I had nothing to do with what went down that night, I swear! Laurel just walked right up to Ollie and they practically started fucking right then and there. I tried to find you, head you off at the pass, but—!”

“Naw, man, it’s not about that shit,” he said cutting him off with a sorrowful look.

“Is it because he asked me to come talk to you? Because, I’m just trying to do him a solid here, so don’t kill the messenger,” he told him. “Honestly man, I’m just delivering a gesture of good will between two friends who happen to be going through a rough patch but, beyond that, I’m not taking sides. And,“ he paused dramatically, “if I was to take sides in this shit, I’d be on your side, believe me! I even told Ollie that was a fucked up move, swear to God; you can ask him!” He shrugged, “If, you know, you were talking to him, which you aren’t, so you can’t…but I totally did say that; I swear.”

“It’s not about Ollie, or Laurel, or you taking sides,” he said wearily.

“What then?” he asked quietly.

Tommy swallowed. Damn, this was harder than he thought it would be.

Brandon stood there, his expression wide open and as close to tears as he’d ever seen him. He’d always been the most sensitive of the three, the most vulnerable, always hiding his pain behind a smile and a party, but he and Ollie both knew just how much of a raw nerve Brandon was. In their world, you either learned to develop a thick skin or you crashed and burned and Brandon was a train wreck in the making.

Everybody knew that Brandon was living on borrowed time. It was like there was a countdown in big neon numbers flashing above his head and, any minute now, there would be an obituary in the Starling Herald saying yet another rich kid bit the dust. Every year he got just a little more reckless,
the drinking got just a little more out of hand, and the drugs got a hell of a lot harder.

They all drank and did their fair share of drugs, of course; alcohol being the least of it. Most of their friend’s parents were either functioning alcoholics themselves or too busy to notice, so no one really cared. In fact, the only ones whose parents hadn’t been to rehab at least once for a, quote, ‘well-needed rest due to exhaustion’, were his and Ollie’s. Of course, *they* still fell into the ‘absentee’ column and, up until recently, none of them ever said boo about the fact that their kids had been getting wasted regularly since they turned fourteen either. Brandon though, Brandon was out of control with that shit and had been for a while. In fact, this was the closest to sober he’d seen him in months and that was saying something.

But, as much as he cared about the guy, Felicity had to come first.

“I love you, man; I do, but the drugs are getting to be too much,” he said honestly. “I’ve got too much on my plate so I gotta cut you loose; sorry.”

He snorted again and looked at him askance, “‘The drugs are getting to be too much?’” Brandon shook his head, “I can’t believe that you; the Wizard of Weed, is giving me this Narcotics Anonymous After School Special bullshit? Like just a couple of weeks ago you weren’t sitting in the middle of my living room giving a lecture on how to roll a goddamn blunt the right way! Shit, man; you smoke more green than Snoop Dog!”

He nodded, “Yeah, okay, I’ll admit that I smoked—a lot, but I quit the minute Felicity came to live here,” he told him.

He snorted, “When was that? Because that little weed seminar was less than two weeks ago!”

“So you’ve been clean and sober for all of two weeks and all of the sudden I’m some kind of degenerate junkie who isn’t fit to even associate with anymore?” he asked accusingly.

Okay, now he was beginning to get a little fed up. He felt bad about doing it, he did, but he was tired of going the long way around everything and his breakfast was getting cold, so fuck it.

“First of all, you’ve been a degenerate junkie for a hell of a lot longer than two weeks, Brandon; we were all just too damn lost in our own shit to tell you,” he said bluntly. “Second, yeah; I may have only been on the wagon for two weeks, but that’s plenty long enough for me to see what’s wrong with my life and this,” he gestured towards his rumpled and disheveled state, “I just don’t want to live like that anymore.”

“Live like what?” he asked him.

“Look at yourself,” Tommy told him. “I love you brother, but goddamn!” Brandon glanced down and straightened his clothes uncomfortably as he spoke, “I walked into that party the other night right before I caught Ollie and Laurel and….shit,” he shook his head in disgust, “And what’s worse is the fact that you and Ollie can’t see it because you’re both in it! I mean, look at you, you’re a…”

His jaw tightened, “A what?”

“You know what?” he said instead, “I don’t want to do this, man, so just go.”

“No, I want to know what you really think about me,” he scowled, “I want to hear how you’re so much better than me and Ollie just because of some kid I’ve never even seen before!”
“It’s not just about her.”

“No?”

“No, it’s because I don’t want to wind up OD’d and dead in a ditch somewhere, man!” he said, finally losing his patience. “Look in the goddamn mirror, Brandon! You’re a fucking mess!” The other man stumbled back, his face blanching at the vehemence in his voice but still he continued, “ Seriously, people at school make jokes about how long it’ll be before you turn up as a bloated corpse floating in somebody’s pool!”

“Why are you saying this crap? What— I thought we were friends, Tommy!” Brandon stuttered, his face a mask of pain.

“We are friends, that’s why I’m saying it!” he told him, shaking his head in disgust. “If I wasn’t your friend I’d just shut the hell up and let you keep killing yourself, but I’m not that guy; not anymore. Look around, open your goddamn eyes and really look,” he pointed towards the gleaming red convertible, “That’s your third car this year, man; your third fucking car in less than six months and you show up here smelling like you’re soaking in scotch and reeking of weed and, what’s worse, you drove.” He took a centering breath and advanced on him, causing the other man to look at him in confusion, “Brandon, bro, one of these days you’re going to drive yourself off a cliff or into a tree, or OD and, hey, if that’s what you want to do, if you want to die, that’s fine. It’s your life, right? Live hard, rock and roll, and leave a pretty corpse; what the fuck, right? But what happens when you go barreling down the road and hit some kid or sideswipe some suburban mom’s minivan when she’s taking her kids to daycare, huh? What then? You think your dad is gonna be able to buy your way out of that one?” he paused and watched as the man paled before answering his own question, “Well, guess again, buddy, because we both know Jack doesn’t give two shits about you! The only reason he’s bailed you out in the past is to cover his own ass, but the minute you kill a kid, he’ll drop it like it’s hot! It’s one thing to drop a wad because you took out the neighbor’s mailbox, but if you really fuck up, you and I both know he’ll cut you out of his life and spin it to make it look like your drugged up mom was the one who led you astray while he and the slutty step-secretary make themselves out to be fuckin’ Ward and June Cleaver.”

He watched his friend’s cheeks color at that as he averted his eyes guiltily then felt a weariness wash over him that seemed to seep into his bones, “You know what? Just go,” he said at last. “I’m not going to lecture you or try to save you; it’s your life, man; you do you.” He stepped back, “You want to live like this, fine; just don’t come back, okay? Just stay the hell away from me so I don’t have to watch you kill yourself because that is not my idea of a good time.”

“Tommy, wait--!” Brandon called out, but Tommy ignored him as he entered the house and shut the door behind him.

He walked into the kitchen, his heart growing heavier with every step. He felt like a total shit but it had to be done, he reasoned. Plus, he wasn’t wrong; Brandon was out of control and he promised Malcolm he’d keep people like that away from Felicity. Still, he felt like a total shit heel for doing it.

As soon as he entered the kitchen, McKenna and Felicity’s gazes met his; Felicity’s filled with curiosity and McKenna’s with sympathy.

“You okay?” McKenna asked softly as he sat down in front of his plate that was stacked high with French toast and bacon.

“Yeah,” he lied.

“You did the right thing sending him away,” she said, obviously seeing right through him.
“Yeah,” he nodded. He already knew it had been the right thing to do.

It didn’t make him feel any better though

“I’d totally do Teresa. Seriously,” Brandon said looking over to him for affirmation.

“Yeah, she’s hot,” he agreed then frowned at the television again, “Aw, come on! TC, man; don’t do it. Cut Liz out, she’s evil!”

“Aye, she’s a right wicked hoor, that yin,” Mrs. McGregor muttered as she scowled at the television.

“What’s a ‘hoor’?” Felicity asked with a frown.

“Tut!” the older woman said with a shushing noise. “Ne'er ye mind whit that word is 'n' dinnae ye gang repeating it either or ah will wash yer geggy oot wi' carbolic mush juist lik' ah used tae dae Tommy's!”

“But you said it first,” the little girl pointed out with a frown.

The housekeeper flushed, “Hush noo; juist watch th' tellybox 'n' quit a' yer yammering or ah’ll send ye tae yer room! A'm missing mah stories.”

Tommy scowled as the man on the screen caved, “Aw man! Moron,” he said with a snort.

“Eve’s gonna be pissed,” Brandon said with a low whistle. “Plus Julian isn’t going to be happy; wasn’t he trying to get her to leave town?”

“Yeah, but—” The scene changed and Tommy frowned again, “Why do they keep switching the scenes like that? Why are we back in the hospital? I wanted to see what TC was going to do and now we’re back with Teresa and Ethan? What the hell?”

Mrs. Mack reached over to cuff him on the side of the head causing him to yelp, “Watch yer foul tongue, Tommy Merlyn,” she said giving him a hard look before turning back to the screen, “Forby, a’m curious aboot this bit tae see if Ethan is aff tae gang back tae his proper guidwife, even if her mither is a harridan, or tae Teresa wha shuid ken better by noo!”

McKenna nodded and shared a look with the elderly woman sitting beside her, “I mean, I do think Gwen kind of deserves to suffer a little because she trapped him and all, but I also feel kind of bad for her. I mean, she’s pregnant with his baby, her mom is like a total nightmare, and he’s practically declaring his love for Teresa right outside the curtain. Seriously, it’s a curtain—how they can’t hear what the dizzy mother is saying is beyond me.”

She nodded, “Aye, that mither is a piece o’ wirk, then again, that Teresa shuid ken better than tae huv a go tae git atween a jimmy 'n' his guidwife. Plus she's nae exactly a saint herself despite that butter wilnae melt in her geggy routine.” She huffed, “If she wanted him sae ill then she shuid hae merrit him 'n' kept him instead o’ running aff wi’ anither jimmy th’ wey she did while up th’ duff wi’ that one’s bairn. Mah mither aye said guid girl's git in trauchle 'n' bad girl's tak’ care o’ themsehse, sae thare isnae ony pity in haein a bairn oot o' wedlock, bit adultery is a hail ither kettle o’ fish if ye ask me. If that Teresa wis as guid a left footer lassie as she claims then she shuid ken better!”

“Do you understand a word she’s saying, because I am totally lost here?” Brandon whispered, looking at the elderly housekeeper askance.
“Occasionally,” Tommy told him. “Usually I just get Felicity to translate it for me though and, even then, it’s pretty much hit or miss.” He frowned at the television again, “When are they going to get Sheraton out of that pit anyway?”

“Hopefully before she gives birth,” Felicity said dryly. “Otherwise that could be a problem.”

“Yeah, if I ever have a kid I’d prefer to have it someplace other than in a hole,” McKenna said with a frown. “Also, I’d like drugs. Lots and lots of drugs.”

“Aye,” Mrs. Mack said solemnly, “Whin ah hud mah Jamie ah hud him at mah mother-in-law’s hoose wi’oot sae muckle as an aspirin tae relieve th’ pain.” Her eyebrows shot up as she tendered the younger woman with a solemn look, “Ah wis in labor fur ower 26 hours afore th’ midwife finally clapped his wee ba挂钩ookie ’n’ he announced his presence tae th’ world. Th’ neist time mah labors cam wi’ his sister Jemma, ah did it in th’ hospital whaur thay pat me tae kip ’n’ didnae wake me up ’til she wis scrubbed poofy culur ’n’ awready bundled in her blanket. If ye ask me that’s th’ wey it shuid be dane, tae!”

Brandon poked him on the arm and hitched his chin towards the housekeeper with a confused look.

“I don’t know, man; all I heard was ‘asprin’ and something about a blanket,” he shrugged then shook his head as he watched the drama play out before them. “Yeah, TC knows he screwed up. You were right; Eve is gonna be pissed!”

“We should go outside and look around the pool house a little before we decide on the entertainment,” McKenna said as they headed out of the kitchen.

“Why?” Tommy frowned. “It’s just a pool party; we can just toss a couple of floats and a beach ball into the pool, open a pack of hotdogs, and that’ll be that.”

“I don’t think so,” McKenna said with a snort. “Besides, Felicity and I have plans.”

“Lots of plans,” the younger girl agreed.

“What kind of ‘plans’?” Tommy asked suspiciously.

“It’s a surprise,” Felicity said with a grin.

“It can’t be that big of a surprise because there’s no way Mrs. Mack will go for something too big,” he warned them. “To tell you the truth, I’m kind of surprised she’s even letting us near the grill. I thought for sure she’d accuse us of trying to burn the place down!”

“Oh, she did,” McKenna said smartly. “But then Felicity and I promised to supervise.”

Felicity nodded, “She even made us swear we’d keep at least two fire extinguishers near the grill just in case.”

He sighed, “Fine.”

The truth was he wasn’t even sure he wanted a party after what went down that morning with Brandon. After all, it’s not like he could invite anybody he knew, not with Felicity there. Sure he promised her he’d invite Laurel and Ollie so they could get their ‘revenge’, but chances are they wouldn’t show, especially when they found out that a ‘pool party’ meant just that; a pool party and cook out. There would be no drugs, no making out with half-naked chicks poolside, and no alcohol,
not even beer; the hardest thing there would be caffeine and cake.

At Ollie’s birthday party a few months ago when they got busted for stealing a taxi (because it was there and who had time to wait for the driver to get out of the can because, as Ollie said, places to go, people to do), while they were waiting for Robert to bail them out and pay off the cabbie, he swore that when Malcolm went on his China trip he was going to top him by filling the whole pool with beer just so he could swim in it.

Picture that; an Olympic-sized swimming pool filled with beer and him in the center just floating in the middle of a sudsy yeast-filled paradise. He was going to do a Long Island Iced Tea thing with vodka, rum, gin, triple sec, tequila, along with a shitload of sweet and sour mix and coke because it just seemed more mature than beer (and he was entering into adulthood after all), but then someone, probably Sara, pointed out that swimming in pure liquor could kill you, so he decided beer was a better alternative.

He even did the research, priced the different liquor distributors, but now... He sighed, even compared to that lame ass affair Moira threw for Ollie’s ‘official’ birthday where Carter Bowen and his mom showed up to brag about his early admission to Harvard while they rolled their eyes at his utter douchebaggery, this was going to suck total ass.

He glanced at Felicity’s bright eyes and felt his lips curve into a smile. Oh well, this party was more for her than it was for him anyway, he reasoned. After all, he stopped caring about things like birthdays a long time ago. Before she came into his life, as far as he was concerned, it was just another reason to get wasted.

When they got to the French doors that led to the path to the pool house, he frowned, “It’s raining pretty hard out there.”

McKenna looked at the rain-splattered glass as lightning streaked across the sky followed by the angry rumble of thunder, “So?”

“So we can’t go out in the rain,” he reasoned.

“Why not?” McKenna asked with a superior lift of her finely arched eyebrow, “Are you afraid of getting a little wet, Tommy Merlyn?”

“Why, are you?” he tossed back with a naughty twinkle.

Yeah, they agreed to keep it ‘just friends’, but still, that one needed to be said.

“Why would she be afraid of getting wet?” Felicity asked, wrinkling her nose in confusion.

“Um…” Tommy stumbled, suddenly realizing just how quickly that one backfired on him.

“Tommy’s just being a pervert,” McKenna said, rolling her eyes at him.

“How is McKenna getting rained on perverted?” she asked him innocently. “Is that some kind of a sex thing or something?”

“Um, uh, well…” he hemmed and hawed as he rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment.

“Yeah, it’s a sex thing,” McKenna said blithely. “Don’t worry, I’ll tell you all about it later.”

“No, you won’t!” Tommy exclaimed, finally coming out of his stupor. He moved closer to McKenna and hissed, “She’s only twelve.”
“And she’s going to be, what? Thirteen in a couple of weeks?” she pointed out. “Plus, she’s about to be a junior in high school, she’s got to learn about this stuff sometime.”

“What does her being a junior have to do with anything?” he scowled.

McKenna gave him a disparaging look, “How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“He was fourteen,” Felicity answered for him.

“I was fifteen!” he said quickly, “Almost. And, besides, Felicity doesn’t need to hear that stuff because she’s not having sex until she’s at least twenty-five…or thirty.” He paused. “Maybe thirty-five, I haven’t decided yet.”

McKenna tilted her head to the side and blinked at him slowly, “So, you got your cherry popped when you were fourteen—”

“Fifteen,” he corrected her, “Like fourteen and three hundred and sixty-four days, so basically fifteen.”

“But you expect Felicity to wait until she’s twenty-five?” she asked, ignoring him.

“Yeah, so?” he blustered.

“Why?” McKenna asked him.

“Yeah, why?” Felicity asked with a frown.

“Because she—you—“ he looked down at the girl in question, “*You* don’t need to have sex until you’re old enough to, you know, do that kind of…stuff.”

“But you were old enough to do that stuff at ‘almost’ fifteen?” McKenna said archly.

“Yeah, well, there’s a difference; I’m a guy,” he shrugged.

She made a soft ‘oh’ then pursed her lips at that, “So, what are you saying then; that you lost your virginity to another guy?”

“No,” he said taken aback.

“So how old was the girl? Twenty-five?” she asked sarcastically, “Because that’s statutory rape, my friend. I just might have to report her.”

“No, but she wasn’t like Felicity,” he said, feeling his cheeks flush in embarrassment.

“And why’s that?” she hummed. “Because when a guy has sex, he’s a stud, but when a girl has sex, she’s a slut?”

“No, I didn’t say that,” he said defensively.

“It kind of sounded like it,” she told him.

“It kind of did,” Felicity agreed.

“Well, that’s not what I meant!” he said churlishly.

“Expecting a girl to stay a virgin until you say it’s okay, even if it is Felicity,” she emphasized, “is
not only degrading and sexist as hell, but it’s a total double standard.”

“Yeah!” Felicity agreed.

“But she’s twelve!” he said pointing to her, “Twelve is too young to be talking about any of this stuff!”

“Uh, no,” McKenna said crossing her arms over her chest once more. “First off, she’s almost thirteen. Secondly, it’s better she knows this stuff now instead of later when some horny guy is trying to get into her pants and filling her head up with nonsense like how you can’t get pregnant the first time or while doing it in a hot tub or something equally stupid as that.”

“What does being in a hot tub have to do with not being able to get pregnant?” Felicity asked with a frown.

“Something about the chemicals in the water combined with the temperature kills sperm or something,” McKenna said dismissively, “It doesn’t matter; it’s a stupid horny boy lie. A good rule of thumb to remember when it comes to boys and sex is that, no matter what they tell you, they’re always lying.”

“Really?” she asked looking from the other girl to Tommy.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Tommy admitted reluctantly.

“And always use a condom,” she told Felicity. “Even with birth control, always use a condom. Say it with me.”

“Always use a condom,” she repeated dutifully.

“I am not happy right now,” Tommy muttered. “This was supposed to be a fun day, and now you’ve got Felicity talking about condoms and hot tub sex…”

“That’s right,” McKenna nodded firmly *still* ignoring him (which was annoying as hell, by the way). “Because birth control doesn’t kill STDs and nothing is 100% effective. My cousin was on birth control, got an ear infection and went on antibiotics, and the next thing you know she and her boyfriend are getting married then seven months later she gave birth to a nine pound, nine-ounce ‘preemie’ named Oscar.”

Tommy gave her a pleading look, “Please, for the love of God, I’ll admit that I’m a stupid chauvinist double-standard whatever, I’ll even shout it from the rooftops; you win! I give up, please can we just stop talking about this now?”

“You’re the one who told her you had sex when you were fourteen, not me!” she snorted.

“Yeah, but that was an accident,” he admitted reluctantly.

“More like bragging,” she said rolling her eyes.

“It was not bragging!” he protested. “Actually I was telling Felicity how much I regretted it, wasn’t I? Tell her,” he said, turning to the younger girl.

“Actually, all you did was yell and say that sex and drugs were bad and that I should never do them, and then you made me repeat it before you’d let me pee,” she said instead.

“Well, what I meant to say was that I regretted it and wished that I had waited,” he scowled.
“Waited for what?” McKenna asked dryly. “Waited for Jennifer Lopez to dump Ben Affleck so she
could make a man out of you instead? Because if that’s what you’re hoping for, hate to break it to
you Merlyn, but Jennifer is here to stay…despite the rumors in the tabloids,” she added. “That is
true love, my friend. You don’t leave Jenny from the Block for long.”

“You're a virgin?” she returned archly.

“Why? What difference would it make if I was?” McKenna demanded. “Would it change your
opinion of me somehow? Would my being a virgin make me better than someone who wasn’t, or
would it mean I’m some kind of prude? You know, you can’t have it both ways, Tommy, so pick
one; whore or Madonna, which one am I?” He faltered at that, “I, um, I…”

“What’s a ‘whore’?” Felicity asked, interrupting his train of babble.

“It’s a hooker,” McKenna told her.

“Oh,” she nodded. “What’s a ‘hooker’?”

“It’s a prostitute; in other words, it’s a person who takes money in exchange for sex.”

“Oh God,” Tommy moaned, burying his face in his hands.

“Oh,” Felicity said again. “Can boys be hookers or just girls?”

“Boys can be hookers only they’re called ‘rent boys’ or ‘gigolos’,” McKenna said cheerfully. “That
or Tommy Merlyn and Ollie Queen but, to be fair, they’re more like mansluts than actual hookers
since I doubt they actually charge people for sex. Or do you?” she asked Tommy pointedly.

“I hate you,” he said with all the sincerity he could muster.

Felicity, however, merely nodded as if filing that away so that she could bring it up again at some
other completely inappropriate moment like during dinner in a public place or in front of Malcolm,
“So what’s the difference between a hooker and a slut?”

“A slut does what a hooker does only she doesn’t charge for it, instead she just pays for it with her
self-respect,” she told her dryly. “Also, unlike with hookers, only girls can be sluts; according to
Tommy anyway,” she said, giving him another triumphant look.

“I just…I just really want to stop having this conversation now,” Tommy said in a pained voice as he
scrubbed his hands over his face and moaned. “I really don’t want to talk about this anymore.”
“You started it,” McKenna shrugged.

“No, I didn’t,” Tommy told her. “In fact, I can’t even remember how this whole conversation even got started in the first place.”

“You asked McKenna if she was afraid to get wet,” Felicity answered.

He felt his face grow hot, “Okay, well, let’s just…” he cleared his throat, “Let’s just go out to the pool house and stop talking about *this*.”

“Why?” McKenna drawled, “Looking forward to getting me wet, Tommy Merlyn?”

“I really, *really* hate you right now,” he told her before heading out into the rain.

“And I really wish someone would tell me what that means,” Felicity said loudly as the summer storm raged around them.

“I’ll tell you later,” McKenna said with a squeal as they all ran through the stinging raindrops and headed towards the pool house which was, in matter of fact, larger than most regular family homes and matched the style and color scheme of the main house with its blue gabled roof and white painted shutters.

One of the things Tommy always appreciated about his family’s home was that, unlike the Queen’s mansion (which was, in fact, a castle that had been moved to Starling brick by brick by one of Robert’s ancestors), the Merlyn mansion looked like an actual house, only bigger. Plus, unlike the drafty and empty halls of the Queen mansion, their house was much more up to date and modern. Malcolm had it built for Tommy’s mother before they got married and, even though they were further from the ocean front than the Queen’s (Malcolm wanted to build it further back to protect it from tsunamis and tropical cyclones similar to the one raging all around them now), it was designed to look like a larger version of the beach ‘cottages’ his mother grew up with in the Hamptons. The pool/guest house, while built on a much smaller scale than the main house, was just as lavish but, at the same time, quaint and homey with its weathered shingles, wraparound porch, and widow’s walk on the roof.

It was there in the pool house that Tommy always felt closest to his mother. Rebecca, during what little free time she had between working at her clinic in the Glades and doing charity work, would often paint in the top most bedroom overlooking the expanse of tall trees to the ocean. Although she wasn’t a skilled artist by any means, using the watercolors both frustrated and relaxed her and she would often sit and paint with Tommy for hours at a time while talking about her childhood in Gotham. She talked about her private school, the same one Felicity now attended, and about the summers she spent on the coast with Granny and Grandpa Bob; about how different the sea outside their window was from the cold, choppy waters of the Atlantic, but how she missed it anyway.

For a long time after she died, he couldn’t even bear to look at the pool house until, one day, he wandered back up to that room where they used to paint together and it was as though he could still hear her laughter and smell the sweet floral notes of the perfume she always wore. After that, the pool house became his refuge and, later, a place to lose himself in alcohol and weed as he allowed his pain to ebb away.

Although, at that moment, it felt less like a safe haven and more like a trap as his eyes caught sight of the shivering form of the man in front of him.

“Brandon?” Tommy blinked as the girls, now soaked and dripping wet, came up beside him.
“The door was locked,” Brandon said, rising shakily to his feet.

“You know, even though Julian is creepy and the son of the devil and everything, he and Eve do make a cute couple,” Brandon offered with a frown. “I’d totally do her.”

“Watch it,” Tommy hissed, elbowing him and nodding his head towards Felicity.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly.

“Somebody needs to throw that flaky mother into a pit next,” McKenna said with a scowl. “She’s making me mad now and I just want to slap her!”

Mrs. Mack answered the girl’s frown with one of her own, “Aye, she does mak’ yi’ll want tae skelp her a guid yin, doesn’t she? If ah wur thare a’d gie her a guid beating then skelp some sense intae her.”

Brandon gestured towards the screen again, “I mean, seriously, I think I could pull off that shirt Ethan is wearing, don’t you? I could so rock the whole wide stripes and khakis Miami Beach thing.”

“They’re not in Miami, they’re in New England,” Felicity told him.

“No, they aren’t,” he huffed.

“No, she’s right,” McKenna told him. “Harmony is supposed to be located somewhere on the coast of Maine. That’s why there’s all that supernatural stuff going on; because it was founded around the time of the Salem Witch trials or something.”

Felicity nodded, “Yeah, see, Tabitha, the witch, she’s over three hundred years old and she moved to Harmony in the late 17th century only to wind up getting burned at the stake.”

McKenna hummed, “And after her resurrection, she vowed vengeance on the Cranes because she held one of their ancestor’s responsible for the whole ‘killing her’ thing. Oh, and the reason she keeps trying to kill Charity is because she supposedly was born with the ultimate powers of good and Tabitha was ordered by the Dark Forces; those are those things in the basement she keeps talking to, to kill her” she explained.

“Aye, tis a gateway tae hell ‘n’ damnation itself, Jesus wept,” the older woman said, crossing herself again.

“Yeah, so these ‘dark forces’ ordered her to destroy Charity in order to keep her from mating with her one true love, Miguel, because if they ever got together it would supposedly trigger her full powers of goodness, thereby eradicating all evil from the universe forever, including Tabitha,” she finished. “Of course, then her little doll, Timmy, fell in love with Charity and kept messing things up on purpose to stop her.”

Felicity nodded, “Then this other witch, Hecuba, got involved when Kay sold her soul to her in order to get her help to make Miguel fall in love with her, then froze Charity in a block of ice, while her evil doppelgänger, Zombie Charity, took her place.”

“Zombie Charity,” Tommy repeated slowly.

“Um hmm,” she hummed, “So then, in order to save the real Charity, Timmy who turned human because he made a wish and this little angel girl changed him, decided to save her. He and Julian
traveled across some kind of magical countryside to get this thing called the Demon's Horn in order to destroy the zombie version of Charity and restore the real Charity.”

McKenna nodded, “Right, but using it killed Timmy, then Charity, because she’d been frozen for so long, needed a heart transplant, so Tabitha, knowing how much Timmy loved her, let her have his heart then decided to stop hating her since she loved Timmy and part of him was inside of her.”

“This is one messed up show,” Tommy said shaking his head.

“Which one is in love with the monkey nurse?” Brandon asked.

“Luis,” McKenna told him. “Only he isn’t in love with Precious, Precious is in love with him.”

“Okay…” Tommy nodded in confusion. “So he’s a gay monkey nurse named Precious and he’s in love with Luis but Luis doesn’t know?”

“No, well, first off, Precious isn’t a monkey, she’s an orangutan which is an ape,” Felicity told him. “Secondly, the character of Precious is a girl even though the orangutan who plays her is a boy.”

“So he’s a cross-dressing monkey nurse who’s in love with a dude?” Brandon asked, still confused.

“I don’t care if Precious is a boy ape or a girl monkey; Luis is hot!” McKenna said firmly. “I’d crush on him, too, if I were her!”

“He’s not that hot,” Tommy huffed.

“He’s totally hot,” Felicity agreed. “Hank’s hot, too.”

“Aye, he is ferr a braw fellow, isnae he?” Mrs. McGregor said, pursing her lips and playing with the little gold crucifix that hung from her neck as the character in question came into view.

“Eh, I hate his voice. I just want to hit him in the face,” McKenna said with a noise of distaste.

“How is this not Miami?” Brandon asked in confusion. “It looks like Miami, they dress like they’re in Miami, half the people on this show are Latino, and they keep heading off to someplace that looks a lot like Cuba if you ask me? I mean, they have *palm trees*! Since when does Maine have *palm trees*?”

“Dude, since when does Maine have witches with gateways to hell in the basement?” Tommy asked wryly.

“Brandon, man, what the hell are you still doing here?” He asked. “I told you to go home!”

Brandon sniffled as he wiped his soaking wet hair off his forehead, “Uh, well, you said I was too wasted to drive and the thing about me killing somebody, and I started thinking about it and…” he looked down and swallowed, then mumbled something.

“What?” Tommy asked, straining to hear him over the storm.

“I said I don’t want to die in a ditch or kill anybody!” he said in a loud voice, his face crumpling slightly. “I-I don’t want to wind up as somebody’s punchline!”

“Aw, bro…” he said, looking on as the other man covered his eyes with one hand, the other still shoved in his pockets as his shoulders began to shake.
“You and Ollie are it, man!” Brandon said with a sob as he looked up at him. “I mean, I don’t really have anybody else and Ollie, you know, he’s okay but he never really gave much of a shit about anything; you though…I mean, you always got it.” He shook his head, “I just—I don’t have anything else and if you stop being my bro then…” he cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably, “I just…you’re all I’ve got left, you know?”

“Man, I’m sorry but…” Tommy began only to be cut off by Felicity.

“We should get him inside the house,” she said, placing her hand on his arm.

“Felicity, I can’t,” he told her. “I promised Malcolm I wouldn’t let you near this stuff.”

“Please?” she asked looking up at him with a pleading expression. “Malcolm doesn’t need to know and he needs our help.”

“She’s right,” McKenna said, her hand cupped over her dark eyes to protect them from the rain. “Let’s just go inside and we can sort it out in there.”

“He’s drunk,” Tommy told her, leaning in so he could speak in low tones.

She looked at Brandon then back to him and shook her head, “He doesn’t look drunk to me. In fact, he looks pretty damn sober for once.”

“Please, man?” Brandon asked him.

“Okay, fine, but only until the storm ends and then you have to go home,” Tommy said reluctantly before stepping up to the keypad and entering the code to let them all inside.

“Okay, yeah,” Brandon said gratefully as they all filed in behind him.

McKenna frowned at the blonde woman screaming on the screen as she clutched her distended belly in fear, “You know, Sheraton has some really crappy luck; buried alive, kidnapped, sunk on a yacht, blown up, now pregnant in a pit; what’s next, brain tumor?”

“Twenty bucks says she gets a brain tumor,” Brandon said turning to Tommy.

“Done,” Tommy said, already reaching for his wallet.

“We keep clean clothes and stuff in all the rooms,” Tommy said as he looked around uncomfortably. “My mom’s studio is in the room below the loft space,” he said looking at McKenna whose arms had broken out in goosebumps. “I think she still has some dresses and sweaters and stuff in the closet. My dad never touched it so you can just take what you need.”

“You’re sure?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yeah,” he told her with a shrug. “It’s just clothes.”

“Thanks,” she said gratefully.

“If you can’t find anything I can bring you some of my sweats or something,” he added then turned to Brandon, “You already know where I keep my stuff, right?”
“Yeah, thanks man,” he said, averting his eyes in embarrassment.

“And do us all a favor and take a shower,” McKenna told him. “You kind of stink.”

“Yeah,” Felicity said, wrinkling her nose slightly. “You smell like Tommy’s room before Mrs. McGregor had the maids clean it.”

“Sorry about that,” Brandon mumbled, his cheeks reddening slightly.

“I’m going to run back to the house and get you something to wear,” Tommy told her.

“Bring some umbrellas, too,” she told him as she followed McKenna upstairs to show her to the room.

“Okay,” he told her. He went to leave when Brandon caught his arm.

“I mean it; thanks, man,” he told him.

“It’s okay,” Tommy told him then sighed, “Look, go clean up and we’ll talk when I get back, okay?”

“Yeah,” he agreed before removing his hand and climbing slowly up the stairs.

A few minutes later he was back inside the cottage, a hastily packed duffle bag slung over one shoulder and an armload of umbrellas tucked under his other arm.

He went ahead and grabbed some t-shirts and sweats for McKenna on the off chance his mom’s clothes didn’t fit her, along with a dry change of clothes for himself, and a blue cotton sundress and underwear he’d fished out of her closet and drawers for Felicity. It wasn’t really cold outside, just damp and windy, but he also brought her a sweater just in case. She tended to always be chilly anyway, her ice cold toes constantly seeking out the warmth of his legs as she hogged the blankets.

He made his way up the stairs then pulled his own clothes out of the bag before knocking on the door and setting it on the floor, “Hey, I brought you clothes!”

“Oh!” he heard Felicity giggle out as she and McKenna spoke in tones too low for him to hear on the other side.

He grinned then shook his head before heading to his room to change. At first he’d been nervous about letting McKenna in, but Felicity really seemed to like her and the two of them were getting along, even if it meant teaming up against him. That was okay though, he decided. He could take the occasional ego bruise if it meant seeing her happy.

He walked into the room and heard the shower going full blast as steam came boiling out. He walked inside and snatched a towel off the shelf to dry his hair then walked back into the bedroom without disturbing the man behind the frosted glass of the shower door.

He briefly thought about going into one of the guestrooms for a shower as well but dismissed that idea. He’d just taken a shower less than an hour ago and, besides, he wasn’t that cold. Instead he just stripped off his wet things then tugged on a fresh pair of underwear that he’d brought along, followed by a pair of jeans and a Green Day t-shirt. He would have chosen a different shirt (even though Green day was okay as emo bands went) but the upside to choosing this one was that there were no scantily clad women on it (even though, according to Ollie, the emo dudes in mascara and eyeliner were all pretty much women themselves) so neither McKenna nor Felicity could say anything about him being a male chauvinist pig or whatever.
The downside was that they were probably going to call him an ‘idiot’ for the rest of the day since the words ‘american idiot’ were typed in white boldface letters just below the words ‘GREEN DAY’ along with the silhouette of a heart shaped grenade.

But, again, as long as they were happy, he could put up with it.

As he was getting dressed, the shower stopped and, less than a couple of minutes later, Brandon emerged from the bathroom dressed in a pair of his long board shorts and a rough cotton baja hoodie over what appeared to be the surf shop tee shirt he picked up last year when he went sailing with Ollie and his dad down to the Bahamas.

“Hey,” Brandon said, clearing his throat as he dropped the towel he was using into a chair and began to finger comb his sandy blonde hair into some semblance of order.

“Hey,” he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Listen Brandon, I…” he began.

“It’s cool,” Brandon said cutting him off. “I mean, I get it; I showed up at your place smelling like shit and loaded; I don’t blame you for wanting to kick my ass to the curb.”

“Dude, I don’t want to ‘kick you to the curb’,” he said with a sigh. “It’s just that now that I have Felicity, I can’t afford to keep fucking off all the time and, while I could give two shits about school and keeping straight before, I…”

Yeah,” he said with a grimaced then looked up in surprise, “Wait, Felicity; is she the one Ollie calls ‘the orphan’?” he asked. “I thought he said that you hated her? Why are you taking care of her all of the sudden?”

“I don’t hate her.” Tommy said gruffly. “Yeah, I didn’t much care for her at first but she…I don’t know,” he said grimacing, “She kind of…grew on me.” He took a centering breath before looking him in the eye, “I like her,” he said firmly and with a hint of pride. “She’s cool, and funny, and I like having her around.”

“So, this thing with you avoiding your friends and partying and stuff is only temporary?” Brandon asked him carefully. “I mean, after she goes back to wherever she came from, then you’ll--?”

“It’s not temporary,” Tommy cut him off. “She’s staying here with me; I’m taking care of her from now on.”

“Wait; what?” he asked in confusion. “What does that even mean?”

“It means just that; she’s mine now,” Tommy told him. “My responsibility, and Malcolm said if I wanted to keep her then I had to cut the shit, so if I have to choose between keeping her or partying, I’ll choose Felicity every time.”

He looked at him blankly, “You’re keeping her?”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

“And she’s yours?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s yours, as in she belongs to you like a…like a what? Like a pet or something?” he asked, shaking his head slightly.
“Like a--!” He gave him a dirty look, “She’s not a dog, she’s a kid!”

“Yeah, but *you’re* a kid,” he pointed out.

“Well, then it’s time for me to stop being a kid, isn’t it?” he scowled. “It’s like that bible thing Mrs. Mack is always talking about. You know, with the ‘Once I was a kid so I did kid stuff, but now I’m a man, so I decided to stop doing all that other stuff.’”

“I don’t think that’s how it goes,” he said with a frown.

“I’m paraphrasing,” he said dismissively. “The point is that the Wizard has left the house, okay? This is my life now; Tommy and Felicity, that’s it.”

“Tommy and Felicity and that’s it?” he repeated while looking at him askance, “Do you really mean that? That you like this kid enough to quit your friends, your bros; everything?” he asked.

“I guess,” he said with a shrug. “I mean…no, that about sums it up actually, so yeah; I like her enough to quit my bros and everything that goes along with that.”

“But why?” he asked in disbelief. “I mean, she seems like a pretty good kid, don’t get me wrong. I mean, I’ve never actually talked to her but she seems okay, but…shit Tommy; you don’t quit your bros just to babysit full time! I could see cutting back maybe, taking it easy on the partying, but that’s no reason to cut your friends out of your life!”

“Why not?” he chuckled humorlessly, “What better reason is there? Man, have you seen my so-called ‘friends’? I went to your party the other day looking for my ‘friends’ and all I found was a bunch of fake ass people pretending to enjoy whatever the fuck kind of teenage wasteland they wandered into, drinking all of your old man’s good booze, while Ollie fucked my dream girl right in front of them but no one said shit to me because they were all too stoned or just didn’t care enough to notice.”

His cheeks flushed guiltily at that, “Okay, so what Ollie did was fucked up, but still…”

“It’s not about Ollie; not entirely,” he told him. “Frankly, I was over that shit a few minutes after I caught Laurel playing cowgirl while she was riding his dick! She really wasn’t that important to me; Felicity is.”

“Yeah, well, Thea is important to Ollie but it hasn’t stopped him from hanging out and she’s his real sister, not just some…whatever she is,” he argued.

“Whatever she is?” Tommy repeated darkly.

Brandon threw his hands up in surrender, “Hey, no offense meant; I just don’t know what to call her. If you say she’s your sister, then—”

“She’s not my sister,” Tommy told him, anger boiling in the pit of his stomach at hearing him dismiss her so easily. It reminded him of the way Moira talked about her only, this time, he knew what to say, “She’s more than *just* my sister, or *just* some little kid, man; I promised to take care of her so this isn’t *just* babysitting for me.”

“I get that, I do,” Brandon said, backing off slightly. “But Ollie—“

“First off, Ollie isn’t exactly the kind of guy I aspire to be someday, okay?” Tommy snorted. “I mean, while I’m cool with him banging Laurel, it was still a shitty thing to do, and Ollie isn’t exactly the most responsible guy in the world. Hell, I left him in the kitchen with Felicity for less than half an
hour and he nearly got her killed! Secondly, Thea may be his sister but Ollie isn’t responsible for her; she’s got Moira and Robert watching out for her, but I’m all Felicity’s got, so don’t even try to compare what this is to what he and Thea have because it’s not the same. He’s *just* Thea’s brother; he can fuck up his life all day long and she’ll still be okay, but this is different than that.”

“Different how?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “She’s got Malcolm, right? He could just--”

“Malcolm?” Tommy said wryly. “Seriously, man, if you think Malcolm is going to step up here then you obviously haven’t been paying attention.”

“I’m just saying that you were a lot younger than her when Malcolm took a powder so she’ll be fine,” he said quickly.

“She’ll be ‘fine’?” he chuckled darkly, “Your parents took off, your dad with the step-secretary and your mom with whatever bottle she happens to grab first; are you fine?”

“No, I guess not,” he said, his eyes cast towards the floor.

“No, well neither am I, and I don’t want Felicity to have to deal with the shit we had to deal with; not alone. Besides, I had Ollie and his folks watching out for me, she only has me.”

“How do you know?” Brandon asked. “Maybe she could stay over at their house with Thea while you, me, and Ollie hang out?”

“And do what? What would Felicity do over there; she’s going to be thirteen in a few weeks and Thea’s only five?”

“I don’t know; play with Barbie dolls?” he said uncertainly.

“I don’t think so,” he said with an eye roll. “Besides, she wouldn’t be comfortable over there alone and Moira wasn’t exactly nice to her the last time they got together so that’s not happening.” He gave him a steady look, “Why do you care if I stop partying anyway?”

“What do you mean?” Brandon asked with a frown.

“I mean, why is it so important that I keep getting wasted with you guys?”

“I just don’t want to break up the band,” he told him. “I mean, it’s always been me, you, and Ollie; remember?”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” he asked him wryly.

The other man looked at him uncertainly, “Why wouldn’t I?”

Brandon looked at him, “I’m definitely going to the mall later. I wonder if that shirt comes in other colors? I mean, I could pull off the khaki but I’d definitely look better in blue.”

“I could go for a trip to the mall,” Felicity said speaking up.

“Me, too,” McKenna said absentely before gesturing towards the screen again and turning towards the housekeeper. “You know, I get how Gwen is way out of line and that her mom is driving her nuts over Ethan but, you’re right; what *is* Teresa doing at the hospital anyway? She’s the ex; you shouldn’t be hanging all over your ex with his pregnant girlfriend in the next room. And, just for the record, I don’t buy her whole ‘butter won’t melt in my mouth’ act either because you know she’s still
hot for Ethan! It’s pretty obvious,” she huffed.

“Yeah, because of the whole dramatic music thing whenever they’re anywhere near each other,” Tommy snorted.

The older woman nodded solemnly, ‘Tis a wicked gam she’s playing fur sure. They’re a' playin’ wi’ fire if ye ask me. Mark mah wurds, hee haw guid wull come o’ it.”

Felicity grinned dreamily at the screen, her head propped up on her hands and elbows on the table, “Fox is a fox, too.”

“No, Fox is a jerk,” Tommy said glaring at the television.

“Is it just me or does that guy remind you of Ollie?” McKenna asked.

“Fox doesn’t look anything like Ollie,” Brandon objected.

She nodded, “Must be the jerk thing, then.”

“Man, TC; told you so. Eve is pissed!” Tommy burst out, pointedly ignoring both of them.

“You know, Eve is a doctor; you’d think she could figure out a way to slip something in her drink or something that couldn’t be traced back to her,” McKenna murmured to Mrs. McGregor who, along with Felicity, had become something of a partner in crime.

“If ah wur ever tae murdurr somebody a’d gang oot tae th’ back green shed ’n’ git some o’ that ant killer then mak’ up a batch o’ corn breid that th’ mister is sae fond o’.” She paused thoughtfully, “Come tae think o’ it, ah dae hae a’ o’ th’ ingredients fur a crakin’ pot o’ chili in th’ pantry.”

“Tomato leaves are poisonous, too,” Felicity offered. “You could make a salad to go with the chili and cornbread.”

“Are we having chili for dinner?” Tommy asked hopefully.

Brandon scowled at the television, “I hate Hank. I hate the way he says ‘buddy’ like that. Like ‘BUD-DEE’. It’s like he’s playing Arnold without the accent.”

“This show has the worst actors,” Tommy agreed. “Just for the record, we are having chili for dinner tonight though, right?”

“It’s ninety degrees outside!” McKenna scoffed.

“So what? Who says it has to be cold outside to eat chili?” he asked her. “You eat ice cream in the wintertime, don’t you?”

“Can we have ice cream?” Felicity asked hopefully.

“Aye, oan baith counts,” the housekeeper told them, her attention fixed on the screen. “Gang ’n’ git some Creamscicles oot o’ th’ deep freeze ’n’ bring me an orange yin.”

“Sheraton Crane Lopez Fitzgerald; seriously, who hasn’t this woman been married to on this show?” McKenna muttered.

“She sounds like a really low rent hotel chain,” Felicity mused as she ran back into the room and began distributing the popscicles.
“So is Kay a ghost or what?” Brandon asked in confusion.

“I’m…not sure,” McKenna said, blinking at the screen.

“Ah think tis aye th' wee angel lassie 'n' she juist looks lik' Kay,” Mrs. Mack offered helpfully.

“But didn’t the angel girl go back to heaven?” Felicity asked, wrinkling her nose slightly. “Also, isn’t Kay alive still?”

A fight broke out on-screen and Tommy sneered, “Miguel just needs to sack up. That guy sounds like a real whiny ass.”

“Language!” Mrs. Mack said, popping his arm. “Bit, aye, he is a bawherr o' a wanker, isnae he?”

McKenna sighed dreamily, “Antonio is yummy though.”

“Aye, he's sae forceful 'n' manly,” Mrs. Mack said in a similar tone.

“Seriously?” Tommy asked them. “The guy’s a jerk who stole his brother’s girl then tried to kill him!”

“Yeah, Antonio seriously sucks,” Brandon objected, showing some bro solidarity as the women around them were obviously getting it wrong.

“Yeah, but he looks good,” McKenna said, still drooling at the image of the two men as they began to fight on-screen.

“What do you mean?”

Tommy sighed and looked at the man in front of him, his face flushing as the anger left him, “Never mind, man; just forget I said anything.”

“No, really man; what do you mean?” Brandon demanded, his face pale.

“I'm just being an asshole, ignore it,” he told him.

“No, tell the truth, Tommy; are you my friend, or not?”

“Have you noticed that all the really screwed up people on this show come from St. Lisa’s? They should just quarantine that place or something,” Brandon mused.

Tommy turned to McKenna, “Why don’t they ever show Alastair’s face?”

“Because he’s the devil. Literally the devil,” she told him.

“Aye, he's maist definitely th' spawn o' Hell; God hulp us,” Mrs. McGregor said, crossing herself.

“Yeah, they probably just don’t show him because they don’t have enough left over in the costume budget for horns,” Felicity shrugged.

“It all went into Ethan’s wardrobe,” Brandon snorted.
“Probably not,” he said, not looking him in the eye. “If I was your friend then…”

“Then what?” He demanded.

“Brandon, when was the last time you left your house to do something besides score?” he asked him. “Or do you just have your shit delivered now?” The other man blanched and Tommy’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “Really?”

“The…pool guy usually brings me shit when he stops by,” he admitted reluctantly. He looked up at Tommy through his eyelashes, “Did you mean what you said about me OD’ing and killing somebody?”

“Kind of, yeah,” he told him.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” he asked quietly.

“Would you have listened?” Tommy tossed back.

“Probably not,” he mumbled then glowered at him, “So the only reason you and Ollie ever let me hang out with you was so I could get you high?”

“That and the fact that you threw a pretty good party,” he joked.

“That’s not funny, man,” he said with a hurt expression.

“No, it’s not,” he admitted then cleared his throat. “Do you want to hear the truth, man? 100% no bullshit?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Tommy took a centering breath before speaking, “The truth is that, yeah, we like you, you’re a stand up guy, but Ollie and I never let ourselves get too attached to you because…” he stopped.

“Because?” The other man prompted him.

Tommy exhaled slowly, “Because you were basically a dead man walking and everybody knew it.”

“Fuck,” he flinched, looking like he’d been slapped.

“Sounds harsh but you asked for the truth,” Tommy said helplessly.

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I?” Brandon mumbled.

Figuring it was now or never, Tommy decided to go for broke.

“Let’s face it, Ollie and me, we party but you, man,” he shook his head, “You’re on a long, dark ride and the end of the road is dead ahead but the brakes are out. It’s hard to get attached to somebody you know won’t be there for much longer.”

“Why is she calling the hospital? That girl just got shot—shouldn’t she be calling 9-1-1?” Brandon asked.
Tommy agreed, “And why does everybody on this show have to say everyone else’s whole name. It’s like they can’t just say, ‘Hi Doc!’ They have to say, ‘Hello Doctor Evelyn Russell’.”

“If you keep picking it apart you destroy the magic that is Passions,” McKenna said in exasperation.

“Aye!” Mrs. Mack agreed. “Tis called,” she turned to Felicity, “Whizzit called agin?”

“Suspension of disbelief,” she supplied.

“Aye, the…kicked oot o’ disbelief thing.”

“Are you a whore, too?” Brandon crowed, “I love Aunt Irma! HAH!”

“Didn’t that lady used to be on the Jeffersons?” Tommy asked squinting at the small screen. “You know, seriously, this TV sucks. Remind me to pick up a big screen at the mall later.”

“For the kitchen?” McKenna asked incredulously. “Where are you going to put it?”

“We’ll find a place, trust me,” he said, waving her off. “We’ll mount it to the wall or something.”

“A bigger telly wid be crakin’,” Mrs. McGregor admitted, “n’ yer da cuid see a’ o’ thaim scrolly bits at th’ bo’em o’ th’ screen while he watches th’ news ower his mornin’ cuppa.”

“Exactly,” Tommy agreed. “Really, it would be for dad’s benefit, not ours.”

“Right,” McKenna said roundly.

“Guid point, aye,” Mrs. McGregor agreed, choosing not to acknowledge their sarcasm as long as it meant her getting a bigger TV in which to enjoy her ‘stories’. “Ye pick up th’ tellybox ’n’ ah will hae Jamie come up tae th’ hoose tae dae th’ electricals ’n’ things.”

“Ivy annoys me,” Felicity said as she slurped on her cherry Creamsicle, “Although she and Julian do have this definite love/hate thing going on that’s kind of intriguing. They should invite Dr. Phil to come on this show for a guest appearance or something because these people need it.”

“They could definitely use some therapy, especially the guy who’s the son of Satan. Talk about daddy issues,” Tommy agreed, avoiding the look of amusement McKenna was directing towards him.

Brandon just stood there, still as stone, as he absorbed what the other man just told him.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy said, shifting uncomfortably as he hitched his thumb towards the door. “Look man, I have to go check on the girls but you’re welcome to sleep it off in here. Just, um, just lock up when you’re done.”

He didn’t bother waiting for an answer, choosing instead to make a quick exit as he headed towards the others down the hall.

“Tommy?”

He froze, turning slowly towards the other man, “Yeah?”

“Can I, um…” Brandon swallowed. “Can I stay with you guys?”
“Until the storm clears?” he asked in confusion.

“No, I mean…” he took a shuddering breath, “Um, for a few days maybe? Uh, my mom is on some kind of cruise and,” he licked his lips, “Um, my place is kind of, uh, not really where I want to be right now.”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that there’s a lot of, um, ‘party favors’ left over from last night and I don’t want to…” He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck then looked up, his eyes swimming with unshed tears, “I don’t want to die, man, and I don’t want to do this any more.”

“Okay,” he said quietly.

The other man approached him and pulled him into a tight hug, “I don’t want to be a punchline, I just don’t, but I don’t know what to—“ He pulled away slightly to look at him, his cheeks flush with humiliation, “I don’t want to lay this at your door but I don’t know what to do anymore and I need help. If I try talking to my dad about it then—”

“I got you, man; don’t worry about it,” he said patting him on the back before releasing him. “You can just stay with me until we figure it out.”

“Thanks,” he said, his cheeks ruddy with embarrassment.

“You should go lie down while I go talk to McKenna, okay?” he told him.

“Yeah,” he said, turning to leave before stopping to look at him. “I’m not a junkie or anything though, you know that right?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said although, truth be told, he wasn’t sure if he meant it.

“I’m not,” Brandon stressed. “I mean, I know that when somebody says they can stop anytime, it really means they can’t, but I can quit. I’m just—“ he looked down at the floor again, “I’m just not sure I want that kind of temptation around right now; you know, hair of the dog, so I thought that maybe I should—“

“Like I said, I got you,” Tommy said with a nod. “Go sleep it off, okay?” he grinned at him, forcing himself to relax, “You might smell better but you still look like shit.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled sheepishly, “Yeah, I feel like shit, too. I’ll just…” he said motioning towards the bedroom.

“Sure, man; goodnight,” he said with another easy smile as he watched his friend shut the door behind him.

As soon as the door closed, Tommy’s smile faded as well, “Fuck,” he muttered.

Reluctantly, he continued to the end of the hall to knock on the girls’ door.

“Come in!” Felicity called out.

He walked in and smiled. Felicity was wearing the blue sundress he brought her while McKenna found the denim and patchwork dress his mom used to wear while she was painting or working in the flower beds around the property. It still had splashes of paint here and there but it was clean and dry, plus it fit, so that was a bonus, he supposed. The two of them were sitting on the bed giggling as
they played an old game of Candyland they’d dug up from God knows where.

Just like the dress McKenna wore, he hadn’t seen that game in years. He felt his chest swell with emotion for a second as he watched them play before reality set in.

“Hey, uh, can I talk to you for a minute?” he asked McKenna.

“Why? What’s up?” she asked, looking up from the board.

“It’s kind of, um…” he paused, tilting his chin towards Felicity.

“You and I both know you’re going to tell me later anyway so you might as well just say it,” Felicity said, rolling her eyes at him.

“She’s got a point,” McKenna said wryly. “Out with it, Merlyn; we don’t have all day.”

He tightened his lips before speaking, “I need to head over to Brandon’s to clean up a little and get him some stuff.”

“Why?” she asked dubiously. “I thought he was leaving?”

“Uh, he can’t,” he told her reluctantly.

McKenna gave him a warning look, “Tommy…”

“I know, okay,” he said quickly, “but he’s in a bad headspace and he needs to dry out a little.”

“Not around Felicity, he doesn’t,” she said firmly, sounding more like his mother than she knew. Especially in that dress.

He squirmed uncomfortably, “Look, it’s just for a few days,” he said defensively.

“You’re gonna blow it, you know that right?” she asked with hard eyes. “You asked me to help you and I’m telling you, you’re making a mistake.”

“I realize that…” he began.

“What about Felicity, huh?” she challenged. “Where is she supposed to go while Brandon ‘dries out a little’, because she sure as hell doesn’t need to be around that! And what about Mrs. Mack, huh? You know she’s going to tell your dad—”

“I can make sure—“

“No, you can’t! Felicity—!”

“I’m right here!” Felicity said glaring at them both. “I may be younger than you but I’m smarter than both of you put together so you can stop acting like I’m invisible or something!”

They both stopped to look at her in surprise.

“I also know what booze smells like, and I know you don’t want me to be around Brandon, but I’m not a baby,” she told them. “I won’t break or freak out or anything just from hearing you guys talk about stuff, I promise.”

“Sorry,” McKenna said biting her bottom lip.
“Sunshine…” Tommy began.

“No,” she told him. “Brandon’s in trouble, right?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said solemnly.

“And you’re his friend, right?”

He swallowed, “Yeah.”

“Then we have to help him,” she said firmly.

“Sunshine, see, the thing is…” Tommy said slowly before faltering. “Um, the thing is, see—“

McKenna broke in, “What Tommy is trying to say is—“

“Brandon’s on drugs,” the younger girl said matter of factly.

“Yeah…” McKenna breathed.

“You knew?” Tommy asked in surprise.

“Doh,” she huffed. “Like I said, I’m not a baby.” Her eyes dropped to the quilt over the bed and she began to pick at it with her fingers, “Plus, he kind of looks like…”

“Like who?” McKenna asked curiously.

“Somebody she saw on TV, right?” Tommy supplied, his eyes meeting Felicity’s.

“Yeah,” she said, tossing him a grateful look.

McKenna looked between them curiously, “Okay, but he thing is, Malcolm told Tommy that—“

“That if I’m around the drugs and stuff I’ll have to go back to Gotham,” she supplied. “Tommy already told me. He also told me that he used to smoke pot but that he quit.”

“Wow, okay,” McKenna blinked. “But still…?”

“Still, nothing,” Felicity said firmly. “You just said that Brandon’s your friend.”

“Yeah, he is,” he admitted.

“And he’s your friend, too,” she said turning towards McKenna.

“Yeah, I guess,” the other girl admitted reluctantly.

“Then you should go with Tommy to get rid of the drugs and stuff, call in a housekeeping service to clean up the rest of it, then pack a bag so he can stay here until he gets better,” she said matter-of-factly.

Again they both looked to her in shocked silence.

“How did you…?” Tommy asked, his head tilted in confusion.

“TV,” she answered. “That and common sense.”

“TV,” McKenna said slowly.
She nodded, “Uh huh. On TV they always flush the drugs down the toilet so the cops don’t see them but that’s really bad for the environment. Plus, it winds up in the septic tank so, logically, they could still find it if they wanted to. Still, if I were you, I’d flush it anyway then get rid of the booze or tell the cleaning service to have it carted off. Just tell them you have someone in recovery then offer to pay extra to keep it discreet. I’m sure Brandon has a credit card or something you can use so Malcolm doesn’t find out, right?”

“Good…thinking,” Tommy said as he and McKenna stared at her. “How…?”

“Young and the Restless,” she told him. “Katherine lost all her money and fell off the wagon but then Jill got her into rehab even though they’re archenemies.” She shrugged, “Mrs. Mack has a lot of stories.”

“This kid has seriously got to get out more,” McKenna said, looking up to where Tommy was still gaping at her.

He shook his head as if to clear it, “But how can McKenna and I both go? We can’t leave you here by yourself.”

“I’m old enough to know better than to eat the bleach under the sink, jeez!” she said, rolling her eyes again. “I’ll stay here and watch TV while Brandon sleeps upstairs then wait for you guys to come back.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” McKenna told her.

Felicity scowled, “Tommy needs someone to help him and, unless you want me to go there instead, someone needs to keep checking on Brandon to make sure he doesn’t choke on his own vomit or whatever.”

“TV right?” Tommy asked her with a grimace.

She nodded, “Plus, you can’t even get food in your mouth without dropping it on your shirt so you need someone there to make sure you don’t miss anything. McKenna wants to be a cop so she can use this as kind of a practice run.”

“A practice run?” The other girl asked. “A practice run for what?”

“Turning a place over and looking for drugs like on Law & Order,” she told her.

“Seriously, how much TV does this kid watch anyway?” the older girl asked him.

“A lot,” he admitted. “But what about Mrs. Mack?”

“I can handle Mrs. Mack,” she said easily. “If you guys aren’t back in a couple of hours I’ll just hang out with her and say you guys are watching a movie with a bunch of naked girls in it or something.”

“Don’t tell her that!” he growled.

“Why not? She’d believe it after seeing your t-shirt collection, plus she’ll be so busy fussing about you guys finding Jesus that she won’t even check to make sure you’re really upstairs in your room.”

“Again, she has a point…” McKenna admitted.

“Not all of my shirts are like that. I mean, in case you didn’t notice I happen to be wearing a Green Day t-shirt, thank you,” he muttered uncomfortably. “No naked anything; just a bunch of punks
wearing eyeliner while they pretend to be the Clash.”

“Whatever,” Felicity told him. “You two go get his wallet and head to his place. In the meantime, I’m going downstairs to watch Oprah,” she said as she got off the bed and headed to the door.

As she left, the other girl turned to him with a raised eyebrow, “Felicity is a little scary.”

“Yeah, I know.” He sighed and grimaced as he looked down the hall through the open door, “I guess I’ll go get his wallet.”

McKenna nodded as she got up to follow, “Yeah, and while we’re at it, we should get Brandon to spring for a swing set or something because that kid really needs to go outside to play every once in a while.”

The credits began to roll as Brandon got up from his chair to stretch, “Okay, are we going to the mall now or what?”

“Yeah, we can take the SUV that way we can all fit comfortably and have enough room in the back for the TV,” Tommy said, tossing his popsicle wrapper in the trash.

“Ye be canny driving around wi’ th’ girls, dae ye hear me, Tommy Merlyn?” Mrs. McGregor warned. “Ah will hae yer lugs boxed if ye git anither speedin’ ticket, especially wi’ wee Felicity in th’ motor wi’ ye. ’N’ ye better wear yer seat belts as weel.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed as they all filed out of the room.

“What are ‘lugs’ and why is she threatening to put yours in a box?” Brandon asked in confusion.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I just agree and keep moving.”

“Lugs are ears and she just threatened to smack him upside the head if he gets another speeding ticket but that’s okay because, if he does get a ticket, I can just hack the SCPD server and fix it,” Felicity told them before skipping ahead to join McKenna.

“Can she really do that?” Brandon asked Tommy in surprise as he stared after her.

“Yup,” Tommy said with a proud grin. “She hacked the FBI when she was seven.”

“Seriously?” he said, his eyes following the girls as they walked out of the front door. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

Brandon grinned, “Felicity is awesome.”

“She really is,” he agreed.

“Can I borrow her some time?” he asked hopefully.

“No,” Tommy said, punching him on the arm. “Get your own genius; that one’s mine!”

“Now that’s just selfish,” he said rubbing his shoulder as they shut the front door behind them. “Hey, do you think Ethan shops at Banana Republic or what?”

“I have no idea.”
A few hours later, both he and McKenna returned to the pool house where Brandon was watching Felicity as she laughed and danced barefoot in the puddles that had gathered on the deck.

As McKenna slipped off her sandals to join her, Tommy walked up the steps to sit beside his friend on the porch swing, “Hey.”

“Hey,” Brandon said, not meeting his eyes. “Did you get everything?”

“Yeah, wasn’t as bad as we thought it would be,” he told him as he held out his card. “Your ‘guests’ cleaned out most of it and the rest we flushed. We waited around for the cleaning crew then told them to lock up when they were done.”

“Thanks, man,” he said, shoving the credit card into his pocket. He looked at him uncertainly, “Do you need me to clear out now?”

He took a deep breath, thinking about it, “No,” he said at last, “Felicity wants you to stay so, as far as I’m concerned, you can have one of the guest rooms for as long as you need. Just don’t fuck up, okay?”

“I won’t fuck up,” he promised him.

“Not here you won’t,” Tommy told him.

“Because of Felicity,” he nodded.

“Because I got rid of my stash and gave it to Ollie,” he corrected. “If you want to get high you have to go over to his house because I’m dry.”

“That and because of Felicity,” he said again.

“That and because, yeah, if you fuck up in front of Felicity, McKenna and I will kick the ever livin’ shit out of you,” Tommy said gruffly.

“She’s a nice kid,” Brandon told him quietly. He nodded to the girls who were laughing as they splashed water at each other, “I went downstairs after my nap and she gave me some aspirin and brought me a sandwich from the main house. She said she used to do it when her mom would get sick, too.”

“Yeah,” Tommy breathed, his eyes fixed on a happy and smiling Felicity.

“Ollie said her mom was a crack whore or something.”

“Ollie talks too damn much,” Tommy said darkly. He looked to Brandon, “Do me a favor and don’t say that stuff in front of her, okay?”

“I wouldn’t,” he promised then added quietly, “Believe me, I know what that’s like.” He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, “For the record though, Ollie wasn’t saying it to be mean or anything; it was just something he mentioned in passing.”

“Ollie never *means* to fuck up, he just does it.”

“True,” Brandon agreed. “He really is sorry though.”

“Look, if Ollie wants to sack up and come to me like a man, fine,” he told him. “But I meant what I
said; I don’t care anymore. If he wants to be with Laurel, I’m cool with it.”

“Gotcha,” he agreed. “But is it okay if I call him later and tell him that?”

“Do what you want,” he shrugged. “You can even invite him and Laurel to the party McKenna and Felicity are planning for me.”

“Party?” He asked in surprise. “But I thought…?”

“Party, not *party*,” Tommy said wryly. “As in a ‘pool party’ where we all go swimming and cook burgers and stuff on the grill.”

“Oh,” he said nodding slowly. “Ollie’s gonna hate that.”

“Yeah, well, he’ll deal,” he snorted.

“I just meant the ‘pool’ part,” Brandon told him. “You know how he feels about his hair.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter.

“Ow, oh God, don’t make me laugh,” Brandon begged him. “Hangover.”

“Whatever, man,” he chuckled and watched Felicity squeal and point as a rainbow appeared overhead.

“No, you guys will work it out eventually?” Brandon asked him, also looking up at what the girls were pointing to. “You know, the Laurel thing?”

“Yeah, man,” he said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Eventually; always do.” He looked offered him a reassuring look, “Everything’s gonna be okay, I promise.”

“Yeah,” Brandon said quietly as they leaned back on the swing and watched as the sunshine began to peek through the clouds once more.
I get that you're pissed at me, I get that. Been a while since I updated but I have been working on this daily since the last chapter of Still Waters posted and it's 111 pages of Birthday Revenge Party.

111 pages. That deserves something.

Now, I could have had several little tiny chapters out a lot faster, but this way you get all of it.

Forgive me yet?

Enjoy!

---Jen

Also this, you'll find out why:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VK7Z83UbwKM
KARMA
No need for revenge. Just sit back and wait.

Those who hurt you will screw up themselves and if you're lucky, God will let you watch.
Chapter Seven: Karmic Sunshine

“Oof! Ow!”

Tommy awoke clutching his stomach as seventy pounds of Felicity bounced on top of his very full bladder.

“Wake up! It’s Party Revenge Day! It’s Party Revenge Day!” she shouted triumphantly.

“Oh God, off!” he said pushing her to the side as he tumbled out of bed and onto the floor. “Crap, owwww...” Tommy moaned as he laid flat on his back, one eye opened and peering up at the ceiling. “What. The. Hell.”

“It’s Party Revenge Day!” Felicity exclaimed giddily as she looked down at him from the bed, her hair a riotous tangle around her head.

Brandon came stumbling into his room shirtless, his hair sticking up on end as he scratched his butt through a pair of sagging cotton boxers, “I’m not happy,” he said with a grimace from the doorway before stepping over him to fall into bed next to Felicity.

“What’s going on?” Tommy asked fuzzily.

Felicity began to bounce on the bed like it was a trampoline, “It’s Party Revenge Day!”

He blinked, “Wha--?”

“I will give you all the money I have in my trust fund if you can make her go away and never come back,” Brandon begged, his voice muffled by the pillow as he lay face down on the bed, “Ever.”
“What the hell time is it?” Tommy grumbled, rubbing his stomach with a grimace.

“What the hell time is it?” she sang out happily.

“For that matter, why *am* I up this early in the
morning?"

“I figured we should get up early so we could go over our revenge plan, plus McKenna is coming over soon to help me bake you a cake, and—”

“The party isn’t until this afternoon! It’s not for…” he paused, “Let’s see, it’s not for…” he looked at the clock as it changed from 4:35 to 4:36, “ten or eleven hours, give or take.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with a frown. “The party starts at two o’clock, that’s only nine and a half hours.”

“Dude, seriously; I think I know where we could get a barrel and some of that hydro sulphuric whatever acid that turns people into goo,” Brandon mumbled blearily. “I know a guy. If Malcolm asks, we’ll just tell him she’s taking a nap or something.”

“No,” he told him gruffly. “Felicity; go to bed! It’s too early for this crap!”

“But we only have *nine hours* until they get here and we haven’t come up with a plan yet,” she pouted.

“Fine, wake me up in eight hours and forty-five minutes and we’ll come up with something then. Move over,” he snapped, glaring at Brandon.

“Go get on the other side.”

“It’s my bed,” Tommy complained.

“It’s also your kid,” he threw back, “Your loud, vicious, cute kid who woke me up at five--no four o’clock in the goddamn morning shouting about revenge. So, sorry dude, but unless you want me to help you dig a hole in the desert Joe Pesci style, I’m not moving!”

“She’s not my kid,” he grumbled as he walked over to the other side of the bed and plopped down beside him, forcing Felicity to move to the middle or risk getting crushed.

Frankly, at that point, he didn’t care if she did or not; he was going back to sleep.

“Well, she’s not my kid either but, whose ever kid she is, they need to do something about this shit; maybe put her on Ritalin or, I don’t know, get her one of those shock collars that they use to teach dogs to stop barking in the middle of the night,” Brandon grumbled bad-temperedly as he pulled the covers over his shoulder. “Tommy, I love you, man, and I’m not trying to be mean or anything, but your non-kid sucks.”

Tommy covered his eyes with his forearm and mumbled back, “Normally, I’d argue with you, but you might have a point.”

“I know I have a point,” he said gruffly. “That’s why I said it.”

“That’s what I said, now shut the hell up so I can get some sleep.”

“Fuck you,” Brandon shot back, his voice muffled by the pillow.

“Fuck you back,” Tommy slurred. “And watch your language in front of my lousy non-kid.”

“Sorry,” he said almost incoherently before letting out a soft snore.

“Don’t go back to sleep! Come on, please?” Felicity whined shaking them hard and causing both
men to groan piteously. “We need to get up so we can have breakfast before the party people come to set up.”

“What party people?” Tommy asked, lifting his arm from his face and opening one eye to glare at her. “I thought we were grilling some burgers and hanging out by the pool.”

“No, see, I talked to McKenna and then I talked to Malcolm and Mrs. Mack and we, well, *I* came up with this really cool surprise.” She made a happy sound, “You’re gonna love it!”

“What is it?” he asked her with a yawn.

She shook her head and gave him a smug look, “I can’t tell you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her, “Then how do you know I’ll like it?”

“Because, when I told Malcolm, he laughed really hard and for a really long time.”

Brandon lifted his head at that and looked between them, “Dude, that doesn’t sound good.”

Tommy sat up in bed and rubbed his hands through his sleep-matted hair, “Wait, what time did you get up anyway?”

“Couple hours ago,” she told him. “I had to put the brisket I asked Mrs. Mack to buy in the big crockpot, that way it would be done in time for us to finish it on the grill later.”

“Brisket?” Brandon asked, lifting his head to look at her.

“Wait, you were in the kitchen cooking?” Tommy asked in alarm. “By yourself?”

“Yeah…” she said with a shrug.

“Oh crap!” Tommy exclaimed as he got out of the bed and hurried downstairs.

“Dude! Save the meat!” Brandon shouted, sliding out of bed and following him, “I fuckin’ love brisket!”

Both boys bounded down the stairs then skidded into the kitchen.

Tommy glanced around, sniffing the air, “Do you smell anything burning?”

“No,” Brandon said looking around before turning his head towards the double ovens. “I smell something good though. What is that?”

“Noodle kugel,” Felicity said in exasperation as she came up behind them, her hands on her hips.

“Noodle what?” Tommy asked, walking towards the oven to look inside.

“Noodle kugel,” she told him, cutting him off by getting between him and the oven door. “I made it because it’s your birthday.”

“Felicity you’re not allowed to use the kitchen unsupervised,” Tommy said scowling down at her.

She tilted her head and wrinkled her nose in confusion, “says who?”

“Mrs. McGregor!” he told her.

“Since when?”
“Since always,” he said irritably. “She barely even lets me use the microwave much less cook stuff!”

“She lets me cook all the time,” she told him.

“Yeah, while she’s here *supervising you*,” he emphasized.

“No, I asked her and she said it was okay,” Felicity told him with a frown.

“No, she didn’t,” he scoffed before looking at her in surprise, “Did she?”

“Yes,” she said wryly. “I told you I know how to cook, remember?” She sighed, “I help out at the cafeteria at school sometimes…” she said leadingly.

“You mean like as a punishment?” Brandon asked dumbly, both men offering her a puzzled look.

Felicity rolled her eyes at them, “No, because I like to cook, duh. It’s fun and it tastes better because you got to make it yourself.”

“But you’re twelve,” Tommy said uncertainly, “I thought when you said you helped out that meant you watched other people cook or bussed plates or something.”

“No, when I said I could cook, I meant I could actually cook!” she shook her head at him, “And what does me being twelve have to do with anything? Mrs. Mack told me her mom started teaching her to cook when she was four and that, by the time she was my age, she was cooking for her whole family.” At their perplexed expressions she scowled, “I can hack a computer, but you think I can’t read a recipe or turn on the oven by myself? It isn’t rocket science, you know. They have Easy Bake Ovens for six-year-olds! And, even if it was rocket science, I could probably figure that out, too; in case you haven’t noticed, I’m kind of a genius here.”

“She’s got a point,” Brandon murmured as they both stared at her.

“Uh, but you said McKenna was coming to help you cook,” Tommy pointed out.

“Yeah, because she wanted to and because cakes are harder to do than casseroles and stuff that goes in the crock pot,” she said easily.

“McKenna knows how to decorate cakes?” he asked with a frown.

“Yes,” she said wryly. “Remember; she was telling us her aunt owns that bakery downtown?”

“What bakery?” Brandon asked, looking equally perplexed.

“Don’t you guys ever pay attention to anything?” she asked in exasperation as they both looked at her blankly. “The Geeky Monkey…?” she prompted.

“I thought that was a coffee place,” Brandon frowned.

“It is, but it’s also a bakery,” Felicity told them. “She sometimes helps decorate cakes there on the weekends for extra cash. She’s really good at it. She even promised to teach me how to make those little sugar roses.”

“Sugar roses?” Tommy repeated slowly.

“Yeah, you know the kind they make out of buttercream and fondant that goes on top of the cake? I mean, of course, you do! They’re like the *best part*,” she said emphatically.
“They are the best part,” Brandon said slowly, “She does have a point about that,” he said, turning to Tommy who was giving him an incredulous look. “What? She’s right, dude, think about it; everybody always wants the corner piece because that’s where they always put those things when they should just put them all over the cake. Or, better yet, not bother with the cake at all and just sell you the frosting part.”

She nodded vigorously at that, “Yeah, and this way if she teaches me how to do it, we can have as many as we want all the time. We don’t even have to have cake, like Brandon said; we can just have the little buttercream roses *all the time*!”

Brandon’s eyebrows rose at that and he shifted slightly as he looked to Tommy, “You have to admit, that would actually be kind of awesome. And they wouldn’t have to be the little ones either; we could have frosting flowers the size of cupcakes.”

Felicity’s jaw dropped, “Oh. My. God. Yes!”

“I know, right,” he said to her with a nod. “Why they don’t sell those at the store is beyond me.”

“They do sell them at the store!” Tommy shook his head looking between them, “Maybe not the flowers and stuff, but they sell cans of frosting in the bakery aisle! If you guys want to just eat frosting without the cake, just go buy some.”

“It doesn’t taste the same,” Felicity said firmly.

“She’s right,” Brandon agreed. “I think it has something to do with the way they’re shaped.”

“The shape changes the taste of the frosting,” he repeated dubiously.

The other man shrugged, “Yeah, it’s kind of like how French fries and chips are both fried and made from potatoes but they don’t taste the same because they’re shaped different.”

Tommy opened his mouth to say something, but decided to just let that one go since he had no desire to get into the whole ‘chips and fries versus buttercream roses and canned frosting’ debate that early in the morning, “Fine, but what about…?” he asked, tilting his head towards the oven.

“The noodle kugel?” Felicity supplied. “I just wanted to make you something special. I mean, yeah, birthday cake is good and all, but kugel is extra special, you know?”

“Oh.” Tommy looked back at the oven, “And it’s made out of, um, noodles?”

“Yes,” she told him.

“Like spaghetti?”

“No, it’s the egg noodle kind,” she told him. At his blank look, she sighed, “Like the kind Mrs. Mack uses when she makes homemade chicken soup.”

He frowned at that, “But it’s not soup, though, right? Like some kind of baked…soup?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Smells good,” Brandon pointed out.

“Yeah, it kind of does,” Tommy said hesitantly.
A timer dinged and Felicity sighed before heading over to the counter to slip on some oversized oven mitts.

“Whoa,” Tommy said stopping her.

“I have to get the kugel out of the oven,” she told him.

“Let me do it, you might burn yourself or something,” he said, taking the mitts away from her and slipping them on his own hands.

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes before reaching for a kitchen towel and laying it on the table. “Take it out and put it here so it can cool.”

“Okay,” Tommy and Brandon approached the oven warily. He nodded to the other man who opened the oven door. “Here goes,” he muttered before reaching inside carefully and pulling out a casserole dish, the contents bubbling and golden. He set the large Pyrex pan on the table carefully as Brandon looked at it suspiciously.

“I thought you said it was a casserole,” Brandon asked, pointing down at it.

“Yeah,” Tommy frowned, sniffing it again, “It kind of smells like dessert.”

“It is a dessert,” Felicity told him. “I mean, there are all kinds of kugels, but I figured you might like something kind of sweet since it’s your birthday.”

He nodded, looking down at it carefully, “What’s in it? You know, besides noodles?”

Brandon pointed at it again, “And is that cereal on top?”

“Yeah, I added cornflake crumbs to give it a crunchy topping,” she told them, her eyebrows drawing together in consternation.

“So what’s in it?” Tommy asked again.

Felicity put her hands on her hips the way Mrs. Mack did just before she called him an idiot. “Why? Do you think I’m trying to poison you or something?”

He shrugged, “Uh, no?”

“Not on purpose anyway,” Brandon muttered as he continued to look at the contents of the dish distrustfully.

“It’s a noodle kugel like I said,” she told them. “It’s basically noodles and fruit and stuff baked in custard, like a bread pudding.”

“Bread pudding?” Tommy repeated, wrinkling his nose slightly.

“It’s like noodle pie or cheesecake only with the crust on the top instead of the bottom and noodles in the middle,” she said in exasperation.

“Doesn’t look like pie, and I’ve never heard of eating noodles for dessert, have you?” Brandon observed with a frown. “Dude, I don’t know about this; noodle cheesecake? That doesn’t sound right. Plus, kugel? Sounds like the noise you’re gonna be making after you eat it,” he murmured but, from the dirty looks she was giving them, Felicity heard every word.

“If you guys don’t want to eat it then don’t eat it!” she scowled at them. “I was just trying to make
you something special, that’s all! You know what, forget it!”

“No, I’ll eat it,” Tommy assured her as he saw the hurt look in her eyes.

“That’s okay, I’ll just save it for me and McKenna later,” she said with a pout before heading out of the kitchen.

“Felicity, wait!” he called out, rushing up to her and grabbing her arm to pull her back into the kitchen. “I’m sorry, I’ll try it, I promise.”

“You don’t have to,” she said with a sniffle, her head turned away as she refused to look at him.

“Come on, Sunshine; don’t cry,” he said, feeling like an asshole as he noticed her bottom lip begin to tremble.

“I’m not crying,” she said defiantly, her voice cracking slightly.

He sighed and knelt down so he was looking into her eyes which were swimming with tears, “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Her chin wobbled at that, “It’s just that I made it special for you because I didn’t know what else to get you for a present. Mrs. Avey at my school used to make it during the holidays so I wanted to make it for you, too, but you don’t have to eat it if you think it’s too weird or whatever. I even asked Mrs. Mack to pick up rum raisin ice cream even though I like mint chip better because it’s your favorite so you could have them together but I can just give it to somebody else, I guess,” she said, bravely trying to hold back her tears and failing. “I’m sorry I don’t have another present for you,” she warbled as she sniffled again. “I just w-wanted to get you something I made myself but…” she choked back a sob. “I’m sorry, I should have asked first.”

“No, don’t be sorry; I’m sorry! Don’t cry,” he pleaded, feeling a bubble of panic as her shoulders began to shake. “Crap, please? Don’t cry!”

“I just—I just wanted to show how m-much I—,” she said, hiding her face once more. “Mrs. Avey said that kugels were made with love and—and I wanted to make you one because I...I—” she began sobbing piteously into her small hands, unable to continue.

Tommy pulled her into his arms and stroked her hair soothingly, “Don’t cry, Felicity! I’m sorry! We didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. In fact, we’re really, really looking forward to trying it, aren’t we?” he looked at Brandon helplessly as he quickly handed him some paper towels from the roll on the counter so she could blow her nose.

“Right! Absolutely!” Brandon said looking equally panicked as he reached into the drawer for some spoons. “See?”

“Yeah,” he said, getting up and taking a spoon from him, “Yeah, we’ll try it right now.”

“You don’t have to, it’s okay. Besides, it’s too hot right now,” she said glumly. “You’re supposed to wait for it to cool first.”

“We’ll blow on it,” Tommy told her.

“Really?” she asked hesitantly. “You really want to try it?”

“Yeah!” Brandon blustered, “I don’t know about Tommy but….mmm mmm!” he hummed, “Noodles for breakfast are my favorite like, um, cold spaghetti. Or hot spaghetti, only with fruit.” He
paused, “Wait, tomatoes are fruit, right? So hot spaghetti with um…” he looked at the pan, “raisins and cereal on top. De-licious,” he said roundly. “Right, Tommy?”

“Absolutely!” he said with a firm nod. “Cereal covered raisin spaghetti! I can’t wait!”

Her lips twitched upwards slightly, “Okay, but it’s still way too hot to eat. If you try it now you’ll just wind up burning your tongue. If you want, though, we could stick it in the freezer so it can cool faster,” she offered, giving them a shy look. “Plus, there’s ice cream.”

“Rum raisin,” Tommy nodded giving her a bright grin. “We’ll get to that later, but first we’re just taking a little taste, right Brandon?”

The other man hummed again and nodded, “Hmm, yeah, right. Noodles, raisins, and cornflakes in custard; yum-my!” Tommy threw him a dirty look and he shrugged, “What? I thought we were still doing that?”

“Okay, here goes!” they exchanged looks before both of them plunged their spoons in the casserole, blew on it to cool the still bubbling mix, then took a cautious bite.

“Ah! Hot! Ow!” Brandon said open-mouthed as steam erupted from his mouth like a geyser.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ah!” Tommy chewed the warm pudding carefully so as to not burn his tongue, allowing it to fill his senses with the taste of cinnamon, raisins, and vanilla.

Both men swallowed and looked at each other then back down at the dish on the table.

“Is it okay?” Felicity asked nervously. “Because, if you don’t like it, I can--?”

“No, I mean, yeah. That’s not bad actually,” Tommy told her tilting his head slightly as he looked from his spoon then back down to the dish. “Not bad at all.”

“Hot, but pretty tasty,” the other man agreed.

“Seriously, you don’t have to eat anymore if you don’t like it,” Felicity said, looking between them bashfully. “You won’t hurt my feelings; honest.”

“No, I like it.” Tommy rolled the cooling taste of it around his slightly scorched tongue, “Really.”

“Okay, well then you should leave it to cool now so you can eat it later at the party for dessert along with the cake,” Felicity told them. “If you guys want breakfast, I thought we could make eggs or oatmeal or something. Either that or we could go to the House of Pancakes and have McKenna meet us there. They’re supposed to be open 24/7 so…?”

“House of Pancakes is okay, I guess.” Tommy’s eyes strayed towards the casserole dish again, “We could order the Big Birthday Boy Breakfast Feast.”

“The one with the tall stack and the frosting?” Brandon said absently as he licked his spoon and eyed the kugel once more.

Tommy nodded as he sucked on his spoon as well, humming a bit at the lingering taste of caramelized sugar and spice, “Yeah, and maybe some sausages and stuff.”

“I could go for some bacon,” the other man nodded, his attention firmly fixed on the still bubbling hot dish between them. “Maybe some sunny-side up eggs…hash browns…”

“We could even get the waiters to sing you Happy Birthday,” Felicity said brightly.
“Yeah, that sounds cool,” Tommy shrugged, “Or...?”

Brandon’s eyebrow rose slightly, “Or?”

He gestured towards the still steaming pan in front of them, “I mean, it does have cereal on top so that makes it kind of breakfast-y, right? Plus, some cold milk...you know, for the calcium and...stuff.”

“But it’s for dessert,” Felicity told them. “You should eat something healthy,” she frowned at them. “You know, like what Mrs. Mack cooks.”

“Yeah, well, we eat syrup on waffles and stuff, right?” Tommy asked her. “I mean, waffles are kind of like a breakfast dessert...thing, and she makes them all the time.”

“Plus, the Big Boy Breakfast Feast?” Brandon said pointedly, “I mean, don’t get me wrong; I have that thing all the time—like *all* the time. House of Pancakes is my jam and the people that work there think it’s my birthday every other weekend, that’s how much I eat there. Still, it’s six huge double chocolate chip pancakes layered with frosting and sprinkles. While that makes for a very tasty treat after spending the entire day out on your board or after a hard night of partying, it’s not exactly healthy, you know?”

“He’s right,” Tommy said, jumping on the bandwagon. “I mean, compared to all that, this thing is loads healthier, right? Like you said, it’s got fruit, cereal--”

“Calcium,” the other man offered. “You also mentioned calcium. With a glass of milk for even more--”

“Calcium,” he repeated helpfully, “And Vitamin D.”

“Exactly. Does a body good like in the ads with the hot naked chicks wearing milk mustaches,” Brandon nodded earnestly.

“I guess so...” she said slowly. “But it’s still too hot, remember?”

“Well, like you said, there’s ice cream in the freezer,” he said glancing at the large Sub Zero.

“Ice cream for breakfast?” Felicity asked dubiously.

“Why not?” Tommy shrugged, “It’s got milk and raisins in it.”

“And rum,” Brandon nodded then backtracked at the look Tommy threw him, “Probably not real rum, though, ‘cause, otherwise, they’d card you at the ice cream shop and stuff.”

“Calcium, fruit...other stuff,” Tommy said slowly.

“Vitamin D,” the other man threw in. “That’s in ice cream, too, right? I think that’s good for your eyes or your brain or something. Whatever it is, we could probably use as much of that stuff as we can get.”

Tommy looked at her steadily, “C’mom, Sunshine; you have to admit, that’s a totally nutritious breakfast.”

“Totally,” Brandon echoed.

“I guess...” Felicity said hesitantly.
“Great! I’ll get the bowls,” Brandon said headed for the cupboard as Tommy walked over to the freezer to pull out the large container of Häagen-Dazs.

Tommy scooped out the last of the melted ice cream from his bowl before frowning at the empty casserole pan, “Is this the only one you made?”

“Yeah,” Felicity said slowly, looking between the two of them.

“You should make another,” Brandon said nodding enthusiastically as he used his spoon to scrape off some of the leftover topping that was stuck on the wall of the dish. “You know, for the party. In fact, you should make one for the party, then two more; one for each of us.”

“Yeah, so three. Or more,” Tommy mused as he frowned resentfully at his friend. “Dude, you ate the last piece of crust.”

“So?” he shrugged.

“So that’s the best part and it was on my side of the pan,” he told him. “That’s not cool.”

“Felicity’s making more, though, right?” Brandon asked then turned to her. “You are making more?”

“Three more,” Tommy added, “One for each of us.”

The other boy nodded, “And one for the party.”

“What he said.”

Felicity looked between them, “Um, I don’t know if we have enough ingredients left for three. Plus, you guys ate all the ice cream.”

“Yeah, we did,” Tommy said with a grimace. “We could go to the store,” he mused. “I think they open pretty early.”

“I’ll go get some pants,” Brandon said, getting up from the table.

McKenna arrived later that morning, her eyebrows raised in surprise as she observed the two pans of kugel cooling on the table and a third that was being split between the two boys as Felicity stared between them in disbelief, “Wow, that’s a lot of food. Is all that for the party?”

“No, this is just for us,” Brandon told her, “Right Tommy?”

He nodded, “Yeah, the burgers and stuff are for everybody else but this is ours.”

“I’ve never seen anybody eat that much,” Felicity told her wide-eyed. “This is the third one they’ve had this morning.”

“You guys ate three of those things?” McKenna asked them.

“Two and a half,” Tommy corrected.

“Yeah, after we finish this one, *then* it will be three,” Brandon garbled around his spoon.
“Oh, sorry; my bad. Two and a half pans of dessert casserole for breakfast is perfectly reasonable,” she snorted, “You guys are going to get sick from eating that much junk, you know that right?”

“No, we won’t. Besides, it’s not junk, it’s practically health food,” Tommy told her around the large mouthful of said casserole that he was shoveling into his mouth as Brandon nodded enthusiastically beside him. He reached for the empty container of ice cream and frowned, “Damn. Oh well, good thing we picked up a couple of extra cartons. How many different kinds of kugel are there anyway?”

“Um, a lot,” Felicity said uncertainly. “Some are sweet, but some have meat and cheese and stuff.”

“Really?” Brandon said, looking up with interest. “What else?”

“Um, potatoes?”

“Dude, we should go back to the store,” Brandon said turning to Tommy eagerly.

“Yeah,” he said nodding. “I just wish we knew about that earlier, we could have picked it up while we were getting the other stuff.”

“You went grocery shopping?” McKenna asked dubiously, “The two of you?”

“Yeah,” Tommy told her.

“Unsupervised?” she asked dryly.

“Well, Felicity was there,” Brandon offered. At Tommy’s dirty look, he shrugged, “What? She was.”

McKenna smirked at that, “When was this?”

“This morning,” Tommy answered blithely. “We are capable of buying food, you know.”

“Yeah, and not just at the drive-thru,” Brandon said in solidarity. “Even though we did that, too.” Tommy glared at him again, “We got coffee, remember? It was early!” he protested as the other man shook his head in disgust.

“This morning?” she asked as she observed both of them, “You went to the store this morning wearing that?”

“What’s wrong with what we’re wearing?” Tommy asked looking down at his thin cotton lounge pants in a repeating green foaming beer mug print with the words, ‘Kiss Me, I’m Irish’ on the crotch along with a worn and faded t-shirt of Daffy Duck spitting the words, ‘Who Gives A Quack!’ in bold letters.

“You’re wearing pajamas,” she told him.

“Yeah, but it was early like Brandon said,” Tommy said reluctantly.

“Wow,” she breathed. “You guys give new meaning to the term ‘slackers’.”

“Hey, unlike Tommy, I didn’t go in my pajamas; *I* put on actual pants, thank you,” Brandon said defensively.

“You’re still in your boxers,” she said slowly.

“I didn’t say I kept them on, I just said I put them on to go to the store,” he told her.
Her mouth fell open slightly and she looked at him incredulously, “You took your pants back off to eat breakfast?”

“Of course,” Brandon told her. “It’s called not wanting to get all bound up while you’re eating. Plus, this way I don’t mess up my pants if I spill some.”

“Unbelievable,” she muttered, setting her canvas shopping bag on the counter. She looked at the younger girl who was still dressed in a sleep-rumpled pink and purple nightie, dirty mismatched men’s gym socks, and her uncombed hair falling in a wild tangle down her back. “Okay, so if you guys went out then why is Felicity still in her PJ’s? You guys didn’t just leave her here by herself, did you?”

“Oh of course not!” Tommy said with a scowl.

Brandon frowned as well, “Yeah, jeez! What do you think we are; stupid or something? Besides, we couldn’t just leave her; we needed her to tell us what to buy.”

“You don’t want me to answer that,” McKenna said flatly. She turned to the younger girl, “They made you go to the store in your nightgown?”

“They wouldn’t let me change, said it would take too long,” she said glumly. “People kept asking me where my parents were and if I was okay. Also, the cashier wanted to know if I was being taken somewhere against my will.”

“Yeah, that was uncool,” Brandon said with a scowl. “Seriously, I mean just because two guys are shopping with a little kid who happens to be wearing pajamas, it doesn’t make them perverts. That’s like profiling.”

“Oh my God,” McKenna breathed, rubbing her temples with a pained look.

“What?” Brandon huffed. “I was seriously offended. Seriously. It wasn’t like she was naked; we even made her wear her socks. And,” he said pointedly, “I still say that socks count!”

McKenna looked at him in confusion, “What?”

“They got mad because there was a sign that said, ‘No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service’, so Brandon made me put on some socks he found stuffed under the seats of his Jeep,” Felicity explained.

“Are you kidding me?” the other woman burst out with a look of disgust. “You made her put on your fungus-ridden used gym socks?”

“They were clean!” Brandon insisted. “Pretty…clean. Besides, socks are foot coverings; ergo, socks are shoes!”

“I think it was more because you didn’t have on shoes,” Felicity said slowly, “Or socks. Or a shirt.”

McKenna’s head swiveled around to him, “Are you--? What?”

“It was hot,” he told her. “It’s a stupid rule anyway, especially since, like, people around here surf and stuff. I mean, what if you spent the day catching some waves then felt like buying some groceries or something, hmm? Like for a bonfire or a clambake on the beach, what then? The beach is right there! Are they just going to turn people away; refuse to sell them stuff to fill their coolers because they enjoy outdoor activities? Because, I’ve got news for you, that’s discrimination! People get sued and picketed for that stuff! I even said as much to that manager,” he said in a superior manner, “I told him my dad has a whole fleet of lawyers I could call, plus I could have fifty surfers in
that parking lot in less than ten minutes who don’t have jobs so they can be shirtless out there all day long! And remember, I still had on pants. And they weren’t even jeans either, they were khakis; *Dockers* khakis. That alone should’ve more than made up for the no shoes and no shirt thing.”

“Yeah,” McKenna said roundly, “I mean, what were they thinking?”

“That’s what I said when that cashier dude tried to kick us out!” Brandon scowled. “And then, when he asked Felicity if she needed a policeman, I went off! That’s when we asked to speak to the manager and I told him about the whole ‘lawyers’ and ‘pissed off surfer dudes’ thing. I meant it, too, boy! I was about to get rowdy up in that joint!”

Tommy nodded, “You know, they’re lucky they gave us all those store coupons, otherwise I wasn’t going to go back there ever again.”

“Me neither,” Brandon said firmly. “Not that I’d ever been grocery shopping before but, if I ever decided to go again, it probably wouldn’t have been there, that’s for sure.”

“You’re both just…” she closed her eyes, “Unbelievable.”

“Whatever,” Brandon said dismissively then looked down at the nearly empty pan of kugel, “You know, now that I think about it, I am kind of over sweet now.”

“Me, too,” Tommy said, putting down his spoon. “It was good, but now I could go for some protein.”

“We should get Felicity to make us one of these things with some meat and cheese,” the other man nodded in agreement.

Tommy looked to Felicity, “Do we have enough stuff for that?” Before she could answer he turned to Brandon, “Didn’t we get a coupon for some cheese and stuff.”

“Yeah, man, like seventy-five cents off the store brand,” he said eagerly.

“Seventy-five--You’re rich; both of you,” McKenna said pointedly.

“So?” Tommy asked her.

“So why are you bothering with coupons all of the sudden?”

“Are you kidding? It’s like free money,” Brandon said, reaching for his pants that were lying across another chair and pulling out several coupon books. “See? We’ve got one for a dollar off cereal, and here’s one for two dollars off fabric softener.” He looked up at the other man, “Do we need some of that?”

“It couldn’t hurt to pick some up,” Tommy shrugged.

McKenna looked between them in disbelief, “I don’t—I don’t even know how to respond to that. You two have finally crossed over into a level of absurdity that defies all logic.”

“Hey, do you know how valuable these things are?” Brandon asked, waving around the coupon books with a pointed look. “They don’t just give these out to anybody, you know. You’re only supposed to get one with a fifty dollar purchase.”

Tommy glowered at her, “Yeah, and only one per customer, and we got *five*. Each.”

“*And* they’re good for the rest of the month, *including* Double Coupon Tuesdays, plus they’re
supposed to be sending us these special discount cards through the mail for added savings!” the other boy stated triumphantly.

“And it was free,” Tommy said in solidarity. “And not just because we’re rich either, apparently anybody can sign up for this stuff so, if you wanted to, we could show you how to do it, too.”

“Yeah, we totally have the grocery store hook up now,” the other man said smugly. “That place was awesome. There’s like a whole world of stuff out there we never even knew about. Like, did you know that your grocery rewards points can count towards discounts on gas?” he asked roundly.

“And when they said we could double our points just by using a credit card—mind blown!” he huffed. “It was amazing. I mean, you should see how much we saved. Tommy, do you still have the receipt?”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling a long strip of paper from his pocket and holding it out, “Plus, they even have coupons on the back.”

“Really?” Brandon exclaimed, his eyes widening as he took the receipt from him, “I didn’t even notice that before; cool. Hey; a dollar off all meat and vegetable platters at the deli counter.” He looked up at Tommy eagerly, “We should go back and get some of those for the party.”

“I take it back, you guys are awesome,” McKenna said dryly. “You’re like the kings of early morning pajama-clad grocery shopping; a couple of real bargain hunters.”

“You joke, but Tommy even got a whole page of green stamps,” Brandon said with a disgruntled look.

“Goddamn right,” the man in question huffed. “A couple more trips and we’ll have enough for a free gravy boat with the purchase of a four-piece serving set.”

“Gravy boat; boo yah!” Brandon said with a fist pump. “Call me a pervert; well, suck on that, you pony-tail wearing cashier bee-otch!” He turned to the other man, “We should totally go grocery shopping more often since, you know, we’re apparently really good at it.”

“We should,” Tommy agreed.

“Ay dios mio,” McKenna muttered, looking heavenward.

“I wonder what other stuff we could buy.” Brandon’s face lit up as he flipped through the coupons in his hand, “Hey, two fifty off ground round. I wonder if we could do one of those kugel things up like a pizza? You know, like a pizza with noodles and cheese, maybe some sauce with some hamburger and Italian sausage…”

Felicity bit her lip and looked up at McKenna who just shook her head, “Um…but, um, wouldn’t that be…”?

“That’s brilliant!” Tommy nodded, “Seriously, why hasn’t anybody ever thought of that before?”

“They have, you moron! It’s called ‘lasagna’!” McKenna burst out.

The two men looked up at her then at each other.

“Oh,” Brandon said flushing, “Right.”

“Yeah, but this has the little noodles instead of the big noodles,” Tommy said defensively.
“Yeah,” Brandon agreed, sitting up straight in his chair. “I’ll bet you no one ever thought of making that kind of lasagna, huh!” He turned to Tommy, his eyes lighting up once more, “Ooh, you know that idea you had about the ranch flavored nacho pork rinds?”

“What?” McKenna said in disgust.

“Don’t ask,” Felicity said in low tones. “Trust me.”

“Yeah?” Tommy asked, ignoring them.

The other man held his hands up excitedly, “What if—and I’m just spit-balling here—but what if we came up with some kind of mix or something where people could make noodle kugel lasagna and just add the meat. You know, like a box of noodles with all the seasonings and sauces in packets and stuff?”

“That’s genius,” Tommy breathed. “We should call my dad and see if we can get a patent on that before someone else thinks of it!”

“They already have that!” McKenna said, rubbing her temples with a pained expression. “Oh my God, it’s called Hamburger Helper, you dumbasses!”

Both men looked at her in surprise. Brandon glanced down at the coupons he was holding and frowned, “Aw crap, she’s right,” he said, “Buy two, get one free. Ooh, Beef Stroganoff. And Cheeseburger Macaroni! Are these any good?“ he asked, showing them to McKenna who just glared at him. “What? What did I say?“

“Unbelievable,” she muttered.

Tommy frowned, “They don’t have ranch flavored cheesy pork rinds, though, right?”

McKenna gave him a disgusted look, “Not that I know of, no.”

“Don’t listen to her, Tommy; that idea is off the chain,” Brandon said firmly.

“It’s not ‘off the chain’,“ the other woman said firmly. “It’s revolting.” She shook her head at them, “Billionaires or no, I cannot believe the two of you are so bougie that you’ve never even heard of Hamburger Helper.”

“We’ve heard of it!” Brandon objected. “We just…didn’t know what it was, that’s all.”

At her snort of derision, Tommy broke in. “He’s right; don’t hate because we’re filthy rich and, therefore, unused to exotic delicacies like Hamburger Helper. All we ever get to eat is stuff like lobster and caviar. Plus, you know, you shouldn’t call someone a dumbass on their birthday,” he said with a look of mock hurt.

“Oh shut the hell up, Merlyn,” she huffed.

“Still, it’s not a bad idea though. I could totally go for some little noodle lasagna,” Brandon said eagerly. “Wanna go back and get some Hamburger Helper?” he held up another coupon, “Oh, and they also have Tuna Helper and Pork Helper.” He wrinkled his nose slightly, “Tuna Helper Fettuccine Alfredo; okay, so that does sound a little off-putting but maybe we could give the other ones a shot first.”

McKenna shook her head in exasperation, “How the two of you have managed to function on your own this long is beyond me.”
Brandon pouted, “What? I’m hungry; it’s hard to think on an empty stomach, okay?”

“Empty stomach?” McKenna repeated then pointed to the leftover kugel, “After three pans of dessert?”

“Two and a half; plus, like you said, that was dessert,” Tommy said pointedly, coming to his buddy’s defense. “Now we’re hungry for real food.”

The other man scowled, “Yeah!”

“How can you still be hungry? It’s like they have extra stomachs or something,” Felicity breathed in amazement.

“Teenage boys are like that,” McKenna said with a sigh as she turned to lean against the sink. “My mom used to have to practically put a lock on the fridge when my brothers and their friends would come over.”

“Hey, he ate half,” Tommy said, pointing to Brandon.

“Yeah, plus it wasn’t all that filling because we used the noodles without the yolks,” Brandon said defensively. “And all the ingredients we bought were either low fat or fat-free so it was like eating air!”

The other man nodded, “Exactly.”

McKenna glanced at the printed out page on the counter. “Is this the recipe you used?” she asked Felicity who nodded. The older girl hummed as she picked it up and began reading out loud, “Let’s see; two sticks of butter, a *pound* of cooked egg noodles, *six* eggs, two cups of sour cream, a cup of sugar, not to mention an entire package of cream cheese, spices, and a bunch of dried fruit, and that’s per pan; how many did they eat again? Oh yeah, two *and a half* pans worth.”

“Plus, a ton of rum raisin ice cream,” Felicity added.

“Right,” she looked up from the page, “Yeah, that’s what I call a light breakfast alright. I hope neither one of you are lactose intolerant because, if you are, let’s just say you better hope nobody lights a match otherwise the whole place could blow.”

Felicity wrinkled her nose at that, “Ew.

“Whatever,” Tommy said rolling his eyes.

McKenna sighed, ‘C’mon Felicity, grab some bowls so we can start on the cake.”

“Okay.”

Brandon got up from his chair and stretched before snatching up his pants and hitching his thumb towards the door to the kitchen, “Hey man, I’m gonna go catch a shower.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Tommy raised his arm and surreptitiously gave his pits a sniff, “Definitely.”

“Hey Brandon,” McKenna called out, “Turn the oven to 350 since you’re closest.”

“’Kay,” he said, walking over to the ovens and setting the top one to the correct temperature, his khakis slipping from his grasp. Just as Tommy got up from his chair, the other man bent down to pick them up and—
“Gross!” Felicity exclaimed as a loud ripping sound echoed throughout the kitchen.

“Seriously, Merlyn?” the other girl said as she held her hand over her nose defensively.

Tommy flushed, “It wasn’t me!” A foul stench of ungodly proportions filled the room, replacing the aroma of warm cinnamon and vanilla with something decidedly less pleasant. “Goddamn, man!” he shouted, fanning the air between them.

Brandon shifted uncomfortably, “Excuse me.”

“Shit! Dude, there’s something seriously wrong with you! I think something crawled up your ass and died,” Tommy said, backing out of the room.

“It smells so bad,” Felicity whined, both hands coming up to cover her nose and mouth.

“Let’s go,” McKenna said, grabbing the other girl’s hand as they hastily evacuated the area as well.

“What about the cake?” Felicity asked, stumbling behind her, her voice muffled by her hand.

“It can wait!”

As they all left, Brandon called out behind them, “What? I said excuse me!”

“You okay, man?” Tommy asked as Brandon came out of the bathroom.

“Yeah,” he said with a grimace. “I think that was the last of it.”

“Good.” He looked up then frowned, “You did turn on the fan right?”

“Uh…” the other man looked behind him then shrugged, “I can’t remember but, trust me, dude; fan or no, it’s gonna take a while to clear that out so if you gotta go then, for your own sake, find someplace else to unload.”

“We probably shouldn’t have tried to eat that last pan,” Tommy said ruefully.

“It was good going in, just not so much going out,” the other man agreed, rubbing his stomach.

“Next time we stop at one.”

Tommy frowned, “One for both of us or one each?”

“Each,” Brandon snorted, “I mean, let’s not go overboard; we’ll just cut down on the ice cream next time.”

He nodded then hitched his chin towards the bedroom door, “What do you suppose they’re setting up out there anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Brandon said, picking up his controller and sitting down with a wince before shifting slightly in his chair. “We’ll find out soon enough, though; it’s almost two o’clock, right?”

“Yes.” He restarted the game before glancing back towards the windows again. Several large trucks had pulled up to the drive about an hour ago prompting McKenna and Felicity to banish them upstairs until further notice.

He paused the game.
Brandon threw his hands up in frustration, “Bro, come on! I totally had that guy lined up for a kill shot!”

“We can play this game anytime, man. What say we head downstairs and see what’s going on—just for a minute,” Tommy asked hopefully. “They’ll never even know we were down there.”

“And risk upsetting Felicity again? No way,” he said, pressing a button to unpause the game.

“Just this morning you said she was a cuter version of Chuckie,” Tommy reminded him wryly.

Brandon threw him a look, “She is,” he said flatly. “Emphasis on ‘cute’. Seeing her cry because we wouldn’t eat what she cooked made me feel like I was tossing kittens into a blender or something. I mean, I liked it, don’t get me wrong. Even if my ass is paying the price for it now, that shit was off the hook, but I would’ve eaten it even if it tasted worse than the way your crapper smells right now just to get her to stop crying.” He shook his head as he turned his attention back to the video game, “Swear to God, that kid of yours should come with a warning label. I don’t know how, but it’s like she just gets under your skin; like she’s got toxic levels of adorableness or something and you can’t escape it.”

“I know what you mean,” Tommy said with a sigh. “If she ever figures out how damn dangerous she is we’re all doomed.”

The other man shot him a pointed look, “Exactly, so do us both a favor and don’t mess this up, man. Let’s just stay in here until she tells us otherwise, or she’ll get upset again and then God knows what she’ll make us eat next. If not for her then do it for my ass. I’ve already had to chug half a bottle of Pepto today. If you make me miss out on brisket later because you screwed around and made her cry I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Yeah,” Tommy sighed, “You might have a point. Still I wish I knew what they were up to.”

“Me, too,” he admitted reluctantly. “Not enough to go look but; what was it, three? Four delivery vans? And all that for a simple little birthday party,” the other man said thoughtfully. “Did she hire a caterer or something?”

“I don’t think so but, even if she did, four vans worth?” His brow furrowed as he tried to concentrate on the action on the screen. “How many people are coming to this thing anyway?” Tommy turned to him, “Didn’t they ask you to handle that part; who did you invite?”

“They said you said to keep it small so the only people I invited besides the four of us are Ollie, Laurel, and Sara,” Brandon said with a shrug.

“And you told them it was just a simple grill out and not to bring a ton of people with them, right? Invitation only.”

“Yeah, of course,” he snorted. “I even told Ollie when he offered to bring a keg that this was ‘G’ rated and that your old man said no booze because of Felicity so he needed to leave that and the ‘party favors’ at home.”

“Good,” Tommy said before glancing towards the window again furtively as the sound of another vehicle pulling into the drive reached them. “Okay, that’s it,” he said, putting down the controller and getting up.

The other man gave him a warning look, “Tommy, dude…”

He turned to him, one hand already on the doorknob, “I’m just taking a quick peek, that’s all.”
“Are you sure about this?”

Tommy looked at the other man’s worried countenance and grinned, “Sobriety has made you kind of a pussy, you know that? I can’t believe you’re this scared of a tiny little girl.”

“It’s not just Felicity I’m afraid of,” he said flatly. “It’s McKenna. Don’t get me wrong, she’s hot, but she’s also more than a little scary. I don’t care if I sound like a pussy or not, but getting my ass stomped is not my idea of fun.”

Tommy looked at the other man’s well-toned swimmer’s physique wryly, “What? You don’t think you could take her or something?”

“No, no I don’t,” he said without hesitation. “There is no doubt in my mind that she could kick my ass and yours in a heartbeat. Besides, I’ve done a lot of fucked up shit in my time but there’s no way in hell I’m hitting a girl even in self-defense.”

Tommy sighed, “True. I guess we can wait a while longer.”

The other man shifted his weight slightly. “Shit,” Brandon cursed, “Fine, but if she cries I’m totally throwing you under the bus and saying it was all your fault, understood?”

“Got it,” he grinned. “Come on.”

“It’s just a peek, right?” Brandon asked as he followed him downstairs quietly.

“Just a peek,” he agreed as they entered the foyer but, before they could sneak out the back to see what was going on in the pool house, the front doorbell rang.

The two men looked at each other.

“Damn it,” Tommy cursed.

“At least now we have a good excuse for being downstairs if they catch us,” Brandon said drolly as he followed close behind.

“Dude, she’s not going to sic McKenna on you so suck it up already.”

“Even if she doesn’t, Felicity’s kind of vicious, too, or have you forgotten that part?”

“Felicity’s not that vicious,” Tommy said with a huff. “Besides, she’s only twelve; what is it you think she’s gonna do?”

The other man looked at him askance, “She might be twelve, but she’s still an evil genius so excuse me if I don’t want to wind up in Guantanamo Bay or some shit because you got curious.”

He stopped to stare at that, “Guantanamo Bay?”

The other man shrugged, “Yeah; unless it comes with sweet curls and Dr. Zog’s Sex Wax, waterboarding is definitely not my idea of a good time.”

“Felicity can’t send people to Guantanamo Bay,” Tommy said flatly as the doorbell rang again.

Brandon followed him to the door, “How do you know? After all, she hacked the FBI, right? Did you ever think to ask what else can she do with her scary genius brain?”

He paused, his hand on the door. “Good point,” he said before shaking it off.
The door opened, revealing a highly uncomfortable looking Ollie along with a pissed off Laurel and a beaming Sara. They were all dressed for a pool party, even Ollie (albeit grudgingly from the look on his face). Both Laurel and Sara were dressed in short shorts, the straps of their bikinis peeking out from under their brightly colored cotton camisoles, while Ollie was dressed in a muscle shirt and board shorts, his hair in its usual careless and carefully moussed disarray.

Without meaning to, his eyes lighted on his (former?) best friend’s hair as Felicity’s sarcastic tones rang through his mind.

“When did you get a dog?” Ollie asked in confusion.

“Huh?” he heard an aborted snicker and slanted his eyes towards Brandon who was looking pointedly away from him and towards the ceiling.

“You said something about a dead Shih Zhu,” he said with a frown.

“I’m so sorry, Tommy,” Laurel said, her face crumpling in sympathy. “How did it die?”

“I don’t know how it died, but it wound up on Ollie’s head apparently,” Brandon mumbled under his breath as he began to snicker once more.

“Oh, no!” Tommy said quickly. “I just meant that, uh, the neighbor’s Shih Zhu keeps running over here and I thought that you guys were him so I was all, ‘Dead Shih Zhu’! Because…yeah, *annoying*, right?” he said with an awkward chuckle.

Laurel gave him an odd look, “You answered the door thinking we were the neighbor’s Shih Zhu?”

“Yeah,” Tommy said, clearing his throat.

“But we rang the doorbell,” Sara said slowly.

“Huh,” Tommy said, pursing his lips. “Oh, um, he does that sometimes,” he said nodding slowly. “It’s a…really smart breed apparently.”

Laurel looked from him to the doorbell then back, “Aren’t Shih Zhu’s kind of small? How could it even reach the button?”

“It jumped,” he replied carefully. “They…jump a lot. They’re very…um,” he gestured helplessly, “Jumpy.”

“You, the neighbors used to work for Siegfried and Roy,” Brandon said in a deadpan. “Only instead of using tigers in their act, they used poodles.”

“Shih Tzus,” Tommy corrected.

The other man didn’t even blink, “Shih Tzus. The one who keeps ringing the doorbell has a thing for Tommy, though. Personally I think it’s because he eats a lot of bacon.”

Tommy gnashed his teeth together and shot his so-called friend a dirty look.

“What’s his name?” Sara asked.

Tommy turned at that, “Hmm?”

“His name?” she repeated.
Tommy’s brows drew together at that, “Oh, uhhh…”


“Shih Tzu,” Tommy muttered.

“Shih Tzu.”

“Wow, sounds like a really cool little dog,” Sara grinned.

“Yeah, he’s something else,” Tommy breathed.

“Right,” Ollie said roundly. “So buddy, you gonna invite us in, or what?”

“Oh shit! Yeah, come in!” Tommy said quickly as he opened the door to usher them inside.

“Happy Birthday!” Sara said with a grin as she entered the foyer.

“Thanks,” Tommy said with a smile as he looked the three of them over.

“Happy Birthday, Tommy,” Laurel greeted, pausing to kiss him softly on the cheek before cutting her eyes towards Ollie.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” he said, reaching up to touch his cheek as his eyebrows drew together in consternation.

Ollie sighed and clapped him on the shoulder, “Happy Birthday, bro,” he said, his face solemn.

“Thanks,” he nodded.

“I want you to know I’m really sorry,” the other man said quietly. “Seriously bro, I--”

He shook his head, “It’s okay, man; we’ll talk about it later but, for now, we’re good.”

Ollie gave him a hopeful look, “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said with a wry grimace. “It’s okay.”

Ollie nodded, “Still, I know I fucked up and--”

“Don’t sweat it; fucking up is kind of our thing,” he said with a shrug.

Ollie chuckled at that and nodded, “Yeah, I guess it is.” He looked around the seemingly empty house and frowned, “Hey, are we early? Where is everyone?”

“Oh, uh, Felicity and McKenna are at the pool house setting up,” Brandon offered from next to him.

“McKenna’s here?” Laurel asked.

“Yeah,” Tommy said confused by the note of something in her tone. “She and Felicity are the ones who planned this thing.”

“Who’s Felicity?” Sara asked curiously.

“She’s Tommy’s,” Brandon offered up blithely.

Laurel’s brow furrowed in confusion, “Tommy’s what?”
“Just Tommy’s,” he shrugged.

Laurel glared at him, “What does that even mean? Like she’s his girlfriend or something?”

“No! God, no!” Tommy said quickly.

“Then who is she?” Laurel asked in a slightly brittle tone that set his teeth on edge for some reason.

“Felicity’s just some orphan Tommy’s old man stuck him with,” Ollie answered with a snort.

Tommy turned to the other man at that but before he could say anything, Brandon beat him to the punch.

“Hey man, that’s not cool,” he said with a hint of anger.

Ollie looked taken slightly aback at that, “Huh? What did I say?”

“You know what you said,” the other man said pointedly.

“I just said she was the orphan—”

“Yeah, and that’s not cool. She’s not an orphan; she’s got us.”

Both Tommy and Ollie looked at him in surprise.

“Us?” Ollie repeated.

“Yeah; us,” he said firmly, “Me, Tommy, and McKenna; us. And Malcolm didn’t stick her with anybody, Felicity belongs to Tommy. She’s his kid now.”

“She’s Tommy’s what?” Laurel asked with a snort.

“She’s Tommy’s kid,” Brandon repeated stone-faced then paused, “Sort of. The point is that you shouldn’t call her the orphan because that’s not cool, man.”

Okay,” Ollie said roundly, trying to play off his obvious embarrassment at being called out in front of both Laurel and Sara. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend your delicate sensibilities there, McNamara. Next time I’ll remember not to call her ‘the orphan’ around you.”

“Do that,” Brandon said, his usual devil may care expression replaced by a look of deadly intent, “And while you’re at it, watch what you say in front of her, too, because, not to offend your ‘delicate sensibilities’, but if you hurt her feelings then I’m going to kick your ass, got it, *Queen*?”

“Fine,” Ollie said shortly. “Like I said, no offense meant, bro.”

“No offense taken, bro,” Brandon gave him one last look of warning before meeting Tommy’s eyes, “I’m going to go check on the girls and let them know everyone’s here.”

“Thanks, dude,” Tommy nodded as the other man left to cool down.

Ollie waited until Brandon left before turning to him with a scowl, “What crawled up his ass all of the sudden?”

“He’s going through some stuff right now, plus he and Felicity have gotten kind of close,” Tommy said hesitantly. “It’s cool.”
“Whatever,” Ollie said, glowering after the other man before turning back to Tommy, “Hey, and you
know I didn’t mean anything by that, right? I was just kidding.”

“I know,” he assured him. “Still, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t—”

“Yeah, no; fuck no,” Ollie said quickly. “I wouldn’t; not in front of the kid, I promise.”

“Thanks,” Tommy said tightly as he rubbed the back of his neck with a smile that was more of a
grimace.

“I guess I should also apologize to Brandon,” Ollie said with a slightly wounded expression as he cut
his eyes towards the French doors leading to the pool house.

“Like I said, he’s just going through some stuff. I’ll talk to him,” Tommy said easily.

“Yeah,” the other man said gruffly. “You know, I’ve never seen Brandon go off like that before. Are
you sure you don’t want me to take off? I mean, five minutes in the door and I’m already ruining
your party.”

“For a second I thought he was actually going to punch you,” Laurel agreed even though she was
still obviously pissed at him.

They had a point; it was more than a little out of character for the other man to get that intense about
anything really. Even when he was high as a fucking kite, Brandon was the very definition of
mellow with his ‘the dude will abide’ surfer lifestyle and general ‘Who gives a fuck?’ attitude.

Of course, that was before he decided to get sober. Then again, it was also before Felicity came into
their lives as well and, even though Brandon complained about her from time to time, he could see
that the last week he’d spent living there with them had affected him just as much as it had Tommy.
It was this gift she had, this ability to see past all the layers of bullshit they’d built up, that got to
them, all of them; Brandon, McKenna, and especially him.

He couldn’t say that to Ollie though, he couldn’t even begin to put that into words; it was just
something he felt. So, yeah, while it was surprising to see Brandon be as quick on the trigger as he’d
been just now, he understood where that instinct to defend Felicity came from. He saw him display
that same level of care and concern towards her when that asshole cashier decided to fuck with them
at the grocery store.

Oh, the guy wasn’t seriously asking if she needed a cop, he was just being a dick because they
looked like a couple of rich slackers with a case of the munchies dragging their kid sister to the store.
He just figured he’d be an asshole because it wasn’t fair that they were laughing and having fun
while he was stuck spending his summer vacation at work instead of catching waves. However,
when they told McKenna that Brandon went off that morning, they weren’t kidding. Had it been just
them and not them *and* Felicity, he probably would have laughed the guy off or told him to go
fuck himself, but then Mr. Ponytail made the mistake of upsetting Felicity and the worm turned.

They had been jostling each other, laughing, and joking with her in the middle when Ponytail
approached them with a nasty smirk and made a smartass comment about calling the cops and CPS.
The second the words left his mouth, Felicity went from happy and grinning from ear to ear to frozen
in terror. She immediately did the same thing she’d done with Moira and hid behind them, only
instead of just clinging to him this time, she grabbed both of them as if using them as a shield to hide
herself from the threat of social workers and the dreaded ‘group home’ her junkie mom had used to
keep her quiet. He knew why she had been so affected by that, even if Brandon didn’t, but what the
other man could see was how upset she was getting. Even so, the last thing he expected was for
Brandon to get in that guy’s face and demand to speak to a manager then and there. Even Tommy was somewhat taken aback when the other man went from slacker dude to a younger version of Mad Jack McNamara by channeling his dad’s patented cold as ice stare as he burned that vest wearing retail monkey’s bridges down and probably wound up getting the poor bastard fired. But then, as soon as they left, it was like it had never happened. He went from being that guy to Brandon again and spent the entire ride home making Felicity smile by promising to teach her how to surf if she’d get rid of all his speeding and parking tickets so he wouldn’t have to go to traffic court.

As he watched them laugh and joke together all he could think was, for a couple of guys who had spent most of their lives avoiding even the semblance of responsibility, they were handling it surprisingly well considering how suddenly it had been thrust upon them. Yeah, they were making mistakes and, yeah, it was probably a boneheaded move dragging her out in her nightgown, but they were learning and, somewhere along the way, they had become a strange sort of family.

It was weird, but he knew he wasn’t alone in that sentiment when Brandon said she was ‘theirs’, meaning theirs and McKenna’s, because she was. How she managed it, he had no idea, but what he did know was that part of that came from her uncanny ability to make them want to be the best versions of themselves because that’s how she saw them. Brandon, until meeting her, buried his pain at the bottom of a bottle or baggie and yet she never made him feel like a loser druggie or treated him like he was just another rich kid with more money than brains. She didn’t care about the past, didn’t judge him for it, and had simply welcomed him into their lives no questions asked. She never treated McKenna like the odd girl out, or thought she was weird because she wanted to be a cop. She admired her for her strength and courage and never made her feel like she had to hide that from anyone. As for him, she never made him feel like some kind of rudderless Generation WTF?! slacker. Instead, she gave him a purpose, she gave him a family and, most of all, she gave him back that sense of home he’d lost so long ago.

So yeah; the truth was, even though he knew Ollie didn’t mean anything by it, hearing someone else call her ‘the orphan’ and dismiss her as nothing more than a punishment cooked up by Malcolm pissed him off, too. However, the reason he wasn’t tempted to go off on Ollie like Brandon had, was because his anger wasn’t directed toward Ollie as much as it was towards himself.

The minute those words came out of his mouth, all Tommy could think of was how much of an asshole he’d been to ever even think of her like that. He had no anger towards his friend because, after all, Ollie was simply parroting back the same words he said himself not so long ago and in far harsher terms. How Felicity could forgive him after all the mean crap he’d said to her, how she could still love him so much that she would plan this party after all of his selfish bullshit…frankly, it made him want to punch *himself* in the face.

He looked at Ollie and shook his head, “No man, we’re cool. As for Bran, just give him a minute and he’ll cool off,” he assured him.

“Wait, so this is everyone?” Laurel asked, cutting through the awkward pause in conversation, “Just the seven of us?”

“That’s it.”

“So what happened to the party where you were going to hire Aerosmith then fill the entire pool with liquor?” Laurel asked teasingly.

“First off, it wasn’t Aerosmith, it was either going to be The Red Hot Chili Peppers or Fall Out Boy depending on which band won the coin toss,” Tommy told her. “Secondly, I’m pretty much over the whole partying thing,” he said with a shrug. “These days I’m good with just chilling at the house and playing it low key.”
“Really?” Ollie asked dubiously.

He offered him another shrug of his shoulders, “Yeah man, you gotta grow up sometime. Besides, I can’t get into Harvard if I’m constantly stoned off my ass, right?”

Laurel’s lips tipped upwards at that. “Well said, Thomas,” she said her eyes skimming over him as if suddenly seeing him in a new light.

Ollie, however, didn’t appear quite as enthusiastic over his new lease on life, “Since when do you give a crap about getting into Harvard?”

“Since Felicity decided she wanted to go to MIT, that’s when,” he said honestly.

“Uh, no offense, but how long are you planning on going to Harvard?” Sara said in amusement. “Ollie, didn’t you say she was like eight years old?”

“She’s twelve, actually she’ll be thirteen next week so this is kind of more her party than mine,” Tommy corrected. “Secondly, Felicity’s a genius so she’ll be headed to MIT the year after we get there and still probably graduate before us.”

“Wow, seriously?” Sara blinked in surprise.

“Yeah,” Tommy said with a proud grin, “In fact, before she decided to transfer to Starling Prep, she went to a school for the gifted up in Gotham.”

“She goes to The Gotham Academy for Gifted Students?” Laurel asked with a slight frown.

Sara rocked back on her heels at that, her eyebrows lifting in awe, “That place is supposed to be pretty hardcore. Laurel used to dream of going there.”

“Really?” Tommy asked in surprise before turning to the other woman.

“Yeah, but I’d need a scholarship, plus it’s a boarding school and, even if I could get in, our dad wouldn’t have let me leave home,” she said disgruntledly. “It’s supposed to be pretty cutting edge though; graduating from GA pretty much guarantees admittance to whatever school you choose.”

“Wait, since when is the—Felicity,” Ollie corrected quickly, “transferring? I thought she was going back to Gotham soon. I mean, who’s supposed to take care of her, because we both know Malcolm isn’t gonna do it?”

“I’m going to be taking care of her,” Tommy told him.

Ollie narrowed his eyes at him, “Wait, so Malcolm’s taking her out of boarding school just to punish you? ‘Cause, dude, that’s fucked up.”

“No, Malcolm’s not making me do anything,” Tommy said with a snort. “I asked him if she could stay here because we both know Malcolm isn’t gonna do it?”

“Why would you want to spend your senior year taking care of some kid you aren’t even related to?” Ollie asked dubiously.

Tommy’s eyebrows drew together in consternation but before he could say anything, McKenna, Brandon, and Felicity came bursting through the back door.

“It’s time!” Felicity said giddily as she ran towards him, wrapping her arms around his waist and causing him to nearly lose his balance.
“Oof!” He stumbled and wrapped his arms around her, “Watch it!”

“Dude, you have got to get out there,” Brandon said with a grin as he hitched his thumb towards the pool house.

He looked up curiously, “Why? What’s going on?”

“Don’t you dare,” McKenna warned him as he started to answer.

“Let’s just say that your kid really is an evil genius,” Brandon said, his grin widening slightly. “It’s awesome.”

“Hey, I helped,” McKenna said, digging her elbow into his side and causing the other man to wince.

“Okay, so you’re both evil geniuses,” he corrected.

“Thank you,” she preened.

“Hi McKenna,” Laurel said coolly.

“Laurel,” she greeted, her smile fading slightly.

“Tommy was just telling us how you helped plan this whole thing,” Laurel said, her smile seemingly pasted on as she eyed the other girl with a hint of annoyance. “I wish I had known, I could have offered to help.”

“Well, like Brandon said, it was mostly Felicity,” she replied in a similar tone. “I didn’t really do all that much to tell you the truth.”

“Oh right; Felicity,” Laurel said, stepping up to smile brightly down at the younger girl. “Tommy’s been telling us all about you. He said you’re some kind of genius, in fact.”

“He’s told me some stuff about you, too,” Felicity said with a slightly evil grin causing the other girl’s smile to falter as she cleared her throat.

“All good things, I hope,” she said stiffly.

The younger girl paused, “Well…he did say that you might be valedictorian, so that’s good, I guess. Other than that, though…actually, no, that’s about it.” McKenna’s lips twitched upwards slightly as Brandon let out a muffled snicker causing Laurel’s cheeks to redden slightly. “Oh no,” Felicity said quickly, “not that he said anything bad about you, he just didn’t say anything about you at all other than the fact that you had really good grades and that you and Ollie were dating which, you know, I found weird because if you were as smart as he made you out to be then why would you be, um…” Her face flushed as both Ollie and Laurel glared at her. “Not that Ollie’s a bad guy…even though he tried to kill me with a pot brownie—”

“What?” Laurel said in surprise as she rounded on Ollie.

“I didn’t—I wasn’t—I didn’t try to kill her, it was an accident!” he insisted.

“Yeah, to be fair he meant to feed those brownies to you,” Felicity said quickly. “He had no way of knowing I was allergic.”

“You were going to feed me drugged brownies?” Laurel asked in outrage.

“You would think she’d be more upset about the fact that he fed hash brownies to a little kid,”
Brandon muttered.

“I didn’t—“ Ollie growled, his jaw clenched. “They weren’t pot brownies! They were regular brownies with nuts; that’s all!”

“Are you sure?” Felicity asked, “Because you were really out of it. You kept giggling to yourself while making fart noises and kept saying something about Ex-Lax brownies and people who had sticks jammed up their—mmph!” Tommy’s hand came over her mouth as he hugged her to his chest.

“Give a little, save a little, Sunshine,” he said tightly before releasing her as Laurel and Ollie threw each other hate-filled looks.

Sara snorted at that and grinned, “You’re cute. Hi, I’m Sara,” she said, offering her hand.

“Felicity,” she said in return.

Tommy glanced between Laurel and Ollie again, “So this is awkward,” he breathed out before smiling brightly and clapping his hands together, “Alrighty then! Let’s go see this awesome surprise you guys cooked up, shall we?”

‘Holy crap,” Tommy said as he looked around the back garden of the pool house in awe.

“This is…” Laurel blinked in surprise.

Ollie tilted his head, “Majorly…”

“Awesome!” Sara said with a huge grin.


The entire yard was filled with inflatable carnival rides like bounce houses, ball pits, and two that appeared to be some kind of boxing ring and an actual moving obstacle course. There was even an inflatable waterslide leading to the Olympic-sized pool that was almost as tall as the house itself. Meanwhile, there were two men on the back deck manning an enormous grill filled with all manner of delicious meaty goodness.

“It’s Asado—Argentinian barbecue,” McKenna said as she caught him gawking at it. “That part was my idea.”

“There’s no way the seven of us can eat that much food,” he said as he eased over to see what they were cooking, his mouth watering at the various meats that were sizzling over the flame touched coals that appeared to be made from actual wood rather than the simple square briquettes they purchased that morning.

“It’s not just the seven of us,” Felicity told him. “It’s us, the four caterers—“

“Four?” he asked before two women stepped out of the back door of the pool house carrying trays that were laden with piles of what looked like some sort of tarts or turnovers, and a variety of cold salads.

“Those are Empanadas Argentinas, it’s a type of filled meat pie,” McKenna explained. “My mom always makes them for our birthdays so I figured you might enjoy them. Also, that’s vacio or flank steak, Argentinian chorizo, chicken, and costillas or short ribs, and, of course, Felicity’s brisket since
she wasn’t sure if you’d ever had Asado before.”

“I knew you liked chili though but I wasn’t sure about anything else and I figured brisket would be a safe bet just in case you didn’t like it,” Felicity offered.

“No, this is…” Tommy’s eyes widened as he took it all in, “Wow.”

“Hey, what kind of barbecue sauce are you guys using?” Brandon asked wandering closer.

“We don’t use sauces,” the man at the grill told them. “All the flavor comes from the spices and the wood smoke.”

“No sauce for the brisket either?” he asked forlornly.

“Don’t worry,” an attractive dark haired woman said as she put down one of the large bowls of salad, “I’m sure we can find you some barbecue sauce somewhere if you decide you don’t like it dry.”

“Thanks,” he said with a grin as he leaned further over the grill, eyeing the meat eagerly.

“This is my cousin Sebi and his wife Lydia,” McKenna said introducing them. “Also that’s Carlos and Vicki,” she said pointing to the other two people on the deck who both nodded and smiled in greeting. “Vicki is my other cousin. She owns a bakery called The Geeky Monkey downtown and helps out with Sebi’s catering business on the side.”

Vicki looked towards Tommy with a smile, “Happy Birthday! McKenna talks about you guys all the time.”

“You talk about me?” Tommy asked in surprise as he turned to the woman beside him while Laurel and Ollie both looked on with less than pleased expressions.

Brandon looked up at that, “Both of us?”

“Mostly just Felicity actually,” McKenna said wryly.

“Yeah, well, I know McKenna and Felicity made you a birthday cake but I brought a chocotorta as well since it’s traditional,” Vicki said with a friendly smile.

“Thanks,” Tommy said sincerely than frowned, “What’s a choco…?”

“Chocotorta,” Vicki supplied.

“What is that, like a chocolate cake?” he asked.

“Not really,” she told him. “Well, yes and no. It’s a no-bake layered postre, a kind of cookie cake. It’s just dulce de leche with queso crema, cream cheese, layered between chocolina cookies which are basically chocolate cookies. It’s to Argentinians what birthday cake is to you guys.”

“Oh man, that sounds awesome,” Brandon said, looking towards Vicki like he’d finally found true love.

“Well, if you like it we always keep some at The Geeky Monkey,” she told them. “Also, whenever you guys want to stop by the shop, the coffee’s on me. Any friends of McKenna’s are friends of mine.”

“This is still way too much food,” Tommy said shaking his head.
“There are also the guys setting up the jump houses along with the band,” Felicity told him.

“Plus, the salads and stuff are always better the next day, trust me,” Sebi told them as he flipped the steaks.

“That’s true—wait,” Tommy said turning to Felicity, “Did you say ‘the band’?”

At that point, the sound of someone riffing a guitar filled the air as both McKenna and Felicity exchanged grins.

“What was that?” Ollie asked in confusion.

“That is the part that I came up with,” Felicity said, practically vibrating with excitement.

There was a truck parked in the center of the two obstacle courses that moved as soon as the music started to reveal some sort of elevated platform that was blocked off by a crimson curtain. As they watched, the curtain parted to reveal a portable stage and a bunch of guys in jeans and t-shirts that said Dave’s Guitar World.

The frontman let loose with one more screaming riff before stepping up to the mic, “Happy Birthday, Tommy Merlyn and welcome to your very own Rock and Roll theme party!”

“What. The. Hell,” Tommy said flatly as he stared at the set up in disbelief.

“It’s a Rock and Roll party!” Felicity squealed.

“What’s a Rock and Roll party?” Sara asked as she grinned from ear to ear.

“It’s so cool!” Felicity told her, her eyes huge behind her glasses. “See, it’s this thing where they bring a bunch of instruments and teach people how to play them so you can become a rock band!”

“A rock band,” Laurel said dryly.

“Seriously?” Ollie asked in disbelief.

She nodded, “Everybody gets to pick an instrument and learn how to play it. Fun, huh?”


“Well, the other day when me and McKenna were at the party store, we found a bunch of flyers for kid’s Rock Band parties so we called them up but they were booked so McKenna said that we should go to the mall and ask the guy who runs the music store if he knew anybody else who does those kinds of parties and it turns out that he taught people how to play and had a band of his own so he agreed to come out here and help us learn a song. Plus, Malcolm sent you something.” As she started speaking, McKenna headed into the house and came out with a guitar case then handed it to him. “Open it,” she told him.

Tommy set it on the picnic table near the grill and looked inside, “Wow.”

It was a vintage Les Paul in a beautiful oxblood color with mother of pearl insets on the fretboard.

“Malcolm sent me this?” he asked in surprise. “But I don’t even know how to play.”

“Yeah, I know, that’s why he also said you could take lessons if you want,” she told him.

“How did you get him to agree to that?” he asked in mild shock.
“Well, see, when I called him to talk about your party I mentioned that you wanted to learn how to play the guitar and about the whole Rock and Roll party idea. At first he wasn’t sure, but then I told him about the results of some studies I read that say when kids learn to play an instrument, it tends to improve their concentration in other areas leading to higher GPA’s, particularly in areas of math and science.”

“Is that true?” he asked in surprise. She nodded. “But how did you know I’d even be interested in something like that? I never told you I wanted to learn to play the guitar.”

“Oh please,” she said rolling her eyes at him. “99% of the shirts you own have names of rock bands on them and, whenever you listen to music in your room, you put on your headphones and jump around playing the air guitar.” McKenna and Sara both snickered at that causing him to flush, “And there was also the whole supermodel thing.”

“What supermodel thing?” Brandon asked curiously.

“It’s nothing,” Tommy said quickly then paused, “Wait, you didn’t tell Malcolm about that, did you?”

“Of course I did,” she told him. “He asked me why I thought you’d enjoy getting guitar lessons so I told him that you wanted to marry a supermodel some day but the only way they’d ever go out with you is if you were a musician.”

Everyone turned to stare at him.

Tommy shut his eyes and winced, “Shit.”

“He laughed really hard, too; even after I explained the thing about actors and racecar drivers versus musicians,” Felicity said with a frown.

“What?” Laurel asked, doing a double take.

She looked towards the older girl, “Oh, see; supermodels only date musicians, actors, or racecar drivers and Tommy—”

He grabbed her hand and began dragging her towards the stage area, “Let’s go check it out,” he said with false gaiety.

“This is going to be so much fun!” Felicity said giddily.

“Right,” he said with a sigh as he got a better grip on the handle his new guitar case as she skipped ahead of him, the rest of their group trailing close behind.

Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t as bad as he thought it’d be.

When Dave, the owner of the shop, told them that by the time they were done they’d all be able to play at least one song, he didn’t believe him. However, even though the guys he brought along only taught them the basics, their ‘group’ actually did better than he expected. He thought for sure they’d wind up sounding like a bad karaoke rip-off but it turned out that since McKenna already had some piano lessons under her belt, Sara had a natural talent for the drums, and Laurel was a pretty decent singer, the girls, by working together, managed to make them sound better than they might have sounded if it had just been him and the guys goofing around while indulging their guitar hero fantasies.
Felicity, much to his surprise, did not join in. Instead, she chose to sit it out so she could act as their cheering section and videographer.

According to her, Malcolm asked her to record their jam session so he could watch it with them when he got back into town, probably so he could laugh his ass off. If that’s what he was expecting, though, he was in for a disappointment. While it was pretty obvious that they wouldn’t be playing sold out concerts anytime soon, by the time the lesson was over they managed to belt out a pretty decent rendition of AC/DC’s ‘You Shook Me All Night Long’. Admittedly, Laurel didn’t exactly have Brian Johnson’s patented screech and howl, and a few times they wandered away from the G–C–D chord progression but, much to his surprise, once they learned the basics it all fell into place.

Afterward, the guy handed all of them his card and he and Tommy came up with a schedule for his private lessons before sitting down to eat.

And, boy, did they eat.

It was delicious. One bite in and he vowed that from now on all special occasions within the Merlyn household would be celebrated with Argentinian barbecue, chocotorta, and empanadas.

“What about brisket and kugel?” Felicity asked as soon as he made his announcement.

“Oh, this is for like birthdays and stuff,” he told her. “The kugel and brisket we’re having at least once a week.”

“Or more,” Brandon added around a mouthful of brisket.

“Or more,” he agreed.

In addition to the massive amounts of barbecue they were able to consume despite his and Brandon’s overindulgences that morning, Tommy somehow managed to leave just enough room for a slice of the birthday cake Felicity and McKenna made for him. According to McKenna, it was a ‘Lane cake’, which was this huge four layer white cake, similar to a Lady Baltimore (whatever that was) with a bourbon, butter, and raisin filling and tons of billowy white frosting that he swore up and down tasted like vanilla marshmallow fluff. It was amazing.

When he asked McKenna how she knew he’d like it since he’d never even heard of a Lane cake before, she just shrugged and said that Felicity picked it.

“I knew you liked Rum Raisin and so I thought you might like this, too,” she explained when he turned an inquiring look in her direction. “Plus, I figured it was better than just plain ordinary chocolate or vanilla. Mrs. Avey, the head cook at my school, always says that the best ingredient is love and that special days deserve special food, and that since it’s your special day, you deserve a special kind of treat that shows how much we love you.”

“Thanks, Sunshine,” he said quietly.

“No problem,” she said around her own mouthful of cake, “You can get me a Mint Chip cake for my birthday next week.”

“Deal,” he nodded. “Although how I’m going to top this, I have no idea.”

“You don’t have to; just being able to spend time with you is enough.”

Even though the women around them all made cooing noises while the guys all snickered and sent him teasing looks, Tommy wasn’t the least bit embarrassed; instead, he simply smiled. The old
Tommy, the one who had existed before she had come into his life, might have been, but not now; not anymore because he understood what she meant when she said just being together was enough.

Before Felicity became part of his life, he’d always felt alone even in a crowd. Half the reason he’d partied as much as he had was because he needed that noise and turbulence in order to feel like he wasn’t alone. However, from the moment he’d welcomed her into his life, that need for noise and chaos went away because just being with her was enough.

He couldn’t define what they were; he couldn’t tell anyone how she came to be a part of his life—he didn’t even fully understand it himself or know how to process the information Malcolm had given him about her history, but none of that mattered. Everyone around them couldn’t see it, but he could; not even Malcolm could understand it, but all that mattered to the two of them was that he loved her, and she loved him. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

“Thanks, Sunshine,” he said with a smile and she nodded as if she understood because she did. She was probably the only person who ever could.

After that, they worked it off by going from one inflatable to the other. They each had their favorites there as well. Felicity and Sara had a blast in the moon bounce that was shaped like a giant cake, while Brandon developed a weird obsession with the ball pit he had yet to figure out (“Dude!” he shouted after diving in face first then popping up on the other side, “We should get one of these things for keeps!”). McKenna and Laurel, despite the hint of coolness between them, both gravitated towards the water slide where they were soon joined by the rest of the girls. Ollie had been rolling around and jumping through the inflatable obstacle course which was set up like some kind of parkour maze with swinging arms and moving walls, but what caught Tommy’s attention was the sumo wrestling cage.

“Sumo wrestling? Really?” Ollie asked dubiously as the three of them examined the padding they’d have to don before entering the ring.

“Yeah,” Tommy said with a grin as he began to pull on the inflatable bulk with the help of the attendant. “It’s like bumper cars but with you as the car.”

Although it took a little convincing, within minutes he, Brandon, and Ollie were bouncing off the ‘ropes’ and each other while the girls watched from the pool howling with laughter.

All in all, the party he thought was going to be lame, turned out to be a blast.

“All are you happy with the way the party is going so far?” McKenna asked him after he’d gone down the waterslide for what must have been the fifteenth time.

“Yes,” he told her. And he was.

By the time the sun had begun to set, they had all made it back to the pool to cool down, goofing around and laughing as if no tensions existed between any of them even though he knew the stress levels were still high and that there was a certain amount of animosity here and there bubbling just beneath the surface. Several times Ollie had given him that hangdog expression he always wore when he was upset or worried about something. Meanwhile, on the other end of the pool, Laurel and McKenna had their own weirdness going on but he wasn’t about to touch that with a ten-foot pole so, other than one of them occasionally stopping by to check up on him, he’d been keeping a respectable distance.

Still, even though it wasn’t the seventeenth birthday he’d planned on, even with the weirdness, even though there was no pool full of booze or half naked go-go girls in gold cages shaking their fine
forms to whichever band made the cut, he had to admit, it had been a good day. Hokey as the little kid bouncy houses and backyard barbecue thing would have sounded to him just a few short weeks ago, he ended the day with a smile on his face knowing that this was the best birthday he’d had since his mom died. It was perfect, and it was all because of one person in particular.

His eyes landed on Felicity who was sitting on the edge of the pool, her legs dragging slowly through the water, back and forth, as her shoulders slumped and her chin rested wearily on her chest.

Tommy swam lazily towards her with a concerned frown. She looked like she was barely hanging on, her shoulders slumped and her eyes heavy and unfocused. She’d removed her glasses earlier so he could plainly see the pull and color of sleep in her eyes.

“Tired, Sunshine?” he asked quietly in stark contrast the laughter and squeals echoing all around them.

“No, I’m not tired,” she said immediately even though it was obvious that she was utterly exhausted. It was written all over her face from the pink tinge to her eyes, to the fact that her head kept listing forward as if she were going to fall over at any minute.

“Why don’t you go sit over by Ollie on one of the deck chairs, hmm?” he suggested, not bothering to argue with her.

She frowned, “But why? I wanted to stay over here with you guys. I’m having fun where I am.”

His lips twitched upwards at that. Even as she spoke she was struggling to keep her eyes open. Had he not come over when he had, she would have probably fallen in the pool and drowned while trying to snore underwater. “Yeah, but Ollie looks kind of lonely, don’t you think?” He glanced over at him pointedly. Ollie was laying back on one of the deck chairs catching the last of the day’s sun as he glowered over at Laurel who was, in turn, intentionally ignoring him. “Besides, we haven’t gotten to the revenge thing yet, have we? I figured you could handle the Ollie part, what do you say?”

She perked up at that, “You want me to handle Ollie?” He nodded, “What do you want me to do?”

He leaned in, “First, I need you to go over there and distract Ollie while I go talk to Laurel.”

“Then what?” she asked, biting her bottom lip in excitement.

“I don’t know yet, I figured we’d just play it by ear.”

“That’s it?” she asked, looking slightly downfallen.

“It’s a work in progress but, yeah.”

“Oh,” she said with a frown.

He arched his eyebrow at that, “Are you still in?”

“Am I in?” she made a ‘pfft’ noise, “D’uh! Of course, I’m in! Like you even have to ask? Please.”

He smiled at that. He had no real intentions of getting ‘revenge’, but he also knew that Felicity would probably fall asleep within two minutes of laying back in the well-cushioned lounger. It was a pretty safe bet since she readily admitted to getting up to cook around two am or so and had been going full tilt ever since. He felt a little guilty for tricking her into taking a nap, but the party was winding down anyway.
McKenna’s cousins packed up the leftovers for them and left a couple of hours ago as did the band, and the equipment rental guys said they’d be back in the morning so they could enjoy the waterslide and stuff for a while longer. McKenna had already told him that the rest of the evening’s low-key festivities included build-your-own hot fudge sundaes, leftovers, and a John Hughes film fest in the TV room. He figured he’d let her nap for an hour or so before bringing her inside where she’d probably just conk out on the couch twenty minutes into the movie just like she always did. Everyone would probably head home after that. If all went to plan, they’d be in bed well before ten o’clock and could sleep in, followed by a post-birthday brunch at The House of Pancakes.

It was definitely a far cry from the hedonistic bash he’d planned for himself several months ago, but he kind of liked his new drama-free lifestyle that included going to bed before dawn and so, apparently, did all his other friends.

Everyone except Ollie, that is.

Since he’d gotten there it was obvious he felt somewhat out of place and uncomfortable. He kept casting odd looks between him, McKenna, and Brandon as if trying to discern what this new dynamic meant and how he fit into it. Even when they were dressed in padding and bouncing off of each other his smile seemed forced and awkward.

Tommy knew he’d have to confront the elephant in the room sooner or later but, for now, he just wanted to enjoy the day. And he was; his new guitar especially. Being the son of a billionaire meant that every day was pretty much Christmas if he wanted it to be, so gifts rarely held any real meaning to him. Most of the time, Malcolm didn’t even bother to acknowledge birthdays or holidays at all, he just assumed he would celebrate with Ollie and, if he needed anything, he could either ask Mrs. Mack or buy it himself. It didn’t even matter how much money he spent, Malcolm never said a word. He once bet Ollie that they could probably rent out an entire football stadium and Malcolm probably wouldn’t say boo. That was one of the things that had inspired his fantasy birthday party to begin with. He was determined to see what it would take to get Malcolm’s undivided attention for once, but when he saw the guitar…

He knew it wasn’t really from Malcolm; not entirely. Felicity admitted outright that she was the one who put the idea in his head, but the fact that he listened and took the time to actually choose it himself…that meant a lot.

And he knew Malcolm picked it. One of the few things he knew about his dad’s past was that he’d been in a garage band once upon a time. He ran across the pictures one day in the attic and tried asking about it but, as soon as Malcolm saw the album, he’d taken it from him and locked it away as he’d done with all the pictures of his mother, the memories supposedly too painful for him to process. That was one of the reasons he’d been so angry about the picture in his mother’s, now Felicity’s, locket. Not only had Malcolm removed his baby picture, but he’d replaced it with their wedding photo; a picture he, himself, hadn’t been allowed to see for years. Not that he needed to see a picture of Rebecca to remember her. The memory of his mother’s face was still as sharp and clear as it had been when she was alive. After she died, he’d even dream of her; her smell, the color of her hair, the way her voice sounded. Even now he dreamt of her, only it wasn’t just the two of them anymore but Felicity as well because he knew that, had his mother lived, she would have insisted Felicity come live with them and not have been sent to that school in the first place. Had she lived, Malcolm never would’ve left him alone, he never would’ve gone to the ashram, Felicity never would’ve had to worry about social workers and group homes; they would have been a family.

He shook off the sudden wave of melancholy and focused on something happier instead. This was a day for happiness, after all, and one of the few times he’d ever felt a bond with his dad was the day he’d found those pictures. Seeing Malcolm with long hair and wailing on an ax had made him feel
like maybe, just maybe, he and his dad actually had something in common…at least until he’d taken it away. He thought he’d never feel that again until he opened that guitar case. Mrs. Ferguson, his dad’s secretary, wasn’t exactly the type of person you’d expect to even know what a Les Paul was and neither was Mrs. Mack. Felicity would have simply researched the thing to death before dragging him to fifty different stores to find just the perfect one. No, that was all Malcolm and, because of that, for the first time since Tommy was a child, it actually felt like his dad was stepping up to the plate and paying attention. Between finally feeling like he had part of his dad back, even if he was halfway across the world in China and girl in front of him who had somehow taken over his entire world, that made it the best present he’d ever gotten, bar none.

That goofy bit of sentiment must have been written all over his face because Felicity began to perk up slightly, her own smile broadening in response.

“What?” she asked, examining his smile curiously.

“Nothing,” he told her with a chuckle. “I’m just…really enjoying my Birthday Revenge Party.”

“Really?” she asked hopefully. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Really,” he assured her. “This was the best party ever. Thanks, Sunshine.”

“Well, hang on to your socks because it’s about to get even better!” she said with an evil little cackle that, God help him, really did make her sound like a cuter version of Chuckie. “Let’s do this: You go work on Laurel while I distract Ollie.” She held out her hand expectantly.

“What are you doing?” he asked, staring down at her extended hand that was facing palm down. “What do you want me to do? Kiss it or something?”

“No,” she said in exasperation. “You’re supposed to put your hand on top and then we say ‘Ready; break!’ like on TV just before the big game and then we give each other high fives.”

“High fives?” he repeated dubiously then shrugged, “Alright, fine.”

He put his much larger hand over hers and together they said, “Ready? Break!” followed by them clapping their hands together in a congratulatory slap.

“Ow…” she howled with a grimace then looked down at her pinkening palm. “I think I need a doctor,” she whined. “I think you broke all the little bones because it’s all pins and needles now.”

“You told me to give you a high five,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but I didn’t tell you to break my hand!”

“What are you two doing over here?” Laurel’s sweet tones cut between them, causing him to turn away from Felicity. She looked between them, a curious smile on her lips, “Just what kind of mischief are you cooking up now, Tommy Merlyn?”

“Me? Nothing,” he said smoothly, “I leave all the cooking up of mischief to Felicity these days.”

“Speaking of which,” Felicity got to her feet then yawned exaggeratedly. “I’m going to go take a nap over on one of the lounge chairs.” She gave him a not-so-subtle wink then waved goodbye to Laurel who watched as she made her way toward Ollie.

The other girl turned to him with a flirtatious smirk, “So what was that little wink she gave you about?”
“She probably just got some chlorine in her eyes,” Tommy said smoothly.

Laurel’s eyebrows lifted at that, “It’s a salt water pool.”

Tommy looked around him in feigned surprise, “So it is. Huh?”

Laurel laughed, a rich sweet sound that, not too long ago set his heart ablaze, but now he found more than a bit forced as if it were something practiced rather than the tinkling bubbles of sound and joy that Felicity often made.

“Tommy Merlyn,” Laurel said slowly, her tongue rolling over the sound of his name, “Look at you; all grown up and acting responsible. And now, come to find out, you’ve got an adorable little sister at home; how is it I’m just finding out about her?”

“Felicity’s not my sister,” he said automatically. “As for the rest, I’m surprised Ollie never told you about her.”

“You guys look like brother and sister to me,” she said, pointedly ignoring his reference to Ollie.

“We’re not,” he said firmly.

“What are you then?”

He thought about that for a minute, “I don’t know what you’d call us,” he mused. “Soul mates, I guess,” he said with a crooked smile.

“Soul mates,” she said wryly. “You can’t be soul mates with Felicity.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because ‘soul mates’ generally refers to a romantic couple,” Laurel said slowly.

“Not necessarily,” he argued. “Soul mates could just refer to two people who are two halves of a whole. It doesn’t have to be a romantic whole, just a whole.”

“While that sounds really sweet, that’s not the definition of what a soul mate is,” she said archly.

“It’s as good a definition as any and it fits us better than anything else I can come up with off the top of my head. I don’t think of her as my sister because, from what I’ve seen with other people who have little sisters, I like having her around too much for that. And I don’t think of her as just being my friend because we’re closer than just friends. That word isn’t big enough. And, despite what Brandon thinks, she’s not my kid because, half the time, she’s the one taking care of me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” she demurred.

“It’s very true,” he said, watching from a distance as Felicity attempted to engage a distracted Ollie in conversation. “She takes care of me all the time. In fact, this whole party was her; all of it.” He felt that warmth he’d come to associate with the younger girl fill his chest once more. “It’s the first time in a long time that I’ve had something like that,” he murmured then flushed as he noticed the expression on Laurel’s face. “Sorry, that probably sounded pretty sappy, huh?”

“No,” she said quickly, her face softening. “It’s just…I feel like I’m seeing a new side to you I’ve never seen before.” She grinned, “I kind of like it.”

“Is that a good thing?”
“Very good,” she said softly as she swam a little closer.

“Too bad you didn’t see it earlier, then,” he said before he could stop himself.

Laurel came closer, her eyes dropping slightly as a flush of warmth lit up her cheeks, “Maybe I just didn’t know what to look for.” She looked at him through her dark eyelashes, “Maybe now I do.”

“Maybe,” he said feeling his mouth tighten.

“And maybe now that I know, we could try going out on a date or something?” she offered.

“I can’t,” he told her.

“Why not?” Laurel asked.

“For one thing, you and Ollie are together.”

“We’re not together,” she said firmly.

“You looked pretty together at Brandon’s party,” Tommy pointed out.

Her blush deepened, “Yeah, well, I thought we were too, but apparently I was mistaken.”

“Look, Laurel,” he said carefully, “while I would love to go out with you, I don’t want to get in between whatever it is you’ve got going on with Ollie.”

“Who says you’d be getting in between anything?” she asked in a husky tone as she came much closer to him, their chests nearly touching.

He backed off, placing approximately a foot of space between them, “All I know for sure is that Ollie has a thing for you, that’s fairly obvious, and I don’t want to mess with that.”

“Ollie doesn’t care about anybody or anything but himself,” she said with a hint of bitterness.

“Normally I’d be tempted to agree with you, Ollie can be a real jerk when it comes to girls, but not this time and not with you,” he told her.

She scoffed at that, “How do you figure?”

“Because he knew I had a thing for you and he went after you anyway,” he said simply. “Not only that, but he never told me about the two of you even though he knew I was planning on asking you out.”

“You were going to ask me out?” she asked in feigned surprise.

He gave her a knowing look, “Laurel, you knew I wanted to go out with you. We talked on the phone a couple of days before Brandon’s party about us getting together.”

“Just to hang out, not to go on a date or anything,” she said a little helplessly.

He thought about arguing with her but then sighed, “You know what; doesn’t matter. The point is that you obviously weren’t into me and I’ve moved on.”

“With who? McKenna?” she asked slanting her eyes at him curiously.

“No, we’re just friends,” he said flatly, “but seeing you with Ollie killed anything I had for you right
A hint of anger came into her eyes, “I hope you’re not suggesting I have something to apologize for here.”

“No, not at all,” he told her. “You and I were just friends, Laurel. You don’t owe me or anyone else a damn thing. Not only that, but you’re your own person; not mine and not Ollie’s or anyone else’s. What you choose for yourself is your business and, if that’s Ollie, I respect that—not that it’s any of my business either way—but just like you have your right to feel like you do, so do I, and whatever you and Ollie have going on…” He sighed, “Look, let’s just say that these days I make it a policy not to get in the middle of drama and this thing with the two of you,” he said nodding in the direction of the other man, “That has drama written all over it.”

“Drama?” she asked archly.

“Yeah, drama,” he told her. “I’m not trying to insult you or start a fight or anything, but the simple fact is that I have a lot of catching up to do between now and graduation if I’m going to get into Harvard, plus I have to be there for Felicity. She’s all I have time for in my life right now so it’s just as well that we never got together anyway.”

“First off, who says we ever would have gotten together whether I was with Ollie or not?” she asked irritably. “Secondly, I have a little sister, Ollie has a little sister, a lot of people have siblings, and it doesn’t stop them from having a life.”

“She’s not my sister,” he said again. “And the reason it’s different is because you guys have parents to shoulder that responsibility and all we’ve got is Malcolm.” He looked at her, “Malcolm stays on the road or in the city most nights, so this is all on us; me and Felicity. She takes care of me and I take care of her; that’s the way it is, and there isn’t much time left for anything beyond that.”

She looked slightly taken aback by that. “Ollie’s dad runs his own company and—“

“Ollie has his Mom to take care of Thea along with a bunch of nannies,” he told her. “Plus, Robert is there more than Malcolm, sure, but just barely. I know for a fact he rarely comes home except on the weekends and, even then, it’s just for a little face time before he takes off again. The rest of the time he’s holed up in his office or at his penthouse in the Marchioness.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said slightly subdued.

“Yeah, well, that’s the part of being the kid of a billionaire they don’t advertise to the public. The fact is, as big a pain as I’m sure it is to have a dad who’s always on you about who you hang out with, trust me when I say it’s better than the alternative. Hell, this is the first time in years that Malcolm even bothered to acknowledge it was my birthday, much less send a gift. If he calls it’ll be like Christmas morning…during which, last year, he was somewhere holed up in Russia or Australia, I can’t remember which, since I spent it with Ollie and his family the same way I’ve done every year since my mom died.”

She blanched at that and turned to him with a sympathetic gaze, “Tommy…”

“I don’t need your pity, Laurel,” he said holding up his hand to stop her. While he wasn’t angry with her, he also wasn’t inclined to play teenage angst and musical beds so he needed to get this out. “I didn’t tell you that so you’d feel guilty or sorry for me. I told you that because, while I like you and, yeah, I’ve had a crush on you for a while now, that’s all it was; a crush. Would I have liked you to give me a shot? Yeah, and if you weren’t with Ollie—“
“I’m not—“ she began.

“You are,” he told her. “And, even if you aren’t, he’s with you. If you want to dump his ass for treating you like shit, I don’t blame you. If I were you, much as I love the guy, I wouldn’t give him the time of day, but I’m not you,” he said firmly. “Your choices are your own, no one owns that, least of all me. Your ability to be your own person and not take any shit is the reason why both of us liked you and why Ollie fell hard enough to risk a lifetime’s worth of friendship to be with you, so why you’re letting him get away with this crap now is beyond me” Her eyes widened slightly at that but he continued. “Still, that’s your choice, yours and Ollie’s.” He sighed, “Look, Ollie has been one of the few constants in my life, even if he can be a dick, and I get how you’re tempted to use me to get back at him. I’m not overly happy with this situation either, truth be told, because I like you, I do. Not only that but if you were with anybody but him, I’d be more than happy to be your revenge rebound guy. Hell, I’d be anything you wanted me to be because you’re gorgeous and smart, and did I mention incredibly hot?” he said with another crooked grin, “And I really, really do like you, Laurel. Swear to God…just not enough to put it all on the line like he did.”

“You’ve got some nerve, Tommy Merlyn,” she said angrily. “What the hell makes you think I’d ever want to use you as my ‘rebound revenge’ anything?”

“So you didn’t ask McKenna to find out if I was still interested in you?”

Her eyes hardened and she looked over to where the other girl was laughing and squealing as she slid down the large inflatable slide with her sister, “McKenna told you that? Because that never happened! She’s lying!” she insisted.

“No, she never said anything, I was just taking a stab in the dark,” he lied smoothly. “The only thing McKenna said about you was that Ollie was being a dick and that, if I wanted to ask you out, you might be open to it.”

“Oh,” she said deflating slightly before, again, turning an angry expression his way, “Well, she should’t have even said that much because, I have news for you, I have no interest in going out with you or Ollie anymore! The only reason I asked you out was because I *thought* that you might be different but clearly I was wrong!”

“Laurel, I’m not trying to be a dick here,” he said cutting in smoothly. “I’m just telling you that, if you were thinking about using me to make him jealous, that it wouldn’t work because A) I have neither the inclination nor the time to deal with that mess and B) If you want to keep Ollie, then I’m the last person you’d want to use to make him jealous. All that will happen is Ollie will drop you like a hot potato because there’s no way he’d risk losing our friendship a second time. I mean, it’s pretty obvious that the only reason he kept running away after you guys hooked up was because he didn’t want to risk pissing me off.”

“Bullshit,” she said with unaccustomed vulgarity.

“Oh, I am absolutely full of shit; doesn’t make it any less true, though,” he said with a smirk. “I’ve known Ollie since we were both in diapers and I’ve never seen him this strung out over a girl.”

“Ollie hasn’t even spoken to me since Brandon’s party,” she said bitterly, her cheeks flushing even brighter.

“He hasn’t spoken to me either,” Tommy told her. “Not once. He was so torn up he had to send Brandon in to act as a mediator because he was convinced I was pissed—and I was. Not about you and him because, like I said, I have absolutely no right to be angry about that, but because he wasn’t honest with me about his feelings for you to begin with. All he had to say was that he was hung up
on you and that would have been that, but he didn’t. That’s what led to all of this; Ollie was too afraid to admit how he felt about you and it cost him big time. That said, I’m not making the same mistakes he did so, I’m telling you right now that, no matter what you decide, I’m bowing out of this equation.”

“You’re an asshole,” she hissed at him.

“Yup,” he agreed happily. “I am a complete and utter asshole, but I do have some standards and the one rule I have is that I don’t shit where I eat. Ollie is my brother, Laurel; he’s all I’ve got besides Felicity, even if he is a stupid prick at times. You might be pissed at me now, I get that, but I would still like to be your friend; both your friends and who knows? Maybe someday I’ll be able to tell this story at you and Ollie’s wedding.”

“That’s not happening,” she hissed at him quietly. “And another thing, go fuck yourself—you and Ollie both!” With that, Laurel got out of the pool and snatched up her towel angrily. “Oh, and by the way,” she said turning back to him, “Happy Birthday and thanks for inviting me, you dick!” she spat before rushing past Ollie and into the house, presumably to get dressed.

The minute the door slammed behind her, Ollie quickly got up from the chaise and followed.

“Dude, the fuck?” Brandon said sleepily as he shifted in the cushioned pool island and took a drink from the insulated glass sitting in the cup holder, “Seriously, your kid cost me major REM last night so tell Laurel to keep the screeching down to a minimum because it’s harshing the mood and messing with my naptime,” he complained.

“What’s going on?” Sara called out from over by McKenna with a frown.

“Just another day of teenage melodrama and angst,” Tommy called back. “I’m pretty sure Laurel is about to take off but if you’d like to stay a while, one of us could give you a ride home?”

“Yeah, you could ride home with me,” McKenna said with a shrug as Sara looked between them uncertainly.

“Thanks, but I should probably go check on her,” Sara said reluctantly.

“Just remember to knock first,” Brandon suggested with a yawn as he sat back on the float, “You know how those crazy kids like to screw like bunnies whenever they throw a hissy fit.”

“Ugh!” Felicity said in disgust, “They better not be doing it in my room!”

“They’re probably not…” Tommy began then paused. “At least I hope not,” he muttered.

McKenna cleared her throat and followed Sara out of the pool, “I’ll go with you. And just in case they are…busy,” she said, tossing Tommy a look, “I’ll make sure to let you know so we can change the sheets. Unless, of course, they’re in Brandon’s room since his are probably a cesspool of bodily fluids anyway.”

“No, they aren’t!” Brandon declared, flipping up his sunglasses to scowl in her direction, “And if they are in my room then Ollie better not be juicing up my bed the way he did last time or I’ll have his ass!”

“Gross!” Felicity said with a look of utter disgust even if Tommy was fairly certain she had no idea what it was Brandon was referring to.

…and at least he hoped not.
He opened his mouth to say something but McKenna waved him off, “I’ll handle it,” she said as she and Sara went inside.

“Where are you going, Sunshine?” Tommy called out with a frown as he watched Felicity trudge past him towards the large bouncy birthday cake.

“Over there where I don’t have to listen to any more of your gross Sweet Valley High meshugass,” she said without pausing.

“Sweet Valley High?” Tommy repeated to himself as he watched her continue on her way.

“Meshugass?” Brandon frowned. “That’s…I know that word, right? I think it was on the SATs.”

“I think it’s Yiddish for ‘crazy nonsense’,” he offered.

“Are you sure, because I’m fairly certain it was on the SAT’s and the answer was C,” he mused then gave him a superior look, “When in doubt, it’s always ‘C’, dude.”

“Good to know,” he said as he relaxed into the warm water to do the backstroke.

A little while later, Ollie came out of the house alone and looking somewhat confused and uncertain. He met Tommy’s eyes and nodded towards the far end of the yard where the obstacle course had been set up.

“Hey man, be right back,” he told Brandon. “Don’t fall in and drown, okay?”

Brandon made a gruff snort and waved him off before turning over onto his stomach, causing the pool float to cast dangerously to the side and take on some water, but which didn’t seem to disturb his nap in the slightest.

“If he drowns I’m dumping his body on the beach so it looks like a surfing accident,” he muttered to himself.

“I heard that and fuck you,” Brandon mumbled.

“Whatever.” He got out of the pool and shook himself off before grabbing a towel, then headed towards Ollie. When he got there, the other man was clearly agitated about something as he kept pacing back and forth and running his fingers through his already untidy hair.

He looked up at him with a scowl, “What did you tell Laurel, dude?”

Tommy frowned, “Nothing much; why?”

Ollie sighed, “Because she said you told her that I was in love with her, and that you hated me for fucking her and that, as a result, you wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot-pole and somebody else’s dick.”

“Why would she tell you that?” he asked in confusion, “I mean the…hate and dick part.”

He paused at that then grimaced, “Because I told her that, of the two of us, you’re the more stand-up guy who would treat her right and that she should give you a shot.”

“You tried pimping me out to Laurel?” Tommy asked wryly.
“No!” Oliver huffed. “Not, you know, in a bad way anyway. You do still want to be with her, right?”

“No,” he said firmly.

“Bullshit,” he told him with a scowl. “Just a couple of weeks ago you were pining for this chick like a lost puppy dog, talking about how she was the mother of your future children and shit.”

“That was before I walked in on the two of you playing ‘Ride ‘em Cowgirl’ at Brandon’s place,” he said drolly.

“You said you were over that,” he said accusingly. “So she was right then; you’re still mad at me? Do hate me now, too?”

“I don’t hate you,” he told him with a withering look, “and while I was pretty fucking pissed at the time, I was pretty much over that shit the second I got home. However, and no offense to Laurel, that doesn’t mean I want your sloppy seconds.”

He blanched at that, “It isn’t…” he sighed, “It’s not like that, bro,” he said quietly. “*She’s* not like that.”

“Yeah, I know; do you?” he prodded.

Ollie scowled, “What are you talking about?” After a second his expression darkened, “Wait, so you *did* tell Laurel I was in love with her?”

“Aren’t you?” Tommy said blithely.

“No,” he said with a snort.

“Ollie, I’m not going to be mad if you just admit that Laurel is your Dream Girl.”

“You know I don’t do that Dream Girl shit; that’s all you!” he said with a disgruntled expression.

“I don’t believe that,” Tommy said with a tight-lipped smile, “Do you want to know why I don’t believe that? Because if you didn’t have feelings for her then that means you fucked me over just for a quick lay and Ollie Queen, my best friend since birth, my *brother*, wouldn’t hurt me like that and he certainly wouldn’t risk ruining our lifelong friendship over a piece of ass; not after being there for me last year after Caroline pulled that exact same shit on me.” He looked at him steadily, “Would he?”

Ollie opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before staring at him helplessly, “Tommy, dude…I didn’t—I’m not—”

“It’s okay, man; Felicity explained it to me,” he said waving him off as he sat down in the plush grass and leaned against the soft-sided bounce house.

He looked at him uncertainly, “Felicity?”

“Yeah,” he said. “After I left that night like I said; I was royally ticked off. I didn’t know whether to kick the shit out of you or burst into tears because you screwed me over by fucking Laurel in front of all of our friends, even though you knew how I felt about her.” He frowned and shook his head, “No, you know what? It wasn’t even about her really. I was mad because you hid that shit from me. Dude, all you had to do was say something but, instead, I had to walk in on that shit in order to find out what was going on. It was like shades of Caroline, remember that?” he reminded him. “Of course
you do. We walked into the room and she was on her knees in front of everybody practically blowing Carter Bowen—had her fucking hand on his dick, cupping him through his jeans with her tongue down his throat, right before heading downtown while all his buddies whooped and hollered. We walked in and she started laughing, said she needed a real man and not just some loser while Carter just smirked at us with his hands all over her.”

Tommy’s face darkened in memory as his eyebrows drew together, “I stood there, frozen, not knowing what the fuck to do, two seconds from crying like a fuckin’ baby because I thought I loved her, and you’re the one who got me the hell out of there.” He met his gaze once more, “She wound up chasing after us and calling me a lousy lay while all his college buddies were laughing their asses off, remember that?” Ollie blanched but still he continued, “Remember when we went back to school how she told everybody I had a tiny dick?” He chuckled humorlessly, “Because I do. Once again, you came to my rescue. There we were in the middle of the quad while she was practically shouting that shit as loud as she could, and you walked right up to her and said that, according to most of the guys you’d talked to, she was so stretched out that fucking her was like throwing a hotdog down a hallway and that an elephant would have to have a board strapped to its ass in order not to fall in. After that, she steered clear of bullshit and left us the fuck alone until her dad caught wind of what went down with her and Carter then had her transferred to the Sisters of Eternal Sorrow or whatever.”

“Man, he was pissed,” Tommy continued with a head shake as Ollie just stood there, eyes cast to the ground, unable to even look at him. “I hear that place is the Catholic version of military school only with nuns. How that fuckhead Bowen got out of being charged with statutory rape is beyond me. Point is, you had my back, bro,” he told him. “You’ve always had my back, which is why I couldn’t figure out why you, the one person I always knew I could count on, would do something like that to me knowing how much it would hurt.”

As he spoke, the other man’s eyes filled with pain to the point of tears. He didn’t stop though; Ollie needed to hear it just as much as Tommy needed to say it. This was a life lesson, he reasoned as he heard Felicity’s voice in his head urging him on. Ollie needs to hear this, she said. This is you getting closure.

“It hurt,” he said again. “It hurt bad, worse than Caroline even, and then, just as I was about to down a bottle of Mad Jack’s favorite bourbon before throwing myself from the roof of the pool house, Felicity caught up with me and explained a few things.”

“Oh yeah, like what?” Ollie asked brusquely as he attempted to hide his pain with an air of nonchalance.

“Like the fact that maybe you were just testing me to see if I was gonna bail on you.”

“Why would I do something like that?” he asked incredulously.

“Fuck if I know,” he shrugged. “I can’t figure any of this shit out, but her theory was that since your parents were constantly writing you off as nothing but a screw-up, that maybe you thought I thought you were a screw-up, too. She said it was all a test to see if I’d tank our friendship over this shit.”

“That’s crap,” he scoffed, even though he could tell from the hurt look on his face that, if it wasn’t completely spot on, then it was damn close.

“Yeah, I thought so, too, so her next theory was that maybe the reason you didn’t tell me that you and Laurel had hooked up more than once over the past year was because you were in love with her and you just didn’t want to admit it to me because you were afraid of ruining our friendship.” Ollie started to object to that, but Tommy cut him off, “Don’t even bother to deny it, dude; Brandon and
McKenna both gave me the straight skinny on all that shit. You hooked up with her at least two or three times before Brandon’s party.” His face fell at that as he looked away guiltily. “It’s okay. Like I said, water under the bridge,” he assured him.

“I’m not in love with Laurel,” he denied gruffly.

“You better be in love with her,” Tommy said plainly.

“Why’s that?” he asked, shuffling slightly.

“Because, like I said, being collateral damage in some kind of epic love story is one thing, I can accept that, that I can forgive; but getting fucked over just because your dick got twitchy is something else entirely.”

Ollie licked his lips nervously and fidgeted, “And if I said I was, you know, in love with Laurel?”

He grinned broadly, “Then I’d say I’m happy for you, bro.”

“Really?” he asked suspiciously.

“Really,” Tommy nodded. “I’ll even dance at your wedding and be godfather to your kids. All you had to do was say something and I would have stepped aside months ago.”

“Doesn’t matter,” the other man glowered, “Laurel fuckin’ hates my ass.”

“Yeah, you fucked up,” he agreed. “The good news is that she still has it bad for you so, with a little begging and some groveling, I think you’ll be okay.”

“Begging,” he repeated.

“Like a dog,” he said smugly. “Full court press, we’re talking some ‘Say Anything’, Lloyd Dobler with a boom box shit.”

He stared at him, “Lloyd Dobler?”

Tommy nodded, “Felicity and McKenna watch that thing all the time along with Almost Famous. Don’t get me wrong, Kate Hudson is eminently doable, but I’m hearing that fucking Peter Gabriel song in my sleep now.”

Ollie exhaled roughly, “So we’re really good then?”

“Long as you don’t fuck this up,” he told him. “Treat her like I would’ve, and we’re cool.”

Ollie’s expression tensed before nodding, “Okay.”

“Oh,” he agreed.

He frowned, “So what’s up with you and McKenna?”

“We’re friends,” he said smoothly.

“Just friends or ‘friends with benefits’ friends?” he asked as he sat down on the grass next to him.

“Just friends,” Tommy told him. “That’s all I’ve got time for now that I’m going to be taking care of Felicity full time.”
“Yeah, about that…” Ollie said carefully. “What’s going on with the two of you?”

His brow furrowed in confusion, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that a couple of weeks ago you were calling her the orphan and saying she was just some charity case that Malcolm was using to punish you, and now you’re, what? Giving up girls and partying over her?” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “What of it?”

“What of it?” he repeated. “Dude, you aren’t seriously planning on spending your senior year taking care of some random kid, are you?” He looked at him curiously, “Is this because of the nut thing?”

“What?”

“You know, because you feel guilty ‘cause we almost killed her or something?”

“No, I like her, okay? I like having her around.”

Ollie gave him another look, “Yeah, but all the time?” he questioned. “I could understand keeping her around for the summer but why would you give up partying altogether?”

“I don’t know; it’s just not important to me anymore,” Tommy told him with a shrug.

“You’re not going to seriously stand there and tell me you don’t care about having fun or hooking up just because of some kid,” he said flatly.

“Not for just ‘some kid’,” Tommy told him, “For Felicity, and yeah.”

“What about cotillion, or prom, or every other party between now and graduation? What about sex?” he asked him. “You’re going to miss out on all that for a kid, even if it is Felicity?”

“That’s the deal I made with Malcolm,” he shrugged. “I could either keep partying or I could keep Felicity; I chose her.”

“Fine,” he said disgruntledly. “What’s Brandon’s deal then?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he’s acting weird and he hasn’t had a bonfire since the night you walked in on—“ he paused, “You know.”

“He needed to dry out so I offered him a place to crash,” he explained easily.

He looked at him steadily for a moment, “Okay,” he said getting to his feet and brushing off the back of his shorts. “Look, I should head out.”

“You sure?” he asked, getting to his feet as well.

“Yeah, man; I think I better just go on,” Ollie said with a nod.

“Is something wrong?” he asked with a frown as he caught the odd note behind the other man’s words.

“No,” he assured him. “I just need to go grovel to Laurel like you told me to.”
“Let me know when you set the date,” he joked.

Ollie’s lips twitched, “Yeah, we’re not there yet, pal. Still, I’ll call and let you know how it turns out.”

“Cool,” he said following after him. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Thanks, bro,” Ollie said, clapping him on the back as they walked away, “and, um, Happy Birthday.”

“Thanks,” he nodded, smiling back, his attention so fixed on Ollie that he didn’t notice the movement within the bounce house or the way the younger girl’s eyes followed them out before standing up and heading towards the pool house alone.

A little while later Tommy went back in the main house to find Brandon in the kitchen with a platter of thinly sliced brisket in his hands.

“You’re still hungry?” he asked incredulously.

Brandon shrugged, “It’s brisket, dude; I’ll find the room.”

Tommy took a quick glance around, “Where are McKenna and Felicity? I peeked into the TV lounge and they weren’t there.”

“I think McKenna left with Sara after Laurel took off and Felicity went upstairs to take a nap,” he told him. “She looked pretty wiped.”

“Yeah,” he said looking towards the staircase, “I should probably—“ His phone rang and he sighed, “Hang on,” he said as he pulled it out of his pocket and checked the caller ID. “Oh, hey dad. I was just going to call you and thank you for—”

//Tommy, what happened to Felicity?// Malcolm interrupted angrily.

“What do you mean?” he asked with a frown.

//What I mean is that she just called me and left a message saying that she wanted to go back to Gotham next semester,// he growled. //Not only that, but she asked if I could still get her into the Princeton program and if she could fly out tomorrow since it starts Monday.//

“What?” He said in surprise.

“What’s going on?” Brandon asked in confusion, but Tommy waved him off.

//What did you do to her?// Malcolm demanded.

“Tomm, what happened to Felicity?” he asked with a frown.

//What I mean is that she just called me and left a message saying that she wanted to go back to Gotham next semester,// he growled. //Not only that, but she asked if I could still get her into the Princeton program and if she could fly out tomorrow since it starts Monday.//

“What?” He said in surprise.

“What’s going on?” Brandon asked in confusion, but Tommy waved him off.

//What did you do to her?// Malcolm demanded.

Tommy’s brow furrowed in consternation, “I didn’t do anything.”

//You had to have done something,// he insisted.

“I didn’t!” he said immediately. “In fact, as far as I know, she had a blast today!”

//Well, whatever happened, you need to fix this,// Malcolm said harshly. //I went out on a limb for you, Tommy. I made promises! I swore I’d keep her happy.//
“Dad— ‘he began only to be cut off again.

//Damn it, Tommy; I can’t send her back there, do you understand? If she goes back then they’ll think I couldn’t keep my word; do you want to lose her? Do you want them to take her away from us?//

“No!” he said immediately.

//Then fix this!/ he bit out before hanging up on him.

“Fuck, dude; what the hell?” Brandon said gaping at him. “I could hear Malcolm yelling from over here.” His brow furrowed in sympathy as he looked at him, “I take it he didn’t call to say ‘Happy Birthday’, huh?”

“No, no Happy Birthday.” Tommy looked down at his phone then shoved it in his pocket, “I’ve got to check on Felicity real quick.”

The other man looked at him uncertainly, “You sure you don’t want to--?”

“Later,” he assured him, already heading out of the kitchen.

When he got upstairs he immediately went to her room and entered without knocking. All the lights were off, but he could see the outline of her small form as she lay under the covers, “Sunshine?”

“Yeah?” she said in a muffled voice.

He approached the bed and sat next to her, tugging the covers down so he could look at her properly. “What’s wrong?” he asked, noting the pink flush on her cheeks that was visible even in the low light.

“Nothing,” she said quietly, “Just tired.”

Bullshit, he thought. “Why did you call Malcolm and tell him you wanted to leave?”

Her flush deepened, “I just thought that maybe the computer camp might be fun after all.”

He nodded, narrowing his eyes at her slightly, “What about spending your birthday here instead? Mint chip cake, remember?”

She rolled towards him and shrugged, “The whole point of having a party was to see what it felt like and, now that I know, I don’t need one anymore.”

“Right,” he drawled. “And what about the part where you want to go back to Gotham when school starts back up?”

“I just, you know…”

“You know what?” Tommy prompted.

She sighed, “Well, you’re going to be busy with school and I don’t want to get in the way.”

“Who says you’d be in the way?” he burst out.

“Nobody,” she said in a muted tone.

“Felicity…” he said in exasperation.
“Okay, look,” she said sitting up and revealing that she had changed out of her swimsuit into a fresh pair of pajamas, “You shouldn’t have to give up having fun just to take care of me.”

“That’s not--!”

“No,” she said firmly even though she refused to look him in the eye. “I’m not a baby, you know. I don’t need anybody to take care of me, and you shouldn’t have to give up everything just because you feel guilty over Ollie giving me that brownie.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked in confusion.

“I overheard you and Ollie talking,” she admitted quietly. “He said you told him I was just some orphan and that you didn’t want me around.”

He flinched and swallowed, “That was before I got to know you.”

“The only reason you got to know me in the first place was because I had an allergic reaction and you were afraid you’d get into trouble if I told anybody,” she said glumly.

“No—okay, yeah; yes, at first that’s why I started hanging out with you,” he admitted, “but that’s not why I asked Malcolm if you could stay.”

“No, you asked him if I could stay because you think I’m just some charity case and you felt sorry for me,” she mumbled.

“No!” he said angrily then tipped her chin up, forcing her to look at him, “I have never thought of you as ‘just some charity case’!”

“Yes, you did,” she said accusingly, her eyes filling with tears. “You told Ollie that I was some kind of punishment!”

“At first you were, but you already knew that, remember?” he reminded her quietly. “But that was before when we didn’t know each other. Sunshine,” he said scooting closer and putting his hands on her shoulders, “If all you were was just some charity case or a punishment, then why would I ask Malcolm to take you out of school, hmm? Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said in a near whisper, her eyes downcast.

“I don’t know why either because, had that been the case, I could’ve just had him keep you in Gotham and not have to deal with it. That’s not what happened, though,” he reminded her as he squeezed her shoulders reassuringly. “If you were listening to what I was saying to Ollie then you would have also heard me tell him that I liked you and that I enjoyed having you around.” At her silence, he sighed and pulled her towards his chest then wrapped his arms around her before kissing the top of her hair. “The reason I wanted you here is because…” He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, “I feel better when you’re around and the reason for that is I need you just as much as you need me.”

“Yeah?” she asked with a snuffle.

“Yeah,” he said as he wiped her tears away with his fingertips. “I want you here and, for the record, the reason I stopped partying has less to do with you than it does with Ollie,” he admitted. “Kind of,” he shrugged, “Not with Ollie personally. He’s still my best friend even if we’re in a weird place, and I’m pretty sure that we’ll get back to the way we were eventually, but the reason I don’t want to party anymore is because…” He sighed, “I guess, jumping off a cliff isn’t quite as much fun as it used to be.”
“What do you mean?” she asked, using the heel of her hand to finish wiping away her tears.

He indicated for her to scoot over before kicking off his flip flops and settling against the headboard with her tucked up against his side, “Did I ever tell you about the time I got busted?”

“Like as in ‘jail’ busted?” she asked wide-eyed. He nodded, “What for?”

“Stealing a car,” he said blithely.

Her jaw dropped, “Shut Up.”

“No, really,” he told her. “Of course, technically, I was arrested as an accessory and we weren’t actually stealing it, more like borrowing it, but we still went to jail.”

“You and Ollie?” she asked in disbelief.

“Who else?” he said with a snort. “It was actually Laurel’s dad who busted us, if fact.”

“Whoa…” she breathed. “So what happened?”

“Same thing that always happens whenever Ollie gets a wild hair up his ass,” he said in amusement. “I went along for the ride.”

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It was the same reason why he always let himself be dragged into Ollie’s messes. It all came down to his need to be a part of something, even when he knew better than to do it in the first place. Tommy wasn’t stupid, he knew stealing that cab had been a bonehead move, but Ollie had always been braver than him, more spontaneous, so it had been easier just to follow even when he knew nothing good would come of it.

Ollie never worried about consequences and, until Tommy had met Felicity, neither had he really. Besides, Ollie had always been the more reckless of the two. Tommy was mostly just a wingman, his partner in crime. His job was to pull Ollie out of the fire not into it, even if that meant getting a little singed in the process. It was the reason why, instead of walking away that night after unsuccessfully trying to convince the other man not to do it, he’d gotten into that cab.

Less than five minutes into their joyride they were pulled over and tossed in jail for ‘borrowing’ the taxi. They’d barely even pulled away from the curb when the blue lights came on.

“Evening Officer McHotty,” Ollie grinned at the lady cop that pulled them over. “Care to hop in and take a ride on—I’m sorry-- *in* my big yellow taxi?”

Needless to say, she wasn’t amused. To make matters worse, Laurel’s dad, Detective Lance, was the one to question them.

He put him in an interrogation room, handcuffed to the table, and sat down across from him for several minutes before speaking.

“You look like a smart kid,” he said. “You aren’t; you’re a goddamn idiot, but you look like a smart kid.” Lance plopped down two files, one much thicker than the other and pointed between them. “See these? This one is yours,” he opened it up to reveal a single sheet of paper, along with his mugshot and fingerprints. “Now, I have no doubt that your rich daddy is going to make all this disappear since the Queen kid has already lawyered up and is patiently waiting for his father to come get the two of you out of this mess, but this file,” he said tapping it with his finger, “this is mine. I
tend to keep stuff even when it ‘officially’ goes away which is why I also have this.” He opened the second folder which revealed Ollie’s picture along with several more sheets of paper. “Your buddy has been a regular visitor to this place lately, so much so that we’re thinkin’ of givin’ him his own private cell. Drugs, underage drinking, drunk and disorderly, public nudity, and now grand theft auto,” he said with a tight smile. “Stealin’ a cab for a joyride; talk about a couple of geniuses. Like no one would notice a big yellow cab being driven around by a couple’a snot nosed little punks!” he said with a humorless chuckle. “That’s almost as funny as when your buddy got loaded on MDMA, stripped bare-assed naked in public, then rolled around in somebody’s front yard. According to the arresting officer he said he did it because,” he flipped the file open again and nodded, “Oh yeah, ‘the grass looked soft’.” He looked back up at him, “But, according to the DA, boys will be boys!” he said throwing his hands up in the air helplessly.

Lance shut the file again and leaned forward slightly, “You know, you’re really lucky,” the older man said as he eyed him like a bug. “This whole ‘kinder, gentler’ policy wasn’t in effect last week when we caught two Latino kids doin’ the same exact thing down in the Glades, only with their neighbor’s old busted down van instead of a taxi. They were just some kids; good kids, younger than you, and he threw the book at them. I wonder why that is? Why would he put two poor kids from the Glades through the system—not the juvenile court system, mind you; as part of his new ‘tough on crime’ initiative he charged them as adults, and yet he let a couple of rich white kids from Lamb Valley go without so much as a slap on the wrist?”

“Clarenden Hills, actually,” Tommy mumbled. “Technically Lamb Valley is separate.”

“That right?” he drawled. “Huh? Guess you’d know all about what separates one class of people from another, wouldn’t you?” Tommy’s cheeks reddened even further at that. “Yeah, the district attorney seems to know, too, since he seems to think the law applies to some people and not to others.”

He stared Tommy down until he began to squirm uncomfortably in his chair, then sat back again, lips pursed, “Ah well, who knows? I’m not a lawyer and politics aren’t my forte. I’m just a cop; a cop that has seen what happens when stupid little punks like your buddy, Queen, are allowed to run wild. You know what happens? I’ll tell you what happens; people get hurt,” he told him. “That’s what happens.”

“Ollie wouldn’t hurt anybody,” Tommy objected, finally speaking up. “I mean, yeah, we screwed up, but we were just having fun.”

“Fun,” he drawled before tapping on the file folder again, “More of those ‘boys just being boys’ things, right? No, I get it,” he said quickly. “I was a stupid little punk who knew better than everybody else when I was your age, too. Of course, time and a hell of a lot of hard knocks cured me of that misconception, but the two of you don’t ever have to worry about that since you’ve got a couple of rich daddies with connections to bail you out. Or at least he does,” he said with a smirk. “Oh, yours is plenty rich, probably even has some major pull in city hall, but he isn’t here right now, is he?” Tommy’s jaw tightened as Lance chuckled again mockingly. “See, that’s why I’m in here talkin’ to you, giving you the benefit of my wisdom because, unlike your buddy Queen, you might actually still have a chance at turnin’ all of this around. Him,” he twisted his mouth in a dismissive way, “he’s already a lost cause.”

“Ollie isn’t a lost cause,” Tommy said tersely. “You don’t know him the way I do.”

“Oh, I might not know him, but I know his type,” the older man assured him. “I deal with his kind all the time, been dealin’ with ‘em since I started out as a rookie on the force, and it always ends the same way,” he crossed his arms over his chest and pinned Tommy with another hard look. “Starts off
with a little pot, a few joyrides, maybe a drink or two, and before you know it, the drugs get harder, the crimes get bigger, some girl says ‘no’ when she *really* means yes because who the hell does she think she is,” he said with a nasty sneer, “and that fun you boys are having turns into someone else’s nightmare because the consequences just don’t seem real anymore, do they?”

“Ollie isn’t like that,” he said angrily.

“Ollie isn’t like that *yet*,” the older man corrected him. “Give him time, though, because that’s where he’s headed.”

“He’s never hurt anyone,” he insisted. “He would *never* hurt anyone!”

“Anyone except himself, right?” He let that sink in before continuing, “Your friend Ollie’s parents seem to think that not making him face the consequences for all this is doin’ him some kind of favor but, lemme tell you, it isn’t. He’s either going to wind up doin’ something even his old man can’t bail him out of or he’s gonna wind up crossin’ some line that can’t be uncrossed and then I won’t have to keep a file on him anymore because he’ll be dead.”

“That’s not…” Tommy faltered.

The older man took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, “Look, kid; normally I’d write you off as well, but since this is your first offense and there’s a nice older lady out in the lobby wearin’ a housecoat and curlers, practically in tears over you bein’ in here—“

“Nice lady?” Tommy asked with a sinking feeling. “She wouldn’t happen to speak with a Scottish accent, would she?”

“That would be the one,” he said with a knowing look. “Said her name was,” he glanced at something in the file, “Agnes McGregor.”

“Shit,” he hissed, shutting his eyes tight and dropping his chin to his chest in defeat.

He chuckled, “Yeah, I took one look at her and thought of my own mother and the way she looked when I was even younger than you and got caught stealin’ hubcaps off of cars with my buddies. I got a feelin’ you’re in for about as long of a night as I was back then.”

“You stole hubcaps off of cars?” Tommy blinked as he lifted his head in surprise.

“Yup, and I got lucky ‘cause the cop who caught me knew my family and let me go with a warning, otherwise I might have went to jail or the army ‘cause, back then, that’s what judges would do. They wouldn’t screw around with this juvenile court shit; they’d just waive the age requirement and ship your ass off to the military.” He gave him another hard look, “My only regret is that they can’t do that anymore.”

“You and my dad both,” he muttered.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know your old man but it appears that we both got somethin’ in common then.” He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table, “Look, kid; my girls go to your school and I’ve heard your name mentioned once or twice. I know you’re a nice kid despite the fact that you’re hangin’ around with the wrong people. I asked your housekeeper, this Mrs. McGregor, where your dad was and the impression I got was that he’s not around a whole lot so, since he can’t be here, I’m gonna give you some fatherly advice; take this as your one get out of jail free card and don’t make me have to put another piece of paper in this file because, in my experience, folks like your buddy Queen always come to a bad end eventually and, if they don’t, it's because they throw guys like you under the bus in order to bail themselves out.”
“Ollie wouldn’t do that to me,” he said automatically.

“Maybe he wouldn’t, but what about his old man?”

“No,” he said immediately. “The Queen’s love me; I’m practically their third kid.”

He arched an eyebrow at that, “You willing to bet your life on that? Because that’s what you’re doing, whether you realize it or not. I’ll bet you a whole box of donuts that if their little play with the DA had fallen through, that the story would be that you were the one behind the wheel and that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That’s bullshit,” he said with a scowl.

“Oh yeah?” he challenged. “There are things going on in this town you can’t see from your ivory tower in Clarenden Hills, kid. On this side of town, though, things are a whole lot clearer if you know where to look. Politics gets dirty in the real world and folks like the Queen’s play for keeps. They know how to make a phone call that gets the charges dropped before the ink is dry on the intake forms and make problems like these just disappear. Poof,” he said, wiggling his fingers in emphasis. “Do you honestly think that if your buddy’s dad had to choose between letting his boy go down, and stabbin’ you in the back, that he wouldn’t screw you over in a heartbeat? Would your old man do the same for him if your roles were reversed?”

“Frankly, my old man probably wouldn’t even notice I was gone, to tell you the truth,” Tommy replied blithely.

“Think you’re so smart, huh?” He leaned further in, “Someday your buddy is going to get into a mess he can’t get out of and where will you be, kid? Are you gonna do the smart thing here or the stupid thing?”

“Well, if I had to choose, probably the stupid thing.”

“At least you’re honest,” Lance said with a snort as he shut the file then reached for his handcuff keys.

As soon as they were off, Tommy rubbed his wrists with a wince as Lance gave him another disapproving look, “I know you think I’m full of shit kid, and that’s okay, but before I let you go I’m gonna ask you the same thing the cop who busted me all those years ago asked. See, like you, I told him my buddies would always have my back and he asked me, ‘If your buddy jumped off a cliff, would you?’ Well, would you?” he prompted.

“Probably, yeah,” he said with a small smirk.

Lance chuckled again and leaned back in his chair as he ran his hand through his dark hair, “Yeah, that’s what I said; same smart ass attitude, too. And you know what he told me?” He waited for him to shake his head, “He said, ‘Now, what if you jump off a cliff? If I was to ask your buddy if he’d jump for you, what do you think he’d say?’”

“Ollie would jump,” he said without hesitation.

“Yeah,” Lance said, his eyes hard and uncompromising. “And when you two finally jump off that cliff together, guess who’s gonna be there to scrape you off the rocks? Me, that’s who, and I don’t much care for getting blood and brains all over my shoes. It tends to ruin my day.” He got up and gestured towards the door, “Take off, kid, and do yourself a favor; get a new friend before it’s too late.”
She looked up at him with a frown, “Do you think he was right? About Ollie?”

“No,” he said immediately. “Ollie wouldn’t hurt me on purpose.”

“But he did with Laurel,” Felicity pointed out.

“That was different,” he said dismissively. “In any case, that’s not the point. The point is that, even though I don’t believe he was right about Ollie being a bad friend, he was right about the whole consequences thing.”

“What do you mean?” Felicity asked in confusion.

“When it was just me and Ollie, consequences didn’t really mean much,” he said with a sigh. “I didn’t really have anything to lose before so it was easier to just go along.”

“And now you do?”

He gave her a stern look, “Yeah, because now I have you.”

She blinked, “Oh.”

“Listen, Ollie’s still my bro, but he’s been going off the rails for a while now. Maybe him and Laurel being together is a good thing after all,” he said with a shrug. “Your little revenge scheme with sticking them together might actually be what turns it around for him. She’ll keep him in line, keep him focused; be there to ride his ass when he needs it.”

“What about you?” Felicity asked slowly.

“What about me? I’ll still be his friend,” Tommy said firmly, “It’s just that now I know that if I screw up, it comes at a cost; one that I’m not willing to pay. Everybody has to grow up sometime, right?” he said with a smile. “And, if I do get tempted to screw up, you’ll be there to remind me of what I stand to lose, but you can’t do that from Gotham,” he told her.

“Yeah?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “And we need you; all of us. Not only do I need you here to help me graduate but now Brandon is talking about going to Harvard, too.”

She winced, “Oh wow.”

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “If you’re not here to kick our asses then this ship is gonna sink big time.”

“So, I guess, me going back to Gotham would be pretty selfish then, huh?” she asked peeking up at him shyly.

He nodded, “If anyone here is a charity case, Sunshine; it’s us.”

“I guess I could stay then,” she said with a tentative smile.

“I’m glad that’s settled then,” he nodded.

“One thing, though.”

“What is it?” he asked her.
“Promise me you won’t stop going to parties or having fun with your friends.”

“Sunshine…” he began.

“No,” she told him. “I don’t want you to start feeling like I’m some kind of job or something. I can take care of myself.”

“And I told you that I wasn’t interested in that stuff anymore,” he told her.

“Maybe not now, but eventually you’ll want to go out and have fun,” she reasoned. “I’ll be okay, I promise.”

“And what if I go out and get into trouble?” he asked smartly.

“Then we’ll fix it,” she shrugged. “Ollie’s dad isn’t the only person who can make things disappear.”

“You’re really scary, you know that, don’t you?” Tommy chuckled, pulling her deeper into his side.

“Yup,” she chirped.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment before she finally spoke up, “You know, now that I’ve had a nap I could use a snack.”

“After everything we ate at the party you’re still hungry?” he said wryly.

“I didn’t eat as much as you did. Unlike some people I actually have self-control,” she said rolling her eyes at him. “I was actually thinking of having some of the kugel now that it’s nice and cold and maybe some of that chocotorta thing.”

“Ooh, we still have some of that left?” he asked hopefully. “Any more empanadas?”

She nodded, “Plus that cake was pretty good, right? I think McKenna managed to save a few slices.”

“Brandon was reheating the brisket downstairs…” he said slowly.

“And those short ribs were pretty amazing.”

They looked at each other.

“Last one downstairs is a rotten egg!” she shouted before climbing over him and jumping off the bed.

“Oof!” he groaned grabbing his stomach and following after her. “Seriously, for a little thing you weigh a ton! Maybe you shouldn’t have any more cake after all?”

Malcolm Merlyn stared at the drink in his hands and grimaced. Tommy called him back just before they’d gone to bed to let him know that it was all a misunderstanding and that Felicity still wanted to remain in Starling.

It had been a hard conversation to have. Tommy had obviously been hurt by the fact that he hadn’t even bothered to wish him a Happy Birthday before hanging up on him like that. He’d apologized, gave him a reasonable explanation for his behavior (jet lag combined with concern over Felicity), but there’d been a certain amount of coolness to his son’s tone that was concerning, especially given the delicate game he was playing in regards to Ra’s al Ghul’s secret treasure.
Felicity’s sudden turnaround in attitude had also been a wake-up call.

He remembered Ra’s words:

“Listen well, Malcolm Merlyn, I grant you custody of the treasure; I will put her in your care and trust you to see to her happiness…”

“I will be watching you. Although she is weak, as I said she is still my treasure. If any harm comes to my precious one or to the city she calls her home, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“…Blood for blood, Magician. So long as my daughter is safe, so is yours.”

Malcolm was many things, but he wasn’t a fool. There were people watching him even in Starling. He had no doubt that Ra’s had eyes and ears everywhere and that they would be watching not just him, but his family as well. Since his wife’s death, he’d avoided spending a lot of time at home. He knew it made him a coward and a bad parent, but the memories of his failure to protect her haunted him to this day.

However, due to his own hubris, he now had no choice but to face his ghosts head on and become the father his wife would have wanted him to be or risk having his children caught in the same deadly trap he, himself, had inadvertently set off.

He hadn’t expected to see Ra’s there, his meeting was supposed to be with Al Owal alone, but there he was dressed in a three-piece suit instead of his customary robes.

“I see you have brought the documents I requested, Saher,” he greeted as soon as Malcolm stepped into Al Owal’s office overlooking downtown Hong Kong.

“Yes,” he said, schooling his features into a calm mask as he handed over his revised will naming Felicity his heir to half of his assets, the other half going to Tommy, along with splitting control of Merlyn Global between them equally.

“No provision for your other child, Magician?” Al Owal sneered as he looked them over with a practiced eye.

“Thea is provided for by Robert Queen’s will,” he said tightly. “But should the time come, when and if she is found to be mine, I hope that you will allow me to make provisions for her as well, Master,” he said, bowing his head in deference to Ra’s.

The other man gave him a pleased look, “We shall reassess then should that come to pass but, if she is provided for by Queen as you say, I see no reason for it. After all, just as my treasure is now yours, your treasure is now his.”

He felt the impotent anger at the other man’s highhandedness rise in his throat, but he merely nodded.

“I am also pleased that you would come all this way personally, particularly given all your new responsibilities at home,” he said meaningfully. “I hope that my treasure is doing well in your absence.”

“Yes, Master,” he told him. “We spoke on the phone just yesterday about her plans to throw my son a birthday party. In fact, I brought you some pictures in case you’d like to see them.”
“I would, is that them?” the other man asked, indicating the folder tucked under his arm.

“Yes, Master,” Malcolm nodded handing it over. “It’s copies of Felicity’s transcripts, as well as some of her letters, and the pictures I mentioned.”

The other man looked through them, occasionally pausing to study them. “My daughter is exceptionally bright, is she not?”

Both Al Owal and Malcolm looked up in surprise. It was rare that Ra’s referred to her as anything other than ‘his treasure’.

“Yes, Master,” Malcolm said, “She’s very smart, a genius in fact.”

Ra’s lips twitched upwards slightly, “And her penmanship is excellent. She appears to have an artistic nature. How is she with other languages?”

“Most of her courses were in the maths and sciences, but I believe she has the mind for it. I’ll make sure she enrolls in some language courses when school starts, if you’d like.”

“I would,” he nodded. “It is important that she be able to communicate effectively if she is to take a leadership role in your company someday. It is also important that she be well-traveled. You may want to consider arranging for that as well. As for her aptitude in the sciences, she takes after me in that regard,” Ra’s said slowly as he flipped through the pictures as Al Owal glowered beside him. “In my former life I was a physician, did you know that, Saher?”

“No, Master,” Malcolm said, although that was a lie. He’d dedicated the last decade of his life to learning everything he could about the Head of the Demon, what little there was to learn anyway.

Ra’s made a noncommittal sound, “Is she interested in the healing arts?”

“Not that I know of. I believe her interests run mostly towards technology and the hard sciences.”

“Understandable given the age in which we exist,” he said with a nod. “It will suit her well when she eventually joins your company.”

“Yes, Master,” Malcolm again agreed although he knew they were getting into very dangerous territory.

He picked up one picture and handed it to Al Owal. It was the one of her, Tommy, and Malcolm standing in front of the school holding up Rebecca’s plaque.

“The treasure has grown into a very lovely young woman, has she not?” he asked his First.

“Yes, Master,” the other man said reluctantly. “However, she is still small of stature, sickly, and her eyes—”

“Yes, yes,” Ra’s said with a grimace.

“Master, although she is small her doctors assure me that she is quite normal for her age, and her allergies are well under control,” Malcolm said quickly. “As for her eyes, I’ve spoken to a specialist who assures me that there are surgical options available to correct the damage done to them. Lasik for example.”

“And how soon can they do this surgery?” the other man asked.

“When she’s eighteen, Master.”
Ra’s gave him a disgruntled look, “Why can’t they do it now?”

“Her eyes must mature first so as not to cause complications with the surgery,” he told him. At Al Owal’s triumphant look, he added, “But, under certain circumstances, they may be able to do it sooner; at sixteen perhaps?”

The other man seemed to mull that over, “Make the inquiries.”

“I will,” he nodded. “If I may I ask…why you are taking such an interest in the treasure now, Master?”

“She is my daughter after all, Magician,” Ra’s said archly.

“Of course, forgive me,” he said quickly. “I meant no offense.”

“Not at all; it’s a legitimate question,” he said as he put the folder down on Al Owal’s desk and walked to the window overlooking over the skyline. “My daughter, Talia, is dead, her final death, it would seem, as is the abomination she created with the Dark Knight. My other daughter, Nyssa…” he sighed, “She has returned begging forgiveness and rededicated herself to my service, but she is a…”

“Degenerate,” Al Owal spat out in disgust.

“Unfortunately, the First is correct,” Ra’s said darkly. “Of course, she is still my blood but she can offer me no worthy heirs unless she chooses to give up this…unnatural deviation. As such, when the time comes…”

“You wish to name Felicity your heir?” Malcolm asked in surprise.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Al Owal spat. “She is weak, despite her admittedly superior mind, and has no training. She cannot lead an army, she can’t even lift a sword or see well enough to fire an arrow at a target! In any case, there is still the chance Ra’s may yet produce a son and heir or choose another equally worthy successor from within the League.”

“The First is correct; she is still too weak to be named my heir even with this surgery you speak of. But her son? Should she ever produce a worthy heir I may reassess then, but that will not be for many years to come.” He said turning to him. “When I was young, an unbetrothed girl of thirteen was practically an old maid. My first wife, Sora, was but sixteen when we married and considered to be on the shelf. Her father begged me to marry her because he was convinced that she was already past her prime but she was both beautiful and intelligent so that didn’t matter to me. Of course, times have changed and, as I said before, I have no intentions of arranging a union for her, not at the moment in any case.” His lip curled in a mixture of disgust and anger, “Many times I tried to convince Talia to pick someone worthy. Finally, she did choose the man I initially wanted her to, but then she got caught up in a spiral of madness and he rejected her instead.” He sighed, “Unfortunately my treasures have inherited my stubbornness as well as my blood, so I do not expect this daughter to be any more willing to accept an arranged marriage than her sisters were; not one born to the world that she was raised in certainly. However, although I have said this before, I feel it is pertinent to remind you that I do expect you to see to it that the man she does eventually choose is worthy of her; especially as he’ll be expected to sire my grandson and eventual heir.”

“Of course, Master,” Malcolm said stunned. “I promised you that I would care for your treasure as if she were my own and I intend to keep my vow.”

Al Owal huffed darkly, “Not that it means much coming from you.”
“What’s that?” Ra’s said looking to his First, “Do you have something to say in regards to my
decision to appoint Saher as the treasure’s guardian?”

“No, Master,” the other man said quickly. “Only that the Magician cannot be much of a guardian
unless he is actually there to see to the treasure’s needs.” Al Owal gave Malcolm a malicious look,
“Perhaps you should consider cutting back on Saher’s responsibilities within the League so that he
may spend more time at home as any *good* father should.”

Malcolm’s jaw tightened. It was a power play, pure and simple. Al Owal was worried that he was
usurping his place as First, especially now that Nyssa was proving to be a dead end. The other man
had trained Nyssa and, until her sister corrupted her, that role had served him well. When he brought
her back into the fold, he sought to reinforce his role as First only to see it thwarted when Nyssa
proved unreceptive to the idea of marriage. Ra’s toying with the idea of making Felicity’s future son
his heir was clearly making the other man nervous.

“If the Master wishes I would be more than happy to turn over my duties to someone else. Someone
who does not have the responsibility of caring for something as important as Ra’s al Ghul’s most
valuable treasure, someone whose duties are far less taxing than my own; you, perhaps?” Malcolm
suggested with a dangerous smile.

Al Owal jumped to his feet and fixed Malcolm with a hate-filled gaze, “I should cut out your
poisonous tongue, Magician.”

“Sit down,” Ra’s ordered in a cold voice causing his First to look at him in surprise. “It is you who
made the suggestion that he remain close to the treasure, therefore it will be up to you to reassign his
duties.”

“Yes, Master,” the other man glowered.

“As for you, Magician,” Ra’s said as he turned to him, “Your duties are to be restricted to caring for
the treasure and her city, and you shall cut down on your travel significantly. I want you in Starling
and by her side. If you cannot be by her side, then you will see to it she is properly cared for and kept
safe by those you trust. No harm may come to her; her happiness is now and will always take
precedence and priority over any and all other responsibilities you have toward both the League and
your own business or personal interests.”

An uneasy feeling settled within Malcolm’s gut, but he nodded anyway, “Yes, Master.

“There is an old saying among my people, Magician,” Ra’s said, looking him up and down coldly.
“The eye sees, but the arm is short.” You asked to become my treasure’s guardian. While I have no
doubts about the fact that you do care for her, I also know that you took that responsibility unto
yourself for reasons of ambition, not parental affection. Be careful that your aspirations do not
exceed your reach.”

For ten years now he’d avoided his responsibilities as a father only to have them now thrust upon
him. Perhaps it was for the best, he reasoned. Besides the near disaster with Felicity that morning and
Al Owal looking for any excuse he could to have his throat cut, there were the recent revelations
about Thea to deal with. Also, he needed to keep a closer eye on Robert.

Robert Queen had always been weak, undisciplined. He was a man who could be all too easily led
by his dick; Isabel Rochev was proof of that. No, much as he hated to admit it, he needed to get his
house in order and find a way to shore up his position at home. When he first thought up the
Undertaking, the idea was to bring down the evil that plagued Starling in the form of the cancerous growth that was the Glades. He wanted revenge for the murder of his wife, but Ra’s had denied him his justice. However, Malcolm was nothing if not quick on his feet. There were other ways to accomplish his goals, ways that did not involve bringing down the ire of the League of Assassins.

After all, the Glades were just a symptom of a greater evil, one that plagued not only Starling but the country as a whole. And, now that Ra’s treasure had grown infinitely in value to the Demon’s Head, he was poised to climb even higher than he had first imagined he could.

After all, Ra’s may someday get his heir, but Malcolm would be, for all intents and purposes, that child’s grandfather—if he played his cards right. Being a father was something he’d always avoided but he could do it. He could be the man both Felicity and Tommy needed him to be and, at the same time, act behind the scenes to secure their future.

It would take years to see his ambitions come to fruition but playing a long game wasn’t that daunting of a prospect to him. He’d spent years rising through the ranks within the League with just one goal in mind, and now that his circumstances had changed, so had his goals. If he did this right, if he was very careful and kept his eye on the prize, he could have it all; the League, the Undertaking, even the country.

“The eye sees, but the arm is short,” he said out loud.

What does one do when they can see what needs to be done but do not possess the reach to do what they must in order to make it happen?

“You get longer arms.”

From now on Malcolm was going to be spending a lot more time at home with his children.

All of them.
David Bowie-isms and the Breakfast Club

Chapter Notes

I know it's been a minute but I was working very, very hard on this the whole time. 143 pages and I almost kept going but I figured it was time to let it go. Hope you enjoy, I know I did!

---Jen
... And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations. They're quite aware of what they're going through...

— David Bowie —

AZ QUOTES
“You’re sure you don’t want a party?” Tommy asked Felicity for the umpteenth time that morning, “Because it’s not too late; we could figure something out and McKenna said she’d help.”

“Yeah, throwing a party on the fly is kind of our wheelhouse,” Brandon said as he shut the car door behind him then paused, “Of course, that was mostly just us ordering up a few kegs and then spending the rest of the night getting wrecked out of our skulls so…probably not the same thing as throwing an impromptu birthday for a thirteen year old girl…” he hummed, rocking back on his heels slightly with a furrowed brow. “Okay, so maybe not our wheelhouse after all.”

“You think?” Tommy asked wryly as he helped Felicity out of the back seat then gave the sports car one last resentful look before heading inside.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like the gleaming red sports car; he did. Truth was he was jealous as hell when Brandon first got it because his dad refused to buy him something similar…and it was a beautiful vehicle, too; all sleek lines and molded contours that made it look like a speeding bullet even when parked. He just would’ve rather taken his Jeep or one of the SUV’s from the garage that day instead. He lobbied hard for it but Felicity insisted that it was her day, her choice, and he was the one who came up with the rules of ‘Felicity Day’, not her.

Yeah, not his best idea ever but now he was stuck with it.
It wasn’t envy that was affecting his current state of mind though; not entirely. That was part of it
however, but not because of the car. Sure, the Jag XKR was fucking awesome; any red-blooded guy
would pop a boner just at the thought of owning something like that, but now that he was planning
on going to Harvard instead of partying with Oliver after graduation, he’d pretty much decided that
the hot sports car would have to wait a few more years. Yeah, the original plan had been to tell
Malcolm he wanted something low slung and sexy as his graduation gift but, after realizing just how
fucking cold it got in Cambridge during the winter, he decided to save that dream until he returned to
the West Coast permanently. Hell, he couldn’t even imagine driving in that shit with his soft top. If
he was going to be living someplace where the wind chill dipped below zero (instead of going to
college in the Bahamas or something like he would have preferred), he wanted heated seats and
something better insulated than a rag top convertible or canvas flaps. Plus, since Felicity was going to
be joining him there, they needed something that was safe, roomy, and reliable, not to mention built
like a fucking tank.

It sounded boring, yeah, but it wouldn’t be that bad, he told himself. After Felicity started telling him
what it would be like living in Cambridge, he’d even started researching potential vehicles on the
internet. He’d pretty much decided on a SUV after looking at some of the concept cars slated to
come out in the next year or so. The Land Rover Defender he saw looked promising so, even though
it sucked to have to wait on his dream car, a little convertible just didn’t make sense for them; not at
this time, anyway. An SUV? That made sense. Even one of Malcolm’s boring four door Mercedes
sedans made sense, but he just couldn’t see putting snow tires on a sports car and he wasn’t really
interested in playing on black ice with her in the passenger seat.

So yeah, despite the tickles of envy he felt, the car wasn’t the reason he was in a shitty mood; what
really got him started that morning was Malcolm and his bullshit. That and the fact that he wasn’t the
one driving. He was already in a bad mood because of his dad so the fact that he was stuck in the
passenger seat only served to continue to erode his at his sangfroid.

Ever since Felicity told him what that meant he’d been dying to use it in a sentence. Unfortunately
the only chance he’d gotten to do that so far was in his head. He was planning on unloading it on
McKenna just to watch her do a spit-take after she and Felicity completely pwned them at Scrabble
the other day.

Yeah, he still said that game was fixed. That was bullshit. Nobody hits the triple word score that
many times in a row—nobody.

As for spending the day stuck in backseat driver mode, it wasn’t that he was normally a control freak
or anything; he was just pissed off at Malcolm and the position he’d put him in by promising Felicity
he’d be there for her birthday even though they both knew he wouldn’t show.

Hell, he already missed it, Tommy thought silently. Today was her birthday, not tomorrow. Even if
he did show up, he was still a day late and a dollar short. Actually, if Malcolm did have to pay him a
dollar every time he came up short by missing his major milestones, he’d be broke and Tommy would be the billionaire. The difference is, he expected Malcolm to disappoint him, Felicity didn’t.

Being able to drive his own vehicle, being the one in control; that might have helped level out his mood somewhat. He’d still be pissed but at least then he wouldn’t feel like he was reacting to the situation rather than having to literally ride it out.

Driving always relaxed him. There was nothing Tommy loved more than a good party or a long drive down the coast. There were many days when he and Ollie would just jump in a car and head down the Pacific Coast Highway, top down and radio blasting. Partying had been their other major source of stress relief, but with partying off the table, he’d been looking forward to unwinding a little from behind the wheel.

Brandon being the one in the driver’s seat instead of him set his teeth on edge and would have even if this other shit wasn’t putting him in a mood.

Okay, so he’d admit it; he’d gotten a few tickets, too. A speeding ticket here and there, tons of parking violations…one lone (and now permanently buried) charge of Grand Theft Auto, but even if he had a habit of forgetting to feed the meter occasionally, the other man had a need for speed that would’ve lost him his license from speeding tickets alone if not for his own father’s intervention. And that wasn’t including the fact that this was his third sports car in six months.

He felt a little surge of guilt at that. Yeah, okay, so Brandon promised to keep it under the speed limit, and yeah, he’d kept his word so far, but a car like that was meant to go fast. He’d driven the Jag himself once when they went back for the other man’s Jeepster after he started staying over on a regular basis. One second he was just cruising along and the next he was feathering the brakes, scared shitless after he looked down at the speedometer and realized he was going almost 135 mph without even breaking a sweat.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t like going fast just as much as the next guy, because he did and had the points on his license to prove it. He’d caught his fair share of rides to the Blue Light Disco for speeding, not as many times as Ollie or Brandon, but he liked a bit of zoom-zoom, too. Had it been just him and Brandon, he would’ve been okay with exploring his inner Andretti, but not as long as Felicity was in the car with them. Even so…

Okay, so maybe it was more than just a tickle of envy he was feeling.

He gave the gleaming red convertible one last longing look and sighed. He didn’t regret Felicity being in his life or sacrificing partying, girls, or anything else for that matter; she was worth it. Still,
his fantasy of owning his own sports car was almost as hard to give up as his now-failed romance with Dream Girl Laurel had been.

Actually more, he admitted reluctantly. Girls came and went, but a man’s love for his dream car was forever. He knew exactly what he wanted, too: a silver Mercedes McLaren. Most people would go with red or black, but when he thought about his Dream Car all he could think about was a gleaming streak of silver, its mirrored perfection gleaming under the sunlight as he drove it down the PCH with the top down and his Dream Girl in the seat beside him heading off into the sunset together.

And then reality came crashing down which meant no Dream Girl, no Dream Car; nothing. Instead, he got a Jeep. A silver Jeep, but still a Jeep.

Unlike the Queen’s and the McNamara’s, Malcolm didn’t really go for flash as evidenced by their home which, while very large and beautiful, was modest in comparison to most billionaire’s homes. He also wasn’t really a car guy so, while Tommy had never wanted for anything, he didn’t have as large a collection of exotic vehicles to choose from as his buddies did. That wasn’t to say he drove around in an old beater, just that he didn’t have a fleet of awesome cars to choose from. Instead, he had his choice of his dad’s boring as dog shit old fart cars that didn’t exactly scream ‘sexy’ as much as they screamed ‘I make a lot of money and vote Republican’, and his one and only personal vehicle; a fully loaded soft top Jeep Renegade.

Not that he didn’t like his truck; hell, he loved his truck. What teenaged boy didn’t like something that could barrel ass off-road and go just about anywhere; that thing was fun as hell. However, what he wanted for his sixteenth birthday was a silver *sports car* that was guaranteed to get him laid in the backseat but Malcolm said he didn’t want Tommy to get himself killed.

Ollie was the one who fucked him on that one long before Brandon had his chance. Less than a week after he got his license, he wrapped his first car around a tree and got a DUI. Malcolm’s reasoning was that whatever Ollie did, Tommy eventually did too, which is why he wound up with something that had push bars and a roll cage instead. Brandon’s later adventures in twisted metal just helped seal the deal.

Okay, so maybe that sounded like responsible parenting and Malcolm did have a point when he said that the Jeep fit Tommy’s current lifestyle better than a sports car would. He wasn’t as big of a fitness nut as Brandon and Ollie but he did like to surf occasionally, enjoyed fishing and camping, and took advantage of the great outdoors whenever the mood struck. At the time though, he was less interested in being practical and more interested in getting laid. In his experience, girls liked gleaming red Jaguars with buttery leather seats so they could cruise around the city and show off to their friends. They didn’t like riding around in mud splattered Jeeps with board racks and a tackle box in the back seat. Not to mention the only thing harder to fuck in than a tiny little sports car was a Jeep. They were a lot smaller in the inside than they looked and, even if you could manage to get your fuck on, canvas flaps weren’t exactly conducive to privacy. Girls tended to not go for that sort of
Again, not that it wasn’t a decent first ride for a teenager; after all it wasn’t like he couldn’t afford a hotel room or that anybody would object if he decided to do it in his own bed (before Felicity moved in, that is). Until Felicity came to live with him he was pretty much free to do whatever the hell he wanted to. The only thing stopping him from turning Casa Merlyn into the Sodom and Gomorrah-esque beach house Brandon operated out of was Mrs. McGregor but, after she went home at the end of the day, he was on his own and could do whatever the hell he wanted to. Most ‘regular’ kids would be perfectly satisfied with just the Renegade and their dad’s full line of Mercedes sedans and SUVs…until you compared it to what Ollie and Brandon rolled around in.

Ollie had three sports cars—three; a Porsche Carrera GT, a Maserati Spyder, and a Mercedes SLR McLaren—one of the few Mercedes types his dad didn’t own, probably because it was actually cool, and just so happened to be his motherfucking Dream Car! In addition to life fucking him on that one, Ollie also had two motorcycles, a Ducati Matrix and an Aprilia RSV 1000 R, a tricked out H2 his dad got him for beach runs and, gone but not forgotten, a Ferrari Enzo he totaled after owning it for less than five days. He even got a sweet little four-seater single engine Cessna Corvalis 400TTX to play with after he got his pilot’s license (the only test he’d ever studied for in his life as far as Tommy knew).

They both got their pilot’s certifications at around the same time, although Tommy didn’t get his own plane to go with it. Robert was an avid pilot, as was Malcolm, but unlike his own father, the other man had taken the time to teach both of them about airplane maintenance and had taken them up hundreds of times for quick runs along the coastline or whenever they went up north to Big Bear.

The first time Tommy ever took the stick was when Robert handed it off to him when he was six years old. Ollie’s dad was also the one to teach him about sailing, taught him to drive a standard, and how to parallel park. Yeah, Robert Queen wasn’t perfect; he slept around, had other vices like drinking, and didn’t always make the best decisions, but he was more of a parent to Tommy than Malcolm had ever been.

Teaching him to fly though; that was something he’d always be grateful to him for. It was a handy skill to have, especially given how much they traveled, but it was the freedom it offered that he appreciated the most. He and Robert were alike in that sense; they were alike in a lot of ways actually.

Ollie hated sailing, got bored easily with fishing, was not enthusiastic about guns or hunting in general, detested swimming, and never liked horses or anything else that involved getting sweaty or dirty unless a girl was involved. Robert, on the other hand, was a true adventurer at heart. Underneath the disguise he wore of a successful businessman, he was a lost boy, a kid who longed to be a cowboy or run away with the circus. He was fun, unlike Malcolm who was anything but.
Robert was always happiest on his boat though. While Tommy was never a fan of boats he did like fishing, loved fishing, and he spent many an hour hanging out with Ollie and his dad on the Gambit with a beer in one hand and a fishing pole in the other. Whereas Malcolm was happiest on the road and reeling in money, Robert hated being cooped up in a boardroom. He not-so secretly resented the suit and tie world he lived in throughout the week so, anytime he could escape into the sea or sky, he would. He felt more kinship with Robert because of that alone than he’d ever felt with Malcolm.

Sometimes when they would join him on the boat for a quick sail down the coast, he’d sneak away from Ollie to just sit with the older man and enjoy his company in silence. Robert would just look up at him, smile, then toss him a cold one before pointing to the other pole, only to pretend to bitch and moan whenever Tommy got a bite, swearing up and down he was cheating somehow.

“You’re a natural born fisherman, son,” Robert would say, “A goddamn magician with that pole just like your old man used to be at your age.”

If he could trade dads with Ollie, he’d take a man like Robert Queen over his own father any day.

Of course, that said, Robert wasn’t perfect. In addition to all the fun parts, he also had a dark side.

They were getting ready for their annual trip up north for the holidays and Ollie’s folks had been unusually tense. Things between them were kind of strained, why he didn’t know, but everyone in the house was feeling it. He asked Ollie what was going on and the other man replied, “Dad’s screwing another secretary or something and Mom’s pissed, but she’ll get over it; she always does.”

Robert’s wandering eye wasn’t exactly a secret, but it upset him nonetheless. Ollie pretended to take it in stride but Tommy wasn’t quite as adept at masking his emotions as his friend was. Maybe because the thought of Robert being unfaithful clashed with his ideas about who he was or maybe it was because it burst that bubble of happiness and family he’d always associated with the Queen household. For whatever reason, he never really believed the rumors about Ollie’s dad until then.

He saw the man flirt with pretty girls, saw them throw themselves at him or slip him their numbers when they were at the airfield or down at the yacht club but that was just harmless fun. He never actually *saw* him feel anyone up or sneak off into the broom closet for a quick piece of ass. Those ‘rumors’ were just stuff the housekeeping staff would whisper about or thinly veiled blind items in the tabloids, but he’d never seen any proof of the older man’s infidelities with his own eyes until then. Until that day, he’d always felt like the Queen mansion was his second home but, for the first time in his memory, he’d felt like an intruder, like an alien lost in an unfamiliar world of bitter accusations and marital unrest. The only good thing he could say about Malcolm was that he loved Rebecca with everything he had. It was his one and only redeeming quality as a husband and a
father, so to see Robert fail at something as basic as that cut deep.

He remembered breakfast that morning as being a cold affair filled with stilted conversation and frozen smiles. He’d been on edge the entire time as he watched Robert pick at his breakfast while listening to Moira pretend everything was normal. In truth though, you could cut the tension with a knife. It got so bad that he was on the verge of begging off the trip, faking a stomach flu or something and heading home. Even the idea of spending Christmas alone was preferable to spending two weeks trapped in a ski lodge with the Queen’s at that point.

He remembered walking outside looking for Ollie, that very excuse on the tip of his tongue, and instead running into Robert. The older man was just standing there with a drink in his hand and staring over the lawns which, even in the middle of winter, were a lush and fertile green.

Being a billionaire meant you could buy pretty much anything, even eternal spring. At least on the surface anyway; it was still winter for the rest of the world.

He shot Tommy a look and, as if he could read his mind, he huffed a bitter laugh, holding up his glass in a salute. Not even ten in the morning and he was on his second or third scotch. He said, “Never settle for a suit and tie life, Tommy Merlyn. Never live life in a box.” He took a drink, the ice cubes clinking inside the rock glass before offering him another smirk, “You’re like me, you know? You were made to live out there,” he pointed out across the gardens towards the ocean, his glass still in hand, “in the sunshine with a pretty young girl on your arm, not slowly suffocating to death in a coffin of your own making.” He downed the amber liquid before setting it down on the railing then turned to walk inside. He clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder on his way past and added, “Remember that, Tommy; the key to a good life isn’t money, it isn’t fame or success, it’s escaping this…damn world full of boxes and sailing off into the sunset with a pretty girl who loves you.”

The weirdness went away shortly after that. He was pretty sure it had something to do with Thea’s close call after she fell off her horse a few months later. After that, Robert was back to being the easygoing guy everyone knew and loved and, from what Tommy could tell, he and Moira seemed better than ever.

In any case, defensive driving, piloting, and self-defense were just a matter of course when your dad was a billionaire. Even with teams of bodyguards and a security detail you had to know how to take care of yourself. The names Queen and Merlyn painted a pretty big target on your back so they were taught the basics of self-defense, how to fire a gun, and how to take the stick and operate the radio just in case the pilot was incapacitated or they needed to make a quick getaway. Neither of them were ninjas or anything, they couldn’t give Rambo a run for his money, but both their dads insisted they be taught just enough basic self-defense to give themselves a better than even shot at getting out alive.
Well, Robert did. Malcolm? Who knew what he thought or even if he gave a shit.

In fact, Robert had promised Tommy he’d begin teaching him how to fly a chopper that summer, but that was before Felicity came down from Gotham. He doubted it was going to happen now though.

Not because of her, of course; Robert wouldn’t care if Felicity tagged along. The reason he wasn’t going up in a chopper anytime soon was because of what Ollie did after he finally got the keys to the Cessna. On his first solo flight, instead of coming back like Tommy had after circling the coast, he flew down to Guadalajara in order to get out of taking his midterms. Robert had to pull some major juice just to keep the FAA off his ass for that one. To make matters worse, Ollie didn’t even let him in on the plan so he could tag along.

No wonder he didn’t argue with him about who got to go first, he thought with a hint of leftover resentment. However, at the time, Tommy was just too stoked about getting his final certification to notice. It also helped that the instructor was female, stacked, and not wearing a bra although he was pretty sure that was for Robert’s benefit rather than theirs. Plus, it showed just how determined Ollie was; those things had to be in the double ‘D’ range and, even if Ollie was always more of an ass man, it was still pretty distracting.

They were natural, too. He could tell by the jiggle.

Needless to say, they’d both been grounded ever since but the little 400TTX was still pretty fucking cool. Tommy would’ve been happy with just a two-seater puddle jumper like a Sandpiper or something but if Malcolm wouldn’t even let him have a base model Corvette, he sure as hell wasn’t going to buy him a plane just so he could pull a John Denver into Orchid Bay or splatter himself on the side of a mountain.

Meanwhile Brandon had his dad’s entire classic car collection to choose from plus his own two personal vehicles; the Jag, and his fully restored 1967 Jeepster. Between the two, if Brandon *had* to be the one acting as their chauffeur, and if he *had* to risk their lives on the other man’s ability to keep all four tires on the ground, that’s the vehicle he would have preferred to take for sure. However when he tried telling her that, Felicity reminded him that he promised her they would do what she wanted and what she wanted more than anything was to spend the day with the two of them while riding around in the little sports car because it was ‘cute’ and she liked the fact that it was her favorite color.

He made an irritated noise in the back of his throat. Maybe he was being overprotective but, while the teal and white Jeepster Commando had plenty of scoot for what it was and could go wherever you wanted it to, the straight six “Go Devil” flat head with only 75 horse power under the hood
wasn’t exactly built for the kind of torque the Jag could put out. It *might* go 90 mph if you were willing to blow up the motor and it didn’t even have a turbocharger. Another thing working in its favor was that it was Brandon’s baby and he spoiled that thing rotten having rebuilt it himself.

If Robert Queen’s rich man’s hobbies included planes and boats, Mad Jack’s was collecting cars (that and banging his secretary). Jack, when he wasn’t busy being an asshole or getting people pregnant, taught Brandon everything he knew about them and gave him the Jeepster when he was thirteen with the promise that if he could get it up to spec, he’d buy him any car he wanted when he got his license. Even after Jack bailed on them to marry his very pregnant assistant, the now ‘Not-So Virgin’ Mary McNamara, he kept on that thing until it was done. Besides partying and surfing, it was probably the only thing the other man ever really cared about.

Brandon had totaled plenty of cars since getting his license, but the old surfer classic had yet to get so much as a door ding. He loved that thing so much he was once issued a ticket for going *under* the speed limit because he’d just gotten it repainted and was afraid of getting bug pecks in the clear coat. Meanwhile he was pretty sure the Jag wouldn’t be ‘cute’ for much longer as it was living on borrowed time.

The thing about Brandon and his truck was, while being just as shallow and status conscious as any of them, he didn’t drive it to show off; no, that was what the Jag, the Ferrari 612 Scaglietti he mowed his neighbor’s lawn jockey down with, and the other cars he totaled were for. The Jeepster, on the other hand, reflected who he was underneath all the rest of the crap as evidenced by the loving care in which he treated it.

It was a neat little truck and got second and third looks from other gearheads, yeah, but it wasn’t necessarily the kind of vehicle that would get a guy laid. It wasn’t even as valuable a collectable as some of the other Jeep Commando models that came out that year. Most of the time when someone was looking for a 1967 Jeepster, they were looking for the wagon, not the convertible.

Not that it wasn’t a neat little truck; it just wasn’t all that popular except with hardcore Willys-Overland collectors. For one thing, it was something Willys came up with to compete with the International Scout and Ford Bronco that was a cross between a military vehicle and a convertible so, while the odd aesthetic worked, it was still more than a little bit utilitarian in comparison to some of the other models.

However, its value wasn’t the reason Brandon loved it so much; it was because it was the only outlet he had for venting his frustrations with both his parents until discovering the joys of recreational pharmaceuticals. He might not be a fan of his father, but he did inherit Mad Jack’s passion for the classics and for preserving their value by not altering them in any way, so the Jeepster looked exactly like it did when it rolled off the assembly line back in ‘67.
Of course, that meant there was no power steering, a stiff suspension which made for a rough ride, and no banging sound system; even the radio was a compromise since that was technically considered a ‘special option’ and didn’t come standard on most of that year’s production models. Oh, and it didn’t even have AC, a point Felicity was very quick to mention.

His argument that it did have AC; a 560 AC meaning four windows, a ragtop, and 60mph down the highway, didn’t exactly go far.

Another reason she wasn’t exactly thrilled about spending her birthday riding around Brandon’s truck was because, according to her, it smelled like feet sweat. She wasn’t wrong, Tommy admitted reluctantly. Although he kept the exterior cleaner than most operating rooms, the interior was permeated with the sickly sweet scent of coco butter, board wax, old gym socks, and fish, further points that Felicity herself brought up as the capstone to her own argument along with the reminder that it was her day, her rules.

As usual she won so, even though Tommy would have preferred to go to breakfast in it rather than risk their lives on Brandon’s ability to control the amount of lead in his right foot, he finally relented…but not until after threatened to beat the shit out of the other man if he so much as switched lanes without using his turn signal.

Felicity caught the look on Tommy’s face and grinned, “Someday, when I get my license, I’m going to get a car just like this one. Or maybe not,” she mused. “Whatever I do get though, it’s definitely going to be red and go really, really fast.”

Yeah, keep thinking that, he thought to himself. If he had anything to say about it (and he would. She’d be living with him in Cambridge by then so he would be the one helping her pick out her first car. He’d also be the one responsible for teaching her how to drive because no way in hell would Malcolm be willing to fly out every weekend just for that), her first vehicle was going to be a tank with a regulator turned down to 35 mph. And that was if he was feeling generous.

He didn’t say that out loud however because he didn’t need to hear the whole ‘double standard’ speech again. Truth was, he was okay with being a hypocrite when it came to her safety as he already knew the argument she’d make; that he was planning on doing the exact same thing his dad did to him using the exact same logic. The difference was he was planning on doing it because he actually gave a crap about her and not because he was simply an asshole who thought handing out rules, ultimatums, and unenforceable threats via long distance counted as ‘hand’s on parenting’.

He could’ve said that but, instead, he faked a smile and said, “Only three more years to go, Sunshine. Speaking of landmark birthdays, turning thirteen is kind of a big deal. Are you sure…?”
“I’m sure! Stop asking already,” she huffed. “We just had a party last week and, as fun as that was—minus Ollie’s relationship drama,” she said rolling her eyes as she smoothed back her windblown curls, “I wanted to do something different this time. Besides, the only people I know are you guys and McKenna; who else would I invite?”

He furrowed his brow at that, “Sara maybe? Or Thea?”

Felicity’s mouth pulled down in a frown, “I met Thea once and she’s even harder to understand than Mrs. Mack because she doesn’t have any teeth. Plus, how is she going to eat cake? By gumming it like one of those teething biscuits they give babies?”

“She has teeth!” Tommy scoffed, “Just…not as many as she’s supposed to have at the moment.”

“Plus, she’s, what; five? Six?” Felicity said flatly. “You want me to invite a baby to my birthday party? Seriously? So I can do what? Enjoy turning thirteen by babysitting?” She snorted, “I already have enough on my hands with you guys!”

“Hey!” he objected.

“She’s got a point though, bro,” Brandon said as he opened the door. “We are a handful.”

Tommy eyed the other man resentfully, “Speak for yourself. What about Sara then?” he asked as they all slipped inside of the restaurant, “She’s cool, funny, smart, and only a couple of years older than you are.”

“Yeah, I think McKenna said she might be coming by with her this morning,” Brandon added. “If you wanted to, we could invite her to spend the day with us as long as they don’t mind piling up in the back seat or following us in McKenna’s car.”

“Or we could just go back to my place and get one of the SUVs out of the garage,” Tommy suggested hopefully. “Better yet, we could hire a car service; maybe get a stretch so we could all hang out in the back? Do it up in style?”

“No.”
She knew him all too well.

“We could invite her along, I guess; Sara seemed nice and McKenna likes her so I wouldn’t mind if she wanted to hang out,” Felicity agreed, ignoring Tommy’s glower as she followed them in. “As for the party thing, I just figured that it would be more fun if we went out and did stuff rather than just sit at home all day and, besides, Malcolm’s coming back tomorrow, right? He’ll probably want to do something special to make up for missing both our birthdays but today it can just be about us.”

“Uh huh,” Tommy said in a neutral tone. In his experience, Malcolm’s promises didn’t count for much. Usually when he said he was cutting a trip short to come home to ‘be with his family’ for some sort of holiday or special occasion, something always came up and he really wasn’t looking forward to dealing with the fallout this time. He was used to his dad shitting all over him, but Felicity wasn’t. She still thought he hung the moon and stars so he had a sinking feeling that she was going to be shattered when his dad inevitably pulled a no show.

Which Malcolm would because he always does, he added silently.

In truth, he was surprised Malcolm even bothered to keep up the pretense of fatherhood anymore. Then again, he did call to check in a few times since leaving town, a new record for him. First he called to ‘apologize’ for blowing up at him on his birthday after accusing him of hurting Felicity’s feelings, then he called again the following day to let him know he’d had some sort of ‘wake-up call’ and that this was the last trip he’d be taking for a while. According to him, he was staying just long enough to tie up a few loose ends in the overseas offices and then he’d be home permanently this time; no more trips that last weeks or months at a time, and no more holidays spent apart. He swore he would cut back on work and be the 50’s sitcom father he should have been years ago.

As soon as the words left his mouth, Tommy just said ‘yeah, whatever’ and hung up. After that, whenever his dad tried ringing him back he just let it go to voicemail. After all, it wasn’t the first time he’d heard that speech, it was just the first time he’d heard it in a while. The last time Malcolm made that speech was when he was ten. He and Ollie decided to recreate the Wright Brother’s experiments after learning about them in school and strapped some kites to their arms with string and duct tape before jumping off the roof of the Queen’s maintenance shed in the east garden.

It had not gone well.

Ollie came out of it with some painful cuts and scratches, along with a small scar on his eyebrow that was barely visible unless he pointed it out to people due to the three stitches he earned after doing a face plant in a rosebush. Tommy, however, hit the ground hard. He wound up breaking his leg in two places and Malcolm had to rush home because he needed surgery to reset the bones. Less than two weeks later, he was back on the road leaving Tommy stuck at home with Mrs. Mack wearing a plaster cast that smelled like wet dog and itched like a motherfucker. Meanwhile, Ollie was left with
a cool scar that he used to pick up chicks by telling them lies ranging from him being knocked over the head in a bar fight while protecting a girl from getting roofied, to almost being kidnapped by international terrorists.

Of course, the Malcolm he knew wasn’t the one Felicity did. Maybe it was because she was a girl and she reminded him of his mom when she was younger, or maybe it was just because she was still naive enough to buy into his bullshit and actually give a crap about him. Whatever it was, he was honestly caught off guard when Malcolm called earlier that morning to wish her a happy birthday then proceeded to ruin his whole fucking weekend by promising her he would be home on Sunday to celebrate.

That was his fault, he thought with a sigh. He should’ve taken the phone off the hook or told Felicity to let it go to voicemail, but before he could answer it, she picked up instead. Malcolm, probably anticipating that Tommy was going to hang up on him if he didn’t just say what he called to say, immediately started in with the hearts and promises crap that never went anywhere in order to soothe his own conscience while building brownie points with the only person who still liked having him around.

After they hung up, he and Brandon sat down and agreed that if (when) he didn’t show up, or whenever he inevitably called to offer some bullshit excuse as to why money or exploring his grief in some stupid fucking ashram in Tibet were more important to him than his family, they’d surprise Felicity with a drive down to the cabin his Grandpa Bob left him.

Tommy tried to get down there a few times a year with the guys but Felicity had never been and he’d been meaning to come up with an excuse to take her up there anyway. It wasn’t a ‘rustic’ vacation mansion like Ollie’s parents owned, but it wasn’t an old one-room fishing shack either. It was a nice sized two story log cabin built on a private lake near Big Bear. And by built ‘on’ the lake, he meant ‘on’ the lake. Grandpa Bob was an architect and he designed the cabin so it butted up to the water’s edge with a large back porch suspended over the lake like a floating boat dock. He built it that way so they could literally walk out the back door onto the porch and cast their lines into the water. He even built a patio area/barbecue pit where they could clean and cook their catch without ever having to step foot in the house thereby pissing off his grandmother by messing up the kitchen. Add a satellite dish and a big screen and it was every man’s version of paradise.

He loved that house, and not just because it belonged to him and not his dad. He loved it because of the memories associated with it.

His grandparents had intended to sell their house in New York and retire there in order to be closer to him and his mom but, unfortunately, that never happened. Six months before his mother’s death they were killed when the driver of a semi fell asleep behind the wheel and wandered into their lane. He was barely eight years old and lost his entire family all in the same year, Malcolm included.
He often wondered if they’d lived if his father would’ve sent him to stay with them instead of leaving him all on his own. And, if so, would he have been sent to live in New York or would they have retired early in order to take care of him fulltime making that house his home? How would growing up somewhere other than Starling City have changed the direction of his life?

On one hand, he would’ve been a much less lonely kid, but on the other hand he wouldn’t have grown up with Ollie as his best friend or ever have gotten the opportunity to know Felicity as he was fairly certain that Malcolm never would’ve come back for him if there’d been another option. Or maybe he would have foisted her off on them too, or he might have sent them both to the same school and they would’ve gotten to know each other that way?

Eh, that was a longshot though, he admitted silently. While he was okay with the possibility of losing his dad (mostly since he’d never really gotten him back in the first place), he was glad he had the chance to stay close to Ollie and have Felicity in his life. Still, as he grew older, he’d come to savor the time he spent there as it called to mind faint memories of his mother and of a family who loved him.

Now that he had Felicity in his life, he wanted to share that with her. She’d never get to know his mom or grandparents, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t just as much a part of his family as they were. The two of them would make new memories together there. He’d teach her to fish, ride a horse; maybe take her hiking down some of the easier trails. He wanted her to see the parts of him that very few people ever saw and the cabin was a big part of that. There was no Malcolm there, no tragic history attached to it. Bittersweet memories, yes, but also joy. He figured they could invite Ollie, McKenna, too, if her folks were okay with it, go out on the town a little, then maybe have a cook out that way Felicity wouldn’t be too disappointed by the fact that, once again, Malcolm bailed on them.

Today wasn’t about revisiting old resentments though, that could wait until tomorrow. Today was Felicity’s day so she called all the shots and the first thing she wanted to do was have a big birthday breakfast at The House of Pancakes and neither of them were about to argue with that.

The three of them made their way towards the back before settling in at Tommy’s favorite corner booth under the large framed and signed poster of the Breakfast Club cast at The House of Pancakes. It was the biggest booth in the place and offered the most privacy. The House of Pancakes was a hidden gem among the more affluent parts of Clarendon Hills and Orchid Bay. It wasn’t your average IHOP or Waffle House and was regularly frequented by both Starling City locals and vacationing celebrities who wanted to be able to enjoy a meal with their friends and families like normal people without having to worry about the Paparazzi snapping flashbulbs in their faces.

The restaurant itself had been there since the late 50’s and the walls were covered in signed photos
and movie posters of the actors who frequented the place; everyone from Sinatra and the Rat Pack to modern stars (but no reality TV ‘stars’ as Big Earl, son of Dino, the original owner, didn’t much care for celebrities that were only famous for being famous).

In fact, Tommy was fairly certain that if Paris Hilton ever showed up for a tall stack (if she ate carbs, that is), Big Earl would plant his big boot in her narrow ass and direct her to the closest In ‘n’ Out Burger with the rest of the reality trash.

As Brandon was fond of saying, ‘Big Earl don’t play’.

Beside the signed Breakfast Club poster were framed pictures of various members of the original cast along with John Hughes himself posing with the owner and wait staff. Next to those, opposite to the poster, was a picture of David Bowie and his family enjoying a complimentary tall stack along with a famous quote of his that said, ‘And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations. They’re quite aware of what they’re going through.’

It was a quote that was used in the film which is why it was placed next to the movie poster, but Tommy just liked it because it pretty much summed up what he was feeling most of the time in regards to his own absentee father. To him, it wasn’t just a pointed remark to those who chose to label people rather than see them as individuals, but a reminder to parents that they needed to be there for their kids early on when their presence actually meant something; that the children they treated as if they were invisible now had long memories and eventually those same kids would outgrow the adults who walked out on them, finding themselves abandoned instead.

He didn’t know if he ever wanted kids, or get married, or any of that other stuff, but if he ever did have kids, he would there every step of the way. He’d make them a priority, and he sure as hell would do more than just check in via email every couple of months or so. And, if he couldn’t be there or didn’t want to be, then he just wouldn’t have kids; he’d get a vasectomy or something before that happened. Too many people in their world used their children as photo opportunities or fashion accessories; he wasn’t going to add his own kids to their numbers. He didn’t want to be that guy and he sure as hell wouldn’t wind up married some cool to the touch society mom like Moira Queen or a former debutante turned pill popper like Stephanie McNamara.

Okay, so maybe Moira wasn’t as bad as Brandon’s coked up mom. She genuinely loved Thea and Ollie, but she was definitely not a ‘hand’s on’ parent. She was the kind of mom who hired nannies to do all the dirty work then trotted their kids out for guests when they were scrubbed clean and dressed in designer onesies.

The point is he wouldn’t stop loving his kids after they stopped being cute. He wouldn’t cast them off like a Christmas puppy turned death row inmate at the pound by Easter. He wouldn’t replace love with stern disapproval or replace structure and discipline with material objects. He didn’t know what
the future held for him; if he had another Dream Girl waiting for him in the wings, if he’d ever have a family of his very own. All he knew was that he wasn’t going to going to make the same mistakes Malcolm did, that’s for sure.

Even though his thoughts were as dark as his mood, he tried to keep up the pretense of a smile as he slid into the booth beside Felicity. Brandon, before his butt even hit the seat, eagerly snatched one of the laminated menus out of the basket, while Felicity’s eyes gravitated towards the huge fifties style neon lighted juke box in the corner. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, he beat her to the finish line, “Yes, but after we order and no Britney, no Jessica Simpson, and—”

“No OutKast,” Brandon broke in. “I am so sick of that ‘Hey Ya’ song it’s not even funny. Oh, Puff Daddy or Snoop Dogg are both okay as long as it’s not ‘Drop it Like it’s Hot’ because that got really old, really fast.”

“Wait, but why can’t—?” Felicity began, her eyebrows drawing together in consternation.

“I doubt they play Puffy or Snoop at the House of Pancakes,” Tommy said wryly.

“They might, you never know,” the other man said off-handedly as he perused the menu, “Hoobastank’s cool, too.”

Felicity scowled as she looked between them, “But--!”

“Hoobastank?” Tommy sneered, cutting off Felicity once more. “Those dudes have one, *maybe* two good songs, and that’s it!”

The other man pulled a face before hitching his head slightly in agreement, “Fine, what about Kanye then?”

“But--?” Felicity started again.

Tommy shook his head, “Again, House of Pancakes, dude. It’s gonna be all family friendly and straight off the pop charts. They still have Sinatra and Joni Mitchell on that thing. The closest thing to edgy you’ll find is the Stones and, even then, we’re talking ‘Wild Horses’ only. I doubt they’d risk putting anything cool like ‘Sympathy for the Devil’ or ‘Paint it Black’ on the playlist,” he said
making a dismissive gesture, “You know, on the off-chance some fundamentalists roll into the parking lot in a church bus or something.”

“Yeah, that would be bad for business,” the other man agreed. “After all, Christians do like their pancake breakfasts.”

“And they hate good rock and roll,” he said roundly.

“Now I want to play AC/DC or some Sabbath up in this joint,” Brandon mused.

“Good luck, brother, because that’s never gonna happen,” Tommy said with a chuckle, “Might as well wish for the Clash or the Sex Pistols while you’re at it. Top Forty and Classic Rock only; Beach Boys, Sonny and Cher, maybe some pre-Yoko Beatles.”

Brandon frowned thoughtfully, “Say what you will about Yoko, but that woman completely did John a favor when she sent McCartney off to Wings and kicked Ringo to the curb so he could play dinosaurs with that chick in the fur bikini from the Dukes of Hazard.”

“I loved that show,” Tommy said appreciatively, “I also loved that bikini.”


“Dude,” Tommy said in warning.

“What?” he asked feigning innocence, “It’s a real word! I was thinking about it for the Scrabble rematch. Tell ‘im, Felicity!”

“It’s a real word,” the younger girl huffed in irritation, “Okay, look, it’s my birthday and I should get to--!”

“Told ya!” Brandon harrumphed. “And it’s not even dirty either, just sounds that way.”
“Just shut up and come up with a decent band,” Tommy ordered.

Felicity’s cheeks reddened as she slapped the table top in irritation, “I should get to--!”

“Dido?” Brandon asked reluctantly, cutting her off again.

Tommy looked up from his own menu to offer him a look of utter disgust, “Dido? Seriously?”

“I don’t know, man; she was okay on that Eminem song but I don’t listen to a lot of pop,” he shrugged. “Black Eyed Peas?”

“Can I say something?” Felicity practically growled.

“No need,” he assured her. “I can live with the Black Eyed Peas. That new one that came out, uh what’s it called?” He squinted slightly, “‘Let’s Get It Started’ is okay. You can play that one along with pretty much anything from the 80’s. That’s it though; no slipping in any boy bands or Spice Girls or I’m taking my quarters back.”

Felicity closed her eyes with a pained expression, “What?”

“Wait, does Fall Out Boy count as a boy band because I actually like them?” the other man asked curiously.

Tommy weighed that for a moment, “I think the emo-punk thing cancels out the pop so I’m gonna go with ‘no’.”

“I can deal with that; add Fall Out Boy to the list. I’m also good with the 80’s thing,” Brandon agreed, “I mean, I prefer club mix or rap, maybe some Marley when I’m feeling mellow, however I must admit I do have a certain fondness for hair bands. In my not so humble opinion, ‘Every Rose Has its Thorn’ should be sung at the Superbowl right after the National Anthem.”

“Goddamn right,” Tommy agreed slapping the table in emphasis, “Yes! I defy any man not to shed a tear whenever that song comes on; it’s right up there with ‘Cherry Pie’. Total strip club classic!”
“Strip club?” the younger girl repeated faintly.

“Agreed, but,” Brandon said to Felicity warningly, “no Cyndi Lauper unless it’s ‘Time After Time’. Those little whoops she makes on ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ give me a headache after a while.”

Felicity’s mouth fell open, “Cyndi…?”

“Yeah, and that thing has been every preteen girl’s anthem for the last twenty years,” Tommy grumbled. “Whenever that song comes on every girl and their mom line up to make sure it stays on repeat for the rest of the friggin’ day.”

“That and the Spice Girls with that ‘Do you wanna be my lover’ song or ‘Wannabe’--whatever the hell it’s called,” the other man said shaking his head with a grimace. “For the record, the answer to that question is a resounding ‘no’…unless it’s the cute little redhead with the pigtails; she’s hot. Maybe I could see doing the angry looking brunette, too—what’s her name? Posh?” he mused. “The one that never smiles but looks like she’d be into some really freaky shit once you got her started. She’s okay, I guess, but the Sporty and Scary ones look like they’d bite your d—.”

“Watch it,” Tommy warned him.

“Sorry,” he said turning to Felicity. “Still, the Scary black chick, while hot, looks like she’d live up to her name and the Sporty one reminds me of our old PE teacher back in elementary school.”

“Ms. Gruber,” Tommy hummed. “Ah God, I hated her; she used to terrify the crap out of me.”

“Me, too, dude,” he agreed. “Did you ever notice that whenever she’d bring out the dodge ball she always went right for the nuts?” He chuckled darkly, “I mean, I wasn’t using them yet, but I knew I wanted to at least have the option someday.” He shook his head and continued to peruse the menu, “Somebody with a dick must’ve pissed that woman off big time because she was out for blood.”

Felicity rolled her eyes in frustration, “Fine, but--!”

“Hey, remember when you came up with the bright idea to start wearing a cup to PE and you wound up having to get stitches because you shoved a coffee mug down your pants?” Tommy snickered.
“But—wait, you put what down your pants?” Felicity asked, doing a double take.

“I didn’t know what ‘cup’ meant,” Brandon shrugged. “I just grabbed whatever I could find in the teacher’s lounge and went with it.”

“How many stitches was it again?” Tommy asked, still snickering.

“Eight,” he said with a pained look, “But it was worth it because she wound up having to transfer to an all-girls school because of her bad aim.”

“Listen, this is all very fascinating, but if it’s my birthday and I’m the one going to the juke box, then shouldn’t I be allowed to pick the music?” Felicity asked with a scowl as soon as she was able to get a word in edgewise.

“No,” both men said together.

“That’s not fair!”

“You get to pick the places we go, the activities, you can even have a say in the food, but music is off the table,” Tommy said firmly. “I don’t want to have my breakfast ruined by listening to Britney Spears wail out that ‘Hit Me Baby One More Time’ garbage.”

“I friggin’ hate that song,” Brandon grumbled. “I mean, I’d totally hit that, but not while she’s singing.”

“That’s bullcrap!” she told them.

“Is she allowed to say ‘bullcrap’?” Brandon asked looking up with a frown.

“Don’t say bullcrap,” Tommy chided absently as he went through the menu. “How do you want your eggs?”
“You can’t tell me not to say ‘bullcrap’,” she said stubbornly. “Bullcrap isn’t a curse word and, besides, you both curse all the time.”

Tommy looked at her, one eyebrow raised, “Yeah, but we’re allowed to because we’re adults and you aren’t.”

Felicity gave an unlady-like snort at that, “Now that’s bullcrap!”

“I’m seventeen, you’re only thirteen,” he pointed out with a scowl.

“You’ve been seventeen for a week and I may be only thirteen but I’m still way more mature than you are—both of you!” she said stubbornly. “Besides, we’re bros and bros are equals so you’re not the boss of me, remember?”

“She’s got you there, dude,” Brandon said with a shrug as he continued to flip absently through the menu.

“She just said she’s more mature than you,” he threw back.

“And I am fully willing to concede to that,” Brandon said easily, “Especially since she makes me tasty eats whenever Mrs. Mack heads home at the end of the day.”

“Traitor,” he grumbled. “You have no sense of pride whatsoever, do you?” he challenged.

He looked up from behind his menu, “Dude, she made me red velvet cupcakes the other day just because I said I liked them; it’s called not biting the hand that feeds me. And, some unsolicited advice here since you helped me put away a good half-dozen of those things; while I agree that you do have superior taste in music, I suggest you pick your battles carefully and let this one go.”

Those really were some pretty tasty cupcakes…

“Fine, I’m not the boss of you,” he grumbled. “Say ‘bullcrap’ all you want, now how do you want your eggs?”
“Poached?” she mused, her lips pursed into a duck-face. “No. Scrambled?” She paused at that, mulling it over. “No. Ome-let…?” Felicity said slowly, drawing out the syllables as she clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“Here,” Tommy sighed in exasperation as he handed her a menu.

“Thanks,” she said happily, her foul mood lifting instantly as she took the menu from him and began to hum happily under her breath, her legs swinging back and forth under the table. “Oh my god,” she said, her eyes going wide as she read, “It’s like Breakfast-Palooza!”

“Duh,” Brandon said, “What? You’ve never been here before?”

She shook her head.

“Really?” Tommy asked in surprise, “Malcolm never took you here?”

She bit her bottom lip and shrugged, “No, Mrs. Mack usually just made breakfast for both of us.”

He looked at her in confusion, “If Malcolm never took you here, then how did you know they would sing ‘Happy Birthday’ if we asked?”

“Because it’s a restaurant and all restaurants do that,” she said slowly.

He had to give her that one.

Brandon lowered his menu with a look of outrage, “Okay, I always knew your dad was a dick but to deny someone the gift that is House of Pancakes…” He shook his head in disgust, “Dude, that deserves its own special level of hell right there, I’m tellin’ ya.”

“By the way, why do you guys call it ‘House of Pancakes’ when the sign outside says, ‘Dino’s’?” she asked them.
“It doesn’t say Dino’s,” Tommy argued.

“Uh, yes it does,” she said roundly. “I can read, remember? It’s got those big oval 60’s style light up letters that say ‘Dino’s’ right outside the window,” she said, pointing it out.

“No,” he drawled, “it says ‘Dino’s House of Pancakes’.”

Her eyebrows drew together at that, “Yeah, so?”

“So if you tell someone you’re going to Dino’s it could mean anything, but if you tell them you’re going to the House of Pancakes they know exactly what it is you’re talking about,” he told her.

She looked at him for a moment before shrugging, “Okay, that makes sense.”

“This one is strong with the Force,” Brandon intoned.

“May the Waffles be With You,” Tommy agreed.

“And they accuse me of being a nerd,” Felicity muttered.

“Seriously bro, not taking someone to House of Pancakes at least once has to be some form of child abuse,” Brandon said, still shaking his head in disapproval. “If I had a kid, we’d live in this joint. Hell, this is where I’m having my wedding reception and, instead of a wedding cake, we’re having a monster sized stack of waffles.”

“Not pancakes?” Tommy asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Waffles are a little more elegant and, if I ever do get hitched, my girl will be all about class,” he answered blithely.

“Besides, you have to learn to compromise,” Felicity agreed. “Dr. Phil says that’s the secret to a healthy relationship.”
“Well, Dad doesn’t much care for eating at places that use paper napkins and laminated placemats,” Tommy said reluctantly. “Okay, so do you know what you want?”

“There’s so much,” she said, her brow furrowed. “What’s a Dutch Pancake ala Mode.”

“Aw, that shit is awesome,” Brandon groaned. “It’s this baked pancake they serve in a skillet, see, and it’s all curled up at the edges like a bowl so you can order it with fruit, then they top it with, like, cream cheese or ricotta cheese so it tastes like a cheesecake, then add more fruit, whipped cream, and ask them to drizzle caramel, chocolate, or fruit sauce on top.” He gave them both a look of pure awe, “The first time they brought that to me, I kissed the waitress on the lips and left her a $100 tip. It didn’t even matter that she was like sixty; I would have married her if she told me she made it herself, swear to God.”

“Wow,” Felicity breathed. “So what’s the,” she glanced down at the menu again, “Reggie Deluxe?”

“I’m ordering five of those things,” Brandon told her firmly. “So cop this,” he raised his hands as if framing the scene, “It’s this massive buttermilk biscuit, like this big,” he picked up the saucer under his empty coffee cup and showed her, “with a gigantic hunk of fried chicken topped with bacon, then smothered in this awesome sausage gravy, a slice of cheese, and an over-easy egg. You break the yolk and it mixes with the gravy—” He tilted his head back, looking emotionally overwhelmed for a moment, “I’m telling you, you have to order another two biscuits just to sop up all the gravy after. It’s beautiful.”

“I might order a couple of those myself,” Tommy nodded as he continued to flip through the menu.

“What’s the Pipes Breakfast Burrito then?” she asked wide-eyed.

Brandon’s lips tightened and he gestured helplessly towards her, “She—she’s never had a Pipe’s Burrito, man?” he asked Tommy, getting choked up. “That’s like a California surfer classic.”

“He gets very emotional about breakfast,” Tommy said rolling his eyes slightly, “Especially when it’s combined with surfing.”

“Okay, pay attention,” he told her with an intense look, “So it’s this huge, like mondo gargantuan burrito, filled with scrambled eggs, sausage, avocado, three or four different kinds of cheese, and topped with this homemade picante sauce that is,” he let out a slow, shuddering breath, “It’s like
proof that God exists, seriously. Plus they’ll add cheese on top, jalapenos, bacon, guac; anything you want!”

“Wow,” she said wide-eyed. “Hey, this says they have breakfast nachos. I didn’t even know there was such a thing as breakfast nachos.”

Brandon brought his hands up, fists clenched and teeth bared in an expression of pure wrath, “I can’t—I can’t--! Okay, that’s it! We’re ordering the whole menu!”

“We’re not ordering the whole menu,” Tommy returned dryly.

“We have to!” Brandon exclaimed passionately while pointing to Felicity, “This poor child has been woefully neglected and it’s up to us to correct this serious miscarriage of justice!”

“What is he on about now?” McKenna asked as she strolled up to them along with Sara. “Happy Birthday, kiddo,” she said sliding into the booth and leaning over Tommy like he wasn’t even there before giving Felicity a quick hug.

“Do you mind?” Tommy asked pointedly.

“Since when do you complain about having a girl in your lap, Merlyn?” she smirked before settling into her seat.

At that Tommy just shifted slightly and kept his mouth shut.

“Happy Birthday, Felicity,” Sara said as she slipped in beside Brandon. “Hope you don’t mind me tagging along.”

“No, it’s great!” Felicity grinned. “Are you guys staying the whole day with us, because we’re going to do Putt-Putt next.”

“We are?” Tommy asked, looking up with a disgruntled expression.
“Yes, we are,” she said firmly, “And then we’re going to the Aquarium.”

“I love the Aquarium,” Sara said happily. “I love the whale exhibit the best.”

“Me, too!” Felicity chirped.

“Great, we get to spend the day watching fish swim,” Tommy murmured. “That and golf.”

“Aren’t you Scottish?” McKenna asked with a raised eyebrow. “I thought all Scottish people did was play golf, pinch pennies, and wear berets with fuzzy balls on top.”

“That and kilts,” Sara added.

“Again with the fuzzy balls,” Brandon grinned, “‘Cause, you know, Scottish people dig goin’ commando Braveheart style.”

“You know, not all Scottish people golf or wear kilts,” Tommy complained. “And the ‘pinching pennies’ thing was a low blow. Not all of us are cheap, that’s a little racist don’t you think?”

“Racist?” the other girl repeated dubiously, “Against who?”

“Yeah, you know, racist against rich white Scottish dudes who are cheap, wear skirts, and golf a lot.” He blinked and turned to Brandon, “That’s a thing, right?”

“Dude, I’m already back to thinking about my food,” the other man shrugged.

McKenna rolled her eyes at them, “Anyway the Aquarium and Putt-Putt sounds like fun, that and the zoo maybe. I hear they just had some baby leopards born there a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yes, to the baby kitties!” Sara said squirming in her seat as she flipped through the menu. “And I want to go to the Aviary, too. I love birds.”
“Awesome, yeah; we should totally go to the zoo,” Felicity nodded, “Ooh, and then we can go to the Science Museum, and then—“

“Slow down, Sunshine, we don’t have to do everything all in one day,” Tommy broke in. “Anything we don’t get to today we can see tomorrow or save for next week.”

“We can? So does that mean it’s my birthday for a whole week?” she asked lighting up with pure joy.

“It can be your birthday until we get everything done, how’s that?” he asked, his lips twitching upwards.

After all, if Malcolm was going to ruin her birthday weekend, the least he could do is extend the parts that didn’t suck a little. In fact, that would work out just fine. There were a lot of places to hang out in Big Bear even during the summer months and it wasn’t like they had anywhere else to be, right? They could go on a Zipline Tour, maybe rent a jet ski or a kayak, check out Big Bear Offroad Adventure and rent a couple of ATV’s; yeah, why not spend the whole week up there? Maybe even a couple of weeks.

In fact, if she wanted to, they didn’t have to come back at all until school started. They could take separate vehicles so the people who only wanted to stay the weekend could head home while he and Felicity stayed up there. Malcolm would probably never even notice they were gone. The whole summer could be one huge holiday. There was the Music in the Mountains Festival, the big 4th of July Fireworks; tons of activities all the way through the beginning of August for the big annual classic car show, and ending a couple of weeks later with the Renaissance Faire. He usually only got to go to one or the other but this year they could stay for the whole thing! Plus they had a huge farmer’s market every Tuesday and while shopping for organic vegetables didn’t particularly interest him, Felicity loved that crap so why not?

With that plan in mind, he grinned, “For now though, let’s just order breakfast, okay?” He looked around the table, “By the way, when does school start back up?”

“Why?” Sara asked looking at him askance, “Since when do you care?”

“I’m just curious,” he shrugged, “Near September, right?”

“More like mid to late August,” McKenna told him.
Tommy’s face fell at that, “Oh.” His eyebrows drew together, “Wait; mid-August?” he asked in confusion. “Didn’t it start later than that last year? Because I could’ve sworn it was closer to September. I remember because the Santa Ana’s were just beginning to pick up.”

Brandon closed his eyes in appreciation, “Awesome waves that year, bro. I caught a sixteen footer and I swear I was inside that curl for an hour.”

“They start it on a different date every year; why I have no idea,” Sara said wryly. “Plus, they don’t tell you when it starts again until a couple of weeks before term so it’s like lulling you into this false sense of security.” She looked around the table, “You know, like, ‘Oh, summer vacation is forever,’ and then—BOOM! School; like some evil scholastic Jack in the Box or something.”

“Yeah, why can’t they just do it at the same time every year?” Brandon griped, “Plus, why does it always have to happen just when the swells get righteous? Sucks.”

While everyone else was commiserating about the demise of summer and debating the best time of year for monster curls (September through October when the Santa Ana and hurricane seasons both started up, he thought), he was mentally going through the events calendar up in Big Bear.

Oh well, maybe he’d go online and see if they could catch the Ren Faire on a weekend. Either that or see if they had any decent schools up there depending on how badly Felicity wanted to go. That was a joke, but just barely.

“Everybody decided what they want yet?”

“No need,” Brandon said staunchly, “I already told you we’re ordering everything.”

“We can’t order everything,” McKenna said automatically.

“I already told him that but he wouldn’t listen to me,” Tommy said with a grimace. “He thinks that because Felicity’s never been here before that we should order one of everything.”
“Maybe two of everything,” Brandon grumbled, “Or more,” he added.

“Wait, you’ve never been to The House of Pancakes before?” Sara asked with a frown. “How can you live in Starling and not eat at The House of Pancakes at least once? That’s like saying you’ve never had a Big Belly Burger or gotten a Monte Cristo at the Glade’s Diner.”

“But I haven’t ever had a Big Belly Burger and what’s a Monte Cristo?” Felicity asked curiously.

“Okay, well, that’s just child abuse right there,” McKenna said flatly before swatting Tommy on the head and causing him to yelp in pain, “What the hell, Merlyn?”

“Exactly!” Brandon agreed, “I mean, it’s the sort of thing they should hold telethons for.”

“She’s from Gotham!” he said rubbing the back of his head with a wince, “They don’t have Triple B on the East Coast.”

“What about a Monte Cristo then?” Sara challenged. “Who doesn’t have Monte Cristo’s? My dad was feeding me those things before I even had teeth. He used to say I gummed them like teething rings.”

“Okay, now I’m with Brandon. We’re ordering the whole menu,” McKenna said putting hers back in the holder. “Plus we’re having Big Belly for lunch, then ending the day at the Glades Diner for birthday cake and deep fried goodness.”

“Don’t you think that’s a bit excessive?” Tommy asked wryly.

She grinned and batted her eyelashes sweetly, “Not if you’re the one picking up the check, I don’t.”

“Besides, it’s her birthday, dude,” Brandon urged, pressing his case hard. “How often does a kid turn thirteen? Plus, she’s Jewish; this can be our version of a Bat mitzvah only with pork products and no Jewish people…except Felicity. Not that Jewish people aren’t allowed; they can come, too.”

“A non-Jewish pork Bat mitzvah,” Tommy said flatly.
He shrugged, “I mean, who says every Bat mitzvah has to be the same? It’s like a new and improved kind of Bat mitzvah with bacon and a distinct lack of…well, everything Jewish except Felicity.”

“My grandfather on my mom’s side was Jewish,” Sara offered.

The other man pointed to her happily, “There you go; instant Bat mitzvah!”

“You just want to eat pancakes until you puke,” he snorted.

“Still her birthday, though,” the other man said with a shrug. “My own gluttony when it comes to breakfast foods and pork related meat products has no bearing on that.”

“Fine, I wonder if they have a tasting menu here,” he grumbled before looking around at them. “You know this is going to be an incredible waste of food, right? Even with this many people there is like-..” he gestured to the menu, “There have got to be a hundred items on the menu and that’s not including all the different options and stuff. Plus, she can’t have nuts so no one is allowed to order anything with pralines or peanut butter, got it?”

“Okay, so we won’t order the *whole* menu,” McKenna conceded.

“But I wanted the whole menu,” Brandon said morosely, then paused, “You know, for Felicity because she’s never been here before…only without the nuts like Tommy said because that would be bad.”

“Right,” McKenna said broadly. “How about we compromise,” she offered. “We each pick out three things that way we can all share buffet style.”

“Three?” Brandon moped, “But there are five of us so we should pick out five items each.”

“Dude, do the math; that would be twenty-five plates of food,” Tommy argued.

“Actually, it would be thirty-five plates of food,” Sara corrected him. “And I’m hungry, but I’m not
“Wait,” Tommy’s eyebrows drew together as he turned to Felicity, “Five times five is twenty-five, right?”

She eyed him dubiously, “Really?”

McKenna snorted, “Ollie and Laurel are coming. Eventually anyway,” she added, “Sara and I came inside after watching them go at each other for fifteen minutes straight in the middle of the parking lot because we’d rather eat breakfast than watch them fight all day just so they can make up later.”

“Allie and Laurel wanted to come to my birthday breakfast?” Felicity asked in confusion.

“Apparently,” Sara said with a scowl, “Don’t worry though; as soon as Laurel gets over herself, they’ll be joining us so that they can gift you with their presence.” She sighed, her expression clearing a bit as she offered her a crooked smile, “Meanwhile, I got you a skateboard for your birthday; it’s in the car. I didn’t wrap it so I’m not really spoiling anything by telling you. I figured I’d give it to you after we eat.”

“A skateboard?” she blinked in surprise.

“Yeah,” the other girl nodded, “I built it myself. Do you know how to skateboard?” Felicity shook her head and the other girl’s smile widened slightly, “That’s okay; I’ll teach you. I’ll have you on a half-pipe before you know it. Also, I just put a base coat on the deck so we can go over some design ideas and customize it together. Tommy and McKenna said you’re some kind of computer genius so maybe we could come up with some cool graphics and you could print them out so we could make our own stencils.”

“Thanks,” she said with a grin before her face stilled, her lips pressed together in displeasure, “Not that I’m not grateful for your sister and Ollie wanting to spend time with me today, but why would they want to come if all they were going to do is fight? Didn’t they already do that at Tommy’s birthday or is ruining other people’s fun some kind of tradition here?”

Brandon and McKenna snickered at that while Tommy just scowled.

“I’m with Felicity,” he said looking between the two girls, “I mean, I could maybe see Ollie coming
but why would Laurel want to hang out with us after her big blow up at me last week?’”

“I don’t know, maybe she had more to say,” McKenna snorted then at Tommy’s glare shrugged and said, “I didn’t invite them, Sara did.”

“I didn’t invite them,” the other girl said firmly. “Laurel invited herself—as usual, and decided to drag Ollie along now that they’re ‘so in love’,” she said with a sneer.

“You and Laurel don’t get along with each other?” Felicity asked the older girl curiously.

“Don’t ask,” McKenna said ruefully.

“No, it’s okay,” Sara sighed, “We used to. In fact, we used to be pretty close until last summer.”

Felicity’s brow furrowed at that, “What happened?”

“She found out that I had a thing for Ollie and that we were talking about getting together so, to get back at me, she told my dad that I was planning on sneaking out.” Her face darkened at that, “I wound up getting grounded for a month while she was allowed to do whatever she wanted which was to go to the party I was going to go to just so she could hook up with him instead.”

“Laurel did that?” Tommy asked in surprise before reeling it back in, “But, um, to be fair you’re a lot younger than Ollie so she was probably just concerned about you.”

“I’m not that much younger than you guys; I’m fifteen,” she huffed.

“I thought you were fourteen,” Brandon frowned.

“Me, too,” Tommy admitted reluctantly.

She glowered at them, “No, well yeah,” she corrected, ”But I'm basically fifteen--not that it makes any difference!” she said with a scowl, “Laurel tried making that same argument after she saw how pissed I was but Ollie was only sixteen at the time. Yeah, I was underage but a year and a couple of
months isn’t that big of a deal. I mean, if you want to get all bent out of shape about the age difference between me and Ollie, then Laurel shouldn’t be dating him either since she’s three years older than me!”

“Wait, that’s not right,” Tommy paused. “If you and Laurel are three years apart then that would make her a year older than us. Sort of. Maybe.” He turned to Felicity, “Wait, I am getting the math right, aren’t I? I always get confused because the months and the years are all...” he waved his hands awkwardly and grimaced.

“We are seriously going to have to start studying now before school starts in order for you have any shot at graduating much less getting into Harvard,” the younger girl said shaking her head.

“Laurel got held back in the third grade because her appendix burst and it was kind of a big deal,” Sara grumbled. “Anyway, the point is that I wanted to go out with him first. Laurel wasn’t even all that interested in him until she found out about us and now she acts like they’re soulmates or something.”

“I’m sorry but, while that sucks for you, if your old man found out you were planning on messing around with Ollie, it would’ve been his ass,” Brandon said flatly. “As in, ‘in the clink with a prison daddy’ kind of thing and a sign around his neck that says ‘Rape Me’. If he got caught hooking up with a fourteen, no thirteen year old *cop’s daughter* since this was last summer…” he shook his head ruefully, “Sorry babe, but I’m sort of glad Laurel ratted you out. I’ve been there when Ollie’s brain switches off and his blood supply heads downtown. Frankly, he should’ve known better than to even talk to you about hooking up; there’s a reason us guys call girls your age ‘jail bait’.”

“I didn’t say we were planning on doing anything,” she argued. “We were just planning to meet up so we could talk a little.”

“First off, Ollie doesn’t just ‘talk’ to girls. He certainly doesn’t just ‘go out’ with anybody either,” Tommy told her, picking up the argument thread from Brandon. “And I thought you were all for Ollie and Laurel getting together? If you were so pissed at her then why were you talking about how they were going to get married someday and that Ollie would have to change his name to ‘Mr. Laurel Lance’?”

“I didn’t say that so they’d get together,” she told him. “I let Laurel think I was going along with her ‘make Ollie jealous’ plan so I could watch her go down in flames. I was hoping he’d do like he’s been doing and make her so miserable she’d eventually get the hint and move on,” the younger girl said with a hard look. “Also, my birthday is in December so even if I’m technically ‘jail bait’ now, I won’t be for much longer. Oh, and, if I was jail bait for Ollie then Ollie was jail bait for Laurel--hah!”
“Yeah, but we’re not talking about Laurel, we’re talking about you, and Tommy has a point; you might be ‘on the verge’ so to speak, but Ollie was never good at waiting to unwrap his presents,” Brandon said as he waved over their waitress.

“Damn, that was almost clever,” McKenna said, her eyebrows shooting towards her hairline in surprise.

“Sobriety agrees with him,” Tommy murmured.

“Tommy’s right,” Felicity said quietly. “He’s been popping out zingers left and right for the last couple of days. Sometimes he says stuff that makes you wonder if you’ve somehow stepped into the Twilight Zone.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Like this morning when the news came on, instead of switching the channel to watch Spongebob like he usually does, he actually watched it and launched into a discussion on beach conservation and the environment,” the younger girl said wide-eyed. “It made sense and everything. He even used the word ‘stewardship’ at one point.”

“Brandon?” McKenna blinked, “The Brandon sitting across the table from us right now Brandon? That guy?”

Tommy hummed, “The minute the shakes stopped, his brain fired right up.”

Seemingly oblivious to their discussion, as soon as their waitress approached the man in question got up to give her a hug and a kiss. “Gladys, you smell like love and deliciousness! Marry me.”

“Put your fanny back in the chair, McNamara, and save the malarkey for girls your own age,” the older woman said in a husky smoker’s voice as she pulled a pencil from behind her ear and tapped on her notepad. “So do you kids know what you want yet?”

“Everything,” Brandon told her, “Actually five of everything. Nope, sorry, forgot about Ollie and Laurel; make that seven of everything.”
“You’re gonna need a bigger table,” Gladys said without batting an eyelash.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Tommy told her with a sigh. “It’s Felicity’s birthday and she’s never been here before so we thought about ordering a few different things then sharing.”

The waitress nodded before turning to Felicity, “Well, since you’re the only new face in this group of hooligans, I’m going to assume you’re the birthday girl they’re talking about?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she answered politely.

“Well, at least one of you has some manners,” the elderly woman said eyeing Brandon with feigned annoyance before turning back to her. “How old are you, sweetheart?”

“Thirteen.”

“Really?” the older woman said in surprise. “You’re a bit scrawny for thirteen so we’ll just have to fatten you up a little won’t we?” She looked around the table for a moment, “Tell you what; is this all of you? You said two more were coming?”

“Apparently,” Tommy answered wryly.

She nodded, “As it just so happens, Big Earl is in the back working on some stuff for his next cook book while he redoes the Sunday brunch menu.”

“Big Earl is here?” Brandon asked excitedly then turned to the others, “Big Earl is the owner and he has like a ton of cookbooks and stuff he sells in the gift shop next door. I have the whole set at home.”

“Since when do you cook?” McKenna asked doing a double take.

“I don’t,” he told her. “I just buy them for the pictures.” At their disbelieving looks, he shrugged, “What? You guys have never heard of food porn?”
“There is something seriously wrong with you,” the older woman said shaking her head at him.

“But you love me anyway,” Brandon said, smiling up to her flirtatiously.

“Keep thinking that, McNamara.” Gladys sighed, “I swear, someone should have drowned you at birth. Anyway, if you kids are open to it, I could ask Big Earl to send out some of his test dishes for you guys to try so you can let him know what you think.”

They all exchanged glances before Tommy spoke up, “That sounds great, but Felicity’s got a serious food allergy so no nuts. Also she likes vegetables a lot so if he could send out a salad or something that’d be great. Not for me, mind you, but for her it would be great,” he added under his breath.

“Noted,” she said writing it down on her order pad, “Any other allergies or dietary restrictions, sweetheart? Milk, eggs, strawberries; anything?” she asked Felicity who shook her head, “Okay then, what do you want to drink?” Brandon opened his mouth to speak up and she stopped him, “An egg cream and a tropical mango coconut smoothie, got it.”

“I eat here a lot,” he told them as they threw him a look.

After they gave her their drink orders along with Ollie and Laurel’s, Gladys moved away from their table but not before accidently on purpose bopping Brandon on the head with her notepad, to which he only grinned harder, “You know we’d be good together, Gladys. All you have to do is stop playing hard to get and it’s just you, me, and a big tube of BenGay with your name written all over it.” He wiggled his fingers at her, “Just show me where it hurts, baby, and these hands will rock your world.”

“You’re a sick, sick young man, you know that, right?” she said as she turned on her crepe soled shoes and headed off, albeit with a little extra swagger in her arthritic hips.

“Someday, Gladys! Someday!” he called after her, “Remember; nobody likes a tease!”

The elderly woman just gave him a narrow eyed look before moving onto the next table.

Brandon leaned out slightly as he watched her walk back towards the kitchen. “Yeah, she wants
me,” he nodded to himself before turning to the rest of them with a smirk, “Now that’s what I call a cougar.”

“You’re so perverted,” Sara said, wrinkling her nose at him in disgust. “She’s old enough to be your grandma.”

“Great-grandma,” McKenna said with a shudder.

“Don’t be ageist; older women need love, too,” he shot back. “Besides, that just means we can hit our sexual peaks together then, afterwards, she can bring me smoothies in bed.”

McKenna’s mouth fell open in revulsion before turning to Tommy, “I can’t believe you let this guy live under the same roof as you and Felicity.”

His lips curled into a grimace, “Believe me when I say I’m beginning to rethink that myself.”

Brandon, ignoring their byplay while looking like the cat who ate the canary, rubbed his hands together gleefully and grinned, “Oh man, I can’t want to see what Big Earl’s gonna come up with. That man is the maestro of bacon, I’m telling you.”

“The maestro of bacon?” McKenna repeated, arching her eyebrow at him, “Since when do you even use words like ‘maestro’ in a sentence? You kept arguing ‘quarpzed’ was a word during Scrabble.”

“Quarpzed?” Sara repeated with a look.

“Quarpzed,” Brandon said straight-faced, “‘The astronaut quarpzed in his flight suit,’” he said firmly. “It’s a technical term; look it up. As for ‘maestro’, I’ve always used that word when it comes to Big Earl,” he told her. “The man is a food savant. He came up with this bacon jalapeno chocolate milkshake for Cinco de Mayo last year,” he closed his eyes and sighed dramatically. “It was so good I tried to muscle my way into the kitchen so I could kiss him right on the mouth. It was totally worth the ass kicking he threatened to give me afterwards, too, man.”

“Do you go around kissing everybody who works here?” Sara asked incredulously.
“Pretty much,” he admitted. “However, as I said before, I always make sure to tip well and I stopped using tongue after Gladys threatened to have me banned that one time.”

McKenna gave him an appalled look, “That’s just so wrong.” She took a deep breath and held it, “Okay, change of subject—quick, before McNamara starts waxing poetic over varicose veins and support hose.”

Felicity screwed her face up at that, “Ew.”

“Now I think I’ve lost my appetite,” Tommy muttered.

“Well, here’s one: Laurel is going to be pissed when she finds out I didn’t order her the Skinny Plate,” Sara said with a satisfied grin.

“Why would anyone order that?” Tommy asked wrinkling his nose. The Skinny Plate was just this lump of fat-free (see flavor-free) cottage cheese served in a lettuce cup with some sliced up kiwi.

“Obviously because she and Ollie are dating,” McKenna answered for her.

He blinked at that, “Huh?”

“Laurel doesn’t want Ollie to think she’s fat,” Sara told him.

Brandon, Tommy, and Felicity all looked at her in confusion.

“But she’s not fat,” Tommy said slowly, “In fact, she’s really, really skinny.”

“It’s just something Laurel does,” Sara told them. “She’ll order stuff like cottage cheese or a salad then say she’s full after two bites so people will think she’s all delicate and stuff then, later when she gets home, she stuffs her face with leftover chicken parm or scarfs down a whole bag of chips because she’s starving.”

Felicity tilted her head and looked at her in confusion, “Why doesn’t she just eat her lunch with
“It’s a teen girl thing,” McKenna shrugged. “I think the logic is that if a guy sees you eat real food then he might think you actually do stuff like use the bathroom for more than just powdering your nose and giggling with your girlfriends about how hot they are.”

“Well, I share a bathroom with her so, believe me, she doesn’t just powder her nose in there,” Sara said grumpily.

“I did not need to hear that,” Tommy said with a pained expression.

“Everybody poops, Merlyn; suck it up,” McKenna told him.

“Again; very poor choice of words,” he told her.

“So if it’s a teenage girl thing, does that mean you guys do it, too?” Felicity asked her.

Brandon frowned, “Like she said, everybody—“ He paused, “Oh, you meant the not eating thing, never mind.”

McKenna rolled her eyes before shaking her head, “No, what I should have said was it’s a teenage white girl thing with Sara being the exception because she burns off a zillion calories a day from doing gymnastics and zipping around on that skateboard of hers all the time. Latina women like me pride ourselves on having big booties so we don’t give a crap.”

“So to speak,” Brandon added.

“I…really didn’t need to hear that either,” Tommy said with another grimace.

“So does that mean when I start dating boys I can’t eat anymore?” Felicity asked with a frown.

Tommy cut in before McKenna could answer for her, “No, because we agreed you’re never dating.”
“And I thought we agreed that expecting Felicity to never date was both chauvinistic and stupid,” McKenna said flatly.

“Yeah, but I decided that I can live with that as long as it means I can sleep at night and don’t have to threaten to break some kid’s kneecaps,” he shot back.

“You were right, he really is turning into a dad,” Sara said with an amused look.

“If I can interject something here,” Brandon spoke up.

“Oh please don’t,” McKenna said eyeing him critically.

Ignoring her he turned to Felicity, “I, for one, think big girls with curves are sexy so you should eat whatever you want and not worry about what anybody else thinks as long as you make healthy decisions and feel good about yourself.”

“Me, too,” Tommy agreed, “Don’t worry about all that dieting crap because no guy wants to date a stick. Not that you’re allowed to date,” he added, “Ever.”

McKenna looked between them suspiciously, “Really?”

“Absolutely,” Tommy said firmly, “She’s never allowed to date.”

“No, you idiot,” she snorted, “Didn’t Felicity say something about you wanting to marry a supermodel someday?”

“Yeah, but not a really skinny one that doesn’t eat anything but salad,” he shrugged.

Felicity nodded, “Because if Tommy married someone who only eats salads then he might have to eat one, too.”
“True,” he agreed.

“Yeah, because supermodels are all plump and curvy and spend their days scarfing down pizza and cheeseburgers,” she snorted.

“Also he really likes chili so she’d have to eat that, too, and learn to put up with the smell afterwards,” Felicity told her.

Tommy threw her a dirty look, “Hey!”

“And chili. Also she’d have to be deaf and have no sense of smell because Felicity’s right; you could fill a gas tank after a couple of bowls there, Merlyn,” McKenna added causing Sara to snicker.

“Hey, better out than in!” he returned.

“I beg to differ, especially when your ‘out’ winds up ‘in’ my oxygen supply,” she tossed back. “Now answer the question. And be honest!”

“Fine,” he grumbled, “Okay, well, maybe not the kind of supermodel who does that runway crap and looks like a human clothes hanger, but I would totally date a Sport’s Illustrated or Victoria’s Secret model with boobs and a nice butt.”

“That sounds like a realistic goal to have,” she nodded slowly. “Keep hoping for that and let me know how it turns out for you.”

“Again, son of a billionaire here,” he said throwing up his hands. “Have you seen the kinds of women even ugly *millionaires* date? Between this face and Malcolm’s bank account…”

“I love the way he said ‘millionaires’ just now,” Sara told McKenna with a grin.

“Because, hey, how shitty are those people, right?” the other girl snorted before pulling a face, “Beh, *millionaires*!”
“How gauche!” Sara pronounced with an affected accent.

“Whatever,” he said with a snort, “The point is that if an ugly guy with a few zeros in his bank account can have hot chicks falling at his feet then I, with my movie star good looks, wit, charm, and even more zeros in the bank, should be able to score a Victoria’s Secret model.”

“Do I really have to give you the ‘supermodels only date musicians’ speech again?” Felicity asked with a pitying look.

“I’m taking lessons,” he said in a defensive tone.

“Supermodels only date who?” Ollie asked in amusement as he and Laurel sauntered up to the table. He had a slightly forced smile on his face with his hand wrapped firmly around Laurel, while she kept offering him a slightly ticked-off glare even as she extricated herself from his side to slide into the U-shaped booth beside McKenna forcing everyone to scoot two spots over. “Are you guys still on that? By the way, Happy Birthday,” he said looking down at Felicity.

“Yes, Happy Birthday,” Laurel said with a slightly stiff expression.

“Thanks,” she told both of them.

“So are you guys still debating whether or not son of a billionaire beats musician?” Ollie grinned. “Come up with any answers yet because it might be nice to know just in case the opportunity ever arises,” he joked before noticing the look in Laurel’s eyes and clearing his throat nervously.

“It--!” He blew out a puff of air and shook his head, “You know what, dude; don’t ask,” Tommy told him as he held out his hand and leaned over the table for a manly fist bump, “Meanwhile, good to see you again, bro.”

“Likewise,” he said with a chin bob as he took a seat beside Sara and Brandon leaving Felicity in the middle, with him, McKenna, and Laurel at the end. “It’s okay that we’re here, right? I know this is Felicity’s birthday breakfast and we weren’t sure if we were invited…”

“It’s cool with me,” Tommy said off-handedly, noting the forced way the other man said ‘we’ before turning to Felicity, “You okay with it, Sunshine?”
She shrugged, “Sure, as long as no one starts screaming at each other or attempts to murder me with a brownie.”

Sara snorted at that while Ollie rolled his eyes and Laurel flushed.

“It was an accident,” Ollie told her. “I didn’t know you were allergic to nuts.”

She looked at him distrustfully, “Then why did you already have bubblegum flavored Benadryl in your jacket?”

The girls all stared at him while Brandon spoke up, “Bro, she has a point; why were you carrying around kid’s Benadryl?”

Ollie shifted uncomfortably, “I, um, like the taste?”

“Robotripping,” Felicity hummed knowingly.

Tommy squinted down at her, “Where the hell did you hear about robotripping?”

“Health class,” she told him. “Plus, yesterday Dr. Phil was talking about how a lot of teens are getting high on stuff they find in their medicine cabinets. They even have things called ‘pharm parties’ where they dump all kinds of drugs into a bowl and just randomly mix them up. We’re talking pain meds, allergy pills, antibiotics, erectile dysfunction medication—”

“Don’t talk about erectile dysfunction at the breakfast table,” he told her with a scowl.

“—birth control pills,” she continued, ignoring him. She looked between Laurel and Ollie, “By the way, I know you guys know this already, but speaking of mixing meds, you do know that antibiotics negate the effects of birth control pills, right?”

“What?” Laurel asked, obviously taken off-guard.
“Jesus,” Tommy muttered, running his hand over his eyes in embarrassment as everyone else (with the exception of Ollie and Laurel) began to snicker.

“You know, just in case Ollie brings you to one of those parties or takes some Viagra or something,” the younger girl said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t use Viagra!” Ollie hissed.

“Never?” she asked hesitantly, “Because, according to Dr. Phil, a lot of otherwise healthy young men are experimenting with phosphodiesterase 5 inhibitors—that’s the active ingredient in ED drugs, by the way—“

“How does she know this stuff?” Sara asked turning to McKenna.

The other girl shook her head, “The miracle that is Felicity, what can I say?”

“—which accounts for a marked increase of reported cases of priapism in men under twenty-five and could lead to scarring of the penile tissue and even gangrene which may lead to amputation of the penis,” Felicity finished.

All three men at the table winced at that while Sara and McKenna began laughing so hard tears were running down their cheeks. Laurel’s expression, on the other hand, kept flitting between confusion and outrage.

“Okay!” Tommy said, slapping his hand over her mouth to stop her from saying anything else, “No more talking about amputating penises for the rest of the day—or ever again for that matter!”

“Yeah, I second that,” Brandon said with a shudder.

“And who the hell is this Dr. Phil guy and why is he telling this stuff to a little kid?” Ollie demanded, his face screwed up in disgust causing Laurel to close her eyes and pinch the bridge of her nose with a pained expression.

“Oh God, Ollie; really?” she muttered.
“You were right,” Sara said her shoulders shaking with laughter, “Felicity is cool as shit!”

“Oh my God,” McKenna gasped as she gripped the table, “I think I’m gonna die!”

“Can I just say one more thing?” Felicity asked, her voice muffled slightly by Tommy’s hand.

“No!” he told her.

She reached up and grabbed his hand, pulling it down with surprising strength, “I was just going to say that if Ollie does decide to take a form of ED medication in the future—“

“Hey!” the other man scowled, gesturing towards her and glaring at Tommy, “Can’t you stop this?”

“—he should cut the pill in half just to be safe,” she finished before he could stop her.

“She’s right,” Brandon said reluctantly. “A whole pill can lead to too much of a good thing, if you know what I mean. Believe me, I speak from personal experience here.”

The whole table went quiet at that and Tommy felt his jaw drop. “You’ve tried Viagra?” he sputtered.

“Dude, what haven’t I tried?” he said off-handedly, “But, yeah. I went to a dude who offered me a combo of X and Viagra, called it ‘Sextasy’ and said it was the ultimate good time.” He paused and shook his head, “It wasn’t. It made me hallucinate about talking to my dead grandma while sporting a freakin’ Sequoia in my shorts. Not good.” His mouth pulled downwards, “That shit messed me up for a while. I couldn’t even look Grammy’s portrait in the eye for like a month afterwards.”

“Dude,” Ollie breathed, “That’s just wrong.”

“Jesus fuck,” Tommy muttered, dropping his chin to his chest. “This was supposed to be a nice kid’s birthday breakfast and—shit.”
“Serotonin build-up can cause vivid hallucinations,” Felicity agreed sagely. “At least that’s what Dr. Phil says.”

McKenna let out another bark of laughter at that and Tommy turned a jaundiced eye towards her, “Why are you laughing at that?”

“I’m trying not to,” she said, sniffling and wiping the tears off her cheeks with a napkin, “I’m really not but she’s just so damn--”

“Cute! And more than a little twisted only in a really adorable way,” Sara said bursting out into laughter again as well.

“What she said,” McKenna agreed, grinning toothily.

“Do you really think this is an appropriate discussion to be having in public?” Laurel asked stiffly, “Especially with a child present?”

“I know I don’t,” Ollie muttered.

“Since when do you care about what is and what isn’t appropriate?” McKenna asked Ollie with twinkling eyes.

“Yeah,” Sara said with a smirk, “Didn’t my dad bust you last year for being naked in public while making out with some old lady’s favorite garden gnome?”

“I wasn’t making out with it, I was just holding it,” he glowered at her, “And I really wish people would just drop it with the garden gnome thing already. They bring that up and make it seem like all I do is go around getting wasted so I can stalk people’s lawn ornaments or something.” He gestured towards Brandon, “McNamara here ran over a lawn jockey and a mail box and yet no one ever said ‘boo’ about that. Meanwhile, I wound up having to buy that old lady a whole village full of gnomes, a fountain, *and* a bird bath to make up for it, plus the judge made me spend half the summer over there mowing her lawn and weeding her stupid petunias, yet no one ever gives me credit for that part, do they?” Ollie argued. “But, since you asked, I care ever since I decided to turn over a new leaf and become more mature and responsible,” he announced, his eyes locked on Laurel who sniffed derisively at that.
“Huh,” Brandon said tipping his head back slightly as he eyed the other man.

Ollie gave him a sideways look, “What?”

“Nothing, I was just wondering about something,” the other man said shaking his head slightly, his mouth pulled down at the corners as he flicked his gaze between the two newcomers.

“And what exactly would that be?” Ollie asked with a dangerous edge.

Brandon shrugged, “Well, *since you asked*, I was just wondering whether if this new more mature Ollie thing counted as a STD or pegging.”

“What?” the other man burst out.

“You know, because you were always telling people how Laurel had a stick up her ass only now it’s shoved up yours instead?” he drawled. “It just made me wonder if it was the same stick or if you just grew a whole new one and, if so, how it got up there.”

“Excuse me?” Laurel burst out, hands on hips, as she glared at Brandon.

He held up his hands in a warding gesture before hitching his thumb towards Ollie, “I didn’t say it, your mature and responsible boyfriend did,” he tossed back. “Be pissed at him, not me.”

“Watch it, McNamara,” Ollie growled.

“Or what? You’ll sexually harass my pink plastic flamingo collection or do you have a specific type?” he asked blithely. “It’s the little hats and beards, isn’t it? Yeah, they’re hot,” he mused before grinning. “Hey, check this out,” his voice took on a deep Irish brogue, “You put one of my gnomes in the maternity ward, and I’ll put two of your lawn jockey’s in the morgue.” He looked around the table, “Get it? Sean Connery; The Untouchables.” When Ollie responded by silently clenching his jaw in anger, he paused, “You know, because I’m apparently the Al Capone of mail boxes and lawn jockeys; untouchable.”

“Wait, I thought Sean Connery and his crew were the Untouchables in that movie?” McKenna asked
with dancing eyes.

“Connery must not have been that Untouchable,” Sara pointed out. “He died at the end, remember?”

“Yeah, he was definitely touchable,” Brandon agreed, “Kind of like that garden gnome Queen got busted for diddling in public.”

“You’re an asshole, McNamara; you know that?” Ollie growled out at last.

“Yeah, well, we can’t all be perfect,” he shrugged, blowing on his spoon before balancing it on the tip of his nose and lifting an eyebrow in the other man’s direction, “I’m an asshole who murders lawn jockeys and mailboxes with impunity while you have a weird fetish for German midgets in pointy hats who hang out in people’s flower beds. Guess that makes us about even.” He frowned, “Those things are from Germany, right? I’m just assuming because of the little lederhosen.”

Sara began laughing so hard she began to choke and even Tommy, even though he was giving it his best not to, had to bite back a laugh.

“What’s peg--?” Felicity began to ask until Tommy put his hand over her mouth.

“Don’t,” Tommy ordered.

“But—“ she garbled from behind his hand.

“No!”

“I’m beginning to think you were right about Brandon and the sobriety thing,” McKenna said with a snicker while Laurel and Ollie both eyed the other man angrily.

“Okay, enough,” Tommy said snapply after finally succeeding in taming his impulse to burst into hysterical laughter by keeping his hand pressed against Felicity’s mouth in order to prevent himself from falling over the edge and potentially ruining several lifelong friendships in one fell blow. “This is a nice birthday breakfast for Felicity,” he told all of them, the birthday girl in particular, “There will be no more talk about drugs, toilet habits, sexy grandmothers, Al Capone, erectile dysfunction,
perverted lawn ornaments, or people sticking things up other people’s butts; understood? We’re just going to enjoy breakfast and that’s it.” He slowly removed his hand from Felicity’s mouth and gave her a stern look, “And no more Dr. Phil; every time you mention that guy all it does it cause trouble.”

“Damn right,” Ollie grumbled. “And, by the way, I don’t know what kind of doctor this Phil guy is, but you should really think about reporting him to somebody. I don’t know about you, man, and I know Felicity isn’t your sister, but if I ever caught that guy saying shit like that to Thea I’d kick his fuckin’ ass.”

Even Laurel had to bite her lip at that one as she averted her eyes and did her best not to look at any of them directly.

Ollie stared at all their barely composed expressions, “What? What am I missing here?”

“Nothing, man,” Tommy told him as he loosened his hand around Felicity mouth and draped it over her shoulders instead, “Nothing at all.”

“I don’t think Ollie watches a lot of daytime TV,” she whispered as she snuggled into the hollow of his shoulder, causing him to have to press his lips together so he wouldn’t wind up setting them all off again.

At that point, Gladys came out with their drink orders. As she passed out their glasses, she looked around at their expressions which ran the gamut from confused anger to barely constrained amusement.

“So what’s so funny?” she asked in a raspy voice.

“We were just talking about Dr. Phil and the widespread recreational use of Viagra,” Brandon informed her blithely.

“Well, in my opinion they should go ahead and put that stuff in the water supply,” she told him. “It’s a miracle drug if you ask me, and if Dr. Phil’s on it then I volunteer to be the first in line to help that man work it off. There’s nothin’ I love more than a tall, slow drawling Texan. You kids okay?” she asked and they all somehow managed to keep it in check until after she left the table.

After that, not so much.
As all of them, Ollie and Laurel included, began laughing as one, while Tommy leaned back allowing his head to bounce repeatedly against the hard wood frame on the back of the booth, and prayed for a concussion.

As the food came out, Brandon stared at it in awe, “Bacon,” he said in a near whisper. “He made edible salad bowls out of bacon.”

The rotund older man nodded as Gladys handed out the small salads that were indeed being served in bowls made out of braided crisp bacon, “I figured, you know, people were all going low carb and stuff so why not make the bowls out of bacon. Plus, it might make more people order the salad and it would justify bumping up the price a little. What do you kids think?”

Instead of responding, Brandon just got up silently and wrapped his arms around the other man’s shoulders.

“McNamara, I swear to God if you kiss me again I will ban your ass for life,” Big Earl said in warning as he kept his hands at his sides and eyed the younger man warily.

Brandon pulled away slightly and looked him in the eye, “I love you, Big Earl.”

“Yeah, well, sit your ass down and eat,” the older man said gruffly. He waited until Brandon sat back down to address the rest of them, “Now this bein’ the brunch menu, some of the items aren’t strictly breakfast related but most are. I also been experimentin’ with low carb and high fiber choices so we can offer some of the more health-conscious types some dishes they can enjoy, too.”

“Bowls made out of bacon are considered ‘health conscious’?” Laurel asked as she eyed her salad uncertainly.

“It’s lean bacon,” Big Earl told her. “I’m also thinking of doing it with turkey bacon for folks who can’t have pork.”

“But still…?” Laurel began.
“Don’t question the genius that is Big Earl!” Brandon told her before offering the man in question a beatific smile, “You were saying, oh Maestro of Bacon?”

The older man sighed and rolled his eyes, “I also got a lot of new healthier apps to try out.” He began pointing to the dishes one by one, “Oven Fried Garlic Parmesan Green Beans with Ranch; they’re baked so less grease and carbs than French fries. Baked zucchini fries, which is another one of our new low carb apps. Salami and Cream Cheese Roll-ups; that’s gonna be a lunch item with your choice of a side. I’m thinkin’ of offering a regular side salad or bacon bowl for an extra $2.50, and a choice of sweet potato fries, regular fries, or steamed vegetables. We also got Cheesy Cauliflower Tater Tots; those are low carb and vegetarian. And, lastly, low-carb Pizza Mushroom Tops.”

“This looks great.” Tommy said, already reaching for one of the stuffed mushrooms with pepperoni and black olives, “but what’s with the low-carb all of the sudden?”

“The doctor said Big Earl needed to cut down on the sugar and carbs before he wound up in a diabetic coma,” Gladys said dryly as the man in question tossed her a dirty look.

“Yeah, well, I’m also working on a few low sugar dessert options but I figured I’d save those for another day,” the older man said gruffly. “In the meantime, we’re also adding a few new items to the regular menu. There’s Grilled Cheese Roll-ups for the kid’s menu, along with Ham and Cheese Mini-sliders, and Chicken Bacon Ranch Mac and Cheese.”

“To heck with the kid’s menu; I’d order this stuff all day long,” Sara said already digging into the grilled cheese roll-ups. “You should think about making these with ham and turkey and doing up mini-Monte Cristo’s, too.”

“Huh, that’s not a bad idea,” the older man said rocking back on his heels a little. “Write that down,” he told Gladys.

“Got it,” she told him as she scribbled something in her pad.

“Speaking of that though, we also got some Honey Ham and Cheese Biscuit Sliders we’re adding to the regular breakfast menu, along with Maple Bacon Biscuits,” he told them. “Oh, and speaking of bacon,” another waiter came out with a heavily laden tray and set two small tin buckets on the table with filled with glistening strips of bacon sticking out. “Candied bacon; we got Maple Brown Sugar and Bourbon Brown Sugar.” As all three boys reached for the bacon strips simultaneously he
continued, “Along with samples from the new menu we’re bringing out a few of our regular offerings for you kids to try as well.” Gladys began handing each one of them a note pad and pencil, “Everything is on the house; all I ask is that you write down what you liked, what you didn’t like, and how everything could be improved. That mini Monte Cristo idea was a good one, by the way,” he told Sara. “I’m gonna go into the back and work on that one right now. I’ll be sure to have Gladys bring them out when they’re done and, if it works out, I’ll put your name on ‘em when we publish the new menus.”

“Really?” Sara asked brightly, “So it could be like ‘Sara Lance’s Monte Cristo Wraps’ or ‘The Sara Deluxe’?”

“That’s so cool!” Felicity said with a huge grin.

“Whatever you want to call ‘em—within reason,” he told her, “No butts, no coconuts; gotta keep it clean. That goes for the rest of you,” he said sweeping his eyes over the group. “If you come up with something not on the menu, or a twist on something we already have like Sara here did, I’ll put your name on it and invite you into the back to take a picture with whatever dish you come up with so we can put it up on the wall; might even put it in the next cookbook, who knows?”

“This is like a dream come true, Big Earl! I have *so* many—“ Brandon began eagerly.

“Except McNamara,” Big Earl said cutting him off. “I’m not letting you anywhere near my menu or my kitchen. I can barely even tolerate having you in my restaurant most days,” he told the younger man without heat. “In the meantime…” Another waiter came out holding a tray with a massive tall stack dripping with lavender icing and topped with pink and purple candles, “Attention, folks!” the older man called out gaining the attention of both the staff and patrons, “This little gal is having a birthday today so all together now!” The big man’s deep baritone filled the air, “Hey there, it’s your birthday, and because it’s your birthday…”

Several of the staff gathered around and, in an eardrum jarring chorus, along with a few of the regulars who had obviously seen this scene play out many times before, began to sing.

“We got a treat for youuu!”

The staff gathered in a semi-circle and began clapping their hands before slapping their thighs and shifting their hands on top of each other repeatedly; mimicking pancake stacks like they were doing a House of Pancakes version of the Macarena or something.
“First we poured it! Then we flipped it! Then we stacked it! Higher and higher!”

“Higher and higher!”

“And because you’re one year older, a Pancake party!”

Sara and McKenna both began clapping along and singing at the top of their lungs on either side of a beaming and blushing Felicity.

“It’s a Pancake Party! Blow out the candles and pour that syrupppp!”

“It’s your special day! Dino’s Big Stack comin’ your way! So we get to gather and sayyyy!”

“We love youuu! We love youuu! And Pancakes, tooooo!” the large older man in the center bellowed out the last syllable in a low rumble that reminded Tommy of the mating call of a rhinoceros with a head cold.

Then again, it was her birthday, not his, and as long as she was having fun that’s all that mattered.

“Blow out the candles!” Big Earl told her with a grin. Tommy gave her his arm so she could stand up in the booth since the stack was too tall for her to reach them otherwise. As soon as she blew out the candles, the wait staff all burst out into cheers before quickly dispersing. “Happy birthday, honey,” the older man told her as Gladys fished an ancient Polaroid out of her apron pocket and snapped her picture before handing it to her.

“Thank you,” Felicity said giddily as she accepted the picture, her smile seeming to light up the entire room.

“You’re very welcome,” the older woman told her as one of the other wait staff set a jug of what looked like warm melted icing down on the table along with a shaker of sprinkles.

“Okay,” Big Earl said, putting his thumbs into his belt loops and hitching up his pants before looking around the table, “You kids let us know if you need anything, okay?”
“Thanks Big Earl!” Brandon called out to the man, already reaching for the top of the tall stack and sliding a couple of the extra-large pancakes onto a plate.

“Hey!” McKenna scowled at him.

“What?” he frowned then gestured towards the still towering stack of pancakes, “She can’t eat all of that by herself. Besides, I thought we agreed to do this family style. Family shares everything, right?”

“She means that Felicity should have the first pancake, doofus,” Sara said rolling her eyes. “It is her birthday, remember?”

“Oh,” he said frowning at his plate before turning to Felicity. “Switch plates with me.”

“That’s okay, you can keep that one,” Felicity told him still looking at her picture like it was the most amazing thing in the world. “Besides, the top one is the one with all the melted wax from the candles.”

“Fine by me,” Brandon said happily as he began to dig in, “The wax is the best part.”

“The wax is the best part?” Tommy repeated dubiously as he eased a couple of pancakes onto a plate and placed it in front of Felicity before doing the same for the others.

“Yeah,” Brandon agreed around a mouthful of fluffy goodness. “You know, like those wax soda bottle candies you used to get for Halloween when you were a kid?”

“Ugh, I hated those things,” Sara said disgustedly as she accepted her plate from Tommy and reached for the jug of icing, “Worst candy ever.”

“No, they weren’t,” the other man objected.

“They were,” McKenna told him as she waited for Tommy to hand her a plate. “That and wax lips. Who sees wax and thinks, ‘Oh, let’s feed this to little kids’?” she shuddered, “Might as well be
chewing on crayons.”

Sara wrinkled her nose in agreement, “Yeah; they were gross.”

“They weren’t gross!” he scowled. “I used to love those things, especially the ones with fangs and stuff.”

“Yes, they were,” Sara tossed back, “And those big red lips with the fangs were so stupid; I used to always toss mine or trade them for something better.”

“I liked ‘em,” Ollie said with a shrug before catching the look Laurel was giving him. “I mean, not anymore but I used to.”

“So what’s your favorite candy now?” Sara asked curiously.

“Jolly Ranchers,” he said immediately, nodding in thanks when Tommy passed down his pancakes, “The Sour Apple ones.”

She shuddered, “Ugh, sour.”

He looked over at her, the corner of his mouth lifting in amusement, “Okay, so what kind of candy did you used to like when you were a kid?”

“She still is a kid,” Laurel muttered none too quietly.

Sara threw her sister a dirty look before answering him, “Pixie sticks.”

“Pixie sticks?” Tommy repeated with a grimace. “You might as well be eating Kool-Aid powder or something.”

“I like that, too,” she said cheekily.
“She does,” McKenna told him. “I’ve seen her do it. She even licks the packet when she’s done then walks around with her tongue out so people can see all the different colors.”

“Whatever,” he said before looking to her sister, “Pass me your plate.”

“That’s alright,” Laurel said with a polite smile. “I’m not that hungry.”

“You sure?” Ollie asked with a frown.

She nodded serenely and hummed, “I’ll probably just stick with salad.”

Sara and McKenna shared a knowing look while Ollie just shrugged and reached for the sprinkles.

“In that case, I’ll take her share,” Brandon said as he eagerly shoveled his pancakes into his mouth.

“Go ahead,” she said easily, “I’m planning on moving my salad to a plate as well so you can take my ‘bacon bowl’, too.” Laurel wrinkled her nose, “I don’t even want to know how many fat grams are in this thing.”

Tommy, before he could stop himself, found himself saying, “You know, Laurel, you shouldn’t worry about dieting so much; you’re really not that fat.”

Everyone froze.

“What?” she asked, her cheeks coloring in outrage.

“I mean, you’re not fat at all!” he said quickly. “In fact, you’re really skinny—almost too skinny! Kind of bony actually.”

“I just—“ His mouth fell open and he gulped, “Um, I just meant that you could stand to gain a few pounds, you know, because guys like curvy girls with big, um…” he gestured helplessly, “Not that anything of yours is small, per se. Or it is,” he rushed out, “Just not *too* small! Like the perfect kind of small because, more than a mouthful is a…” he floundered as even Brandon was staring at him openmouthed at that point but whatever demon had taken over his mouth apparently wasn’t done yet since he couldn’t seem to stop from adding, “Not that I want to put anything of yours in my mouth…although I wouldn’t have minded—you know, before…as you well know, but you’re dating Ollie now so—“

Felicity reached up and clapped her hand over his mouth. She smiled at Laurel and batted her eyelashes, “What Tommy is trying to say is that you should have some pancakes because, before you arrived, we were discussing body image issues amongst teenage girls and the associated dangers of eating disorders and excess dieting. He meant no offence. In fact, we had a whole discussion about self-esteem and how girls shouldn’t have to change themselves just so boys will like them. He just wanted to make sure you were eating properly in order to set a good example for me. You know, since you’re going to be valedictorian and he’s always saying you’re such a good role model and all.” She looked at him fondly and smiled, “He does stuff like that; he’s very sensitive to feminist issues.

“What she said,” Tommy said faintly as she dropped her hand.

“Oh,” Laurel said, her eyebrows drawing together slightly, “Um, well, in that case, uh…” she handed him her empty plate, “I’ll have a pancake then.”

“Just one?” he asked, clearing his throat nervously.

The older girl looked at Felicity uncertainly, “Maybe…two?”

As he plated her pancakes, Ollie’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, “Since when do you care about feminist issues?”

“Since always,” Felicity answered for him before he could speak.

Which, given what had just happened, was probably a good thing.

“Yeah,” Ollie snorted derisively, “So I guess that explains why all of his shirts have half-naked chicks all over them.”
“Not all of my shirts,” Tommy muttered to himself.

“Actually, celebrating female sexuality through art makes him even more of a feminist, in my opinion,” Felicity said protectively.

He scoffed at that, “How is wearing shirts with naked girls shaking their funbags—er, breasts,” he corrected, “celebrating female sexuality through art’ much less make him into a feminist?”

Tommy gave him a look, “Dude—“

“I’m just asking,” the other man said with a shrug.

“Simple,” she told him, “The decision a woman makes to expose her body is a feminist issue and, in turn, the women who choose to model for those pictures are essentially exploring the political and societal connotations of nakedness.”

“Oh, this is going to be good,” McKenna whispered to Sara as she sat back in her seat and grinned. “I taught her this.”

“Maybe we should be recording it then?” Sara sniggered.

“The political and societal connotations of nakedness?” Ollie repeated with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” she nodded decisively. “In fact, some women would argue that posing nude is the ultimate feminist act. A naked woman is seen as vulnerable by society; she is a victim. A woman who is sexually promiscuous or projects her sexuality openly is seen as ‘fallen’, a victim of her own uncontrollable impulses since she, by virtue of her sex, is somehow weaker than a man. The feminist rebuttal to that is that by being naked and showing strength in her nudity, she is therefore reclaiming power over her own body. While some people see the nude body of a woman as immoral or degrading, others would argue that by being naked and unashamed, she is denouncing the idea that a woman’s only value to society is as a sexual object. It’s basically a direct commentary on the whole Madonna/Whore dichotomy,” she said off-handedly.

Now everybody was staring at her.
“Um, what?” Ollie asked, scratching his temple in confusion.

“How…old are you again?” Laurel asked slowly.

“Thirteen,” Felicity told her easily. She leaned forward and propped her elbow against the table, “Anyway, the way Tommy explained it to me the other day when we were talking about slut-shaming—"

“Slut-shaming?” the other man blinked.

“Oh man, I wish my mom was here for this,” Sara murmured shaking her head.

“Told you this was gonna be good,” McKenna grinned.

Tommy closed his eyes and prayed for a hole to open up and swallow him.

“Uh huh,” she nodded. “See, our society sets arbitrary rules for women about what is and isn’t ‘decent’. For example, a man can walk around topless but a woman can’t; why?”

Ollie leaned back slightly and rubbed the back of his neck, “You’re…asking me?” He took a deep breath then shrugged, “Um, because…”

“Because?” she prompted.

He looked to Laurel who frowned at him then shifted uncomfortably, “I don’t know; because women have breasts and men don’t?”

“Men have breasts,” she told him.

“Yeah, but not like women’s breasts,” he said with a slight flush.
“Not exactly, no, but essentially men’s breasts are the same,” she told him. “Male breasts have nipples, milk ducts, and some mammary tissue. They also have oxytocin and prolactin, the hormones responsible for milk production. In fact, in some animal species like the Dayak fruit bat, goats, and even cats, males have been known to breastfeed their young. And, among the Aka Pygmy people of central Africa, breastfeeding men are commonplace.”

“Say what now?” Even Tommy had to gawp at that one.

She turned to him and nodded, “While they don’t actually produce milk, they use their breasts to soothe their young, *but*,” she paused, “men *can* lactate; it’s a scientifically proven fact.”

“Seriously?” Tommy asked disbelievingly.

“Yes,” she said, popping the ‘p’. “Plus, men can get breast cancer. Dr. Phil had a show on that, too.” She looked to Ollie, “So are those the reasons that you feel Tommy can’t be a feminist and why women don’t deserve the same rights and considerations as men; because women can breastfeed and get cancer?

“Just—um,” Ollie blinked several times, his brow furrowed as he shook his head, “No?”

“Unless, of course, you think that women who choose to empower themselves through a sexually affirming act are doing something wrong?” she said archly. “In which case, that would mean that you’re the one who thinks these women are not living up to arbitrary standards stipulated by the patriarchy, thereby promoting the systemic oppression of women.” She paused and frowned, “You aren’t doing that, are you?”

“Uh, no? No, not at all,” Ollie said slowly then took a deep breath. “I would, um, never, um, oppress anybody or arbitrarily promote the, um…pa…tri…archy?”

“That’s good to hear,” she said happily. “Please pass the icing?”

“Here,” he said numbly, passing over the small pitcher.

“And boom goes the dynamite,” McKenna said as she and Sara shared a high five, “That’s my girl!!”
“Felicity is awesome,” Sara agreed.

“Thank you,” Felicity said brightly then poured a generous amount of melted frosting over her pancakes, “Yum!”

McKenna looked at Tommy and grinned, “I really love that kid.”

“Me, too,” Tommy said, shaking his head before digging into his own pancakes.

“And I want to just say for the record that I’m a proud feminist, too,” Brandon announced. “So any time any of you ladies want to take your shirts off in public, I will stand with you gladly and offer you whatever support these two hands can—Hey!” He blinked and sputtered as a piece of pancake dripping with sugary icing hit his face and slid down his cheek. He grabbed it before it hit the floor and tossed it in his mouth before grabbing a napkin and wiping off his face, “No wasting the sweet deliciousness—not cool!”

The rest of the day was a whirlwind of activity beginning with mini-golf (which wasn’t nearly as lame as Tommy remembered), the Aquarium, and ending at the zoo several hours later.

And then the day went all to hell.

It was late afternoon when they swung by The Geeky Monkey for a quick coffee and something sweet to wash down the foul taste left in all their mouths by what would forever after be referred to as ‘the kangaroo incident’.

“Kangaroos are creepy,” Felicity said with a shudder as she swirled her straw around her smoothie.

“Yeah, I think we’ll be skipping that particular exhibit from here on out,” Tommy agreed as he took a sip of his Frappuccino.
“I always liked the zoo,” Laurel said in a hollow voice as she drank down her Vente Macchiato. “Ever since I was a little kid; now I don’t know if I can ever go back again.”

“One minute we were petting the little girl kangaroo and then his creepy T-Rex hands just snatched her away and—” Sara pulled a face and made a disgusted noise.

Ollie dumped a couple of packs of sugar into his coffee, “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Dude,” Brandon said looking at him like he’d grown another head.

The other man’s mouth twisted, “Well, I mean, at least nobody got hurt, right?”

“Physically,” McKenna said flatly, “Mentally I’m scarred for life.”

“Did you see that thing’s ‘O’ face?” Brandon opened his mouth and twisted his jaw, hitching his lips over his teeth in an exaggerated expression.

“Stop it!” McKenna snapped, tossing a straw at his head causing him to throw up his hands in self-defense. “Don’t ever talk about that ever again or I will kick your ass! I mean it!”

“I’m definitely having nightmares later. I mean, I’ve seen The Exorcist like twenty times and nothing, but that?” Sara’s voice trailed off and she shuddered.

“This is all your fault, you know that, right?” Laurel said, turning accusing eyes toward Ollie.

“How is it my fault?” Ollie asked, taking umbrage.

“The only reason we were even inside the kangaroo enclosure is because of you,” Laurel said with a scowl.

“Hey, when I mentioned that my mom was on the board I figured they’d let us pet a monkey or one of those baby leopards or something,” Ollie shot back, “You know, something harmless…not a rape-y kangaroo on steroids,” he muttered. “And, hey, did you see the guns on that sucker?” he asked
leaning back in his chair, “That sucker was like the Hulk Hogan of kangaroos. I mean who knew just going to the zoo could be so dangerous?”

“I’m never going to Australia,” Felicity said glassy eyed, “Ever. Those things are everywhere there.”

“At least the zoo lady tried to make the best of it,” Tommy said weakly. “She apologized then offered to finish the tour another day. Plus, she gave us that very, um, informative talk…” Felicity stared at him dead-eyed and he winced, “Sorry, I just figured I’d go the ‘silver lining’ route since you usually like educational…stuff.”

“Educational; right,” McKenna drawled. “It was certainly educational.”

“I think that traumatized me worse than the humping kangaroos,” Sara said wrinkling her nose. “I really didn’t need to know that the females have three vaginas. Or that they can stay perpetually pregnant.”

“I didn’t need to see the process of them getting pregnant,” Laurel said in disgust. “Especially not all up close and personal like that.”

“Yeah, I think I got some on me at one point,” Brandon said with a grimace as he wiped his hands on his jeans despite the fact that their first stop afterwards had been to the zoo’s restrooms.

“Come on, Dude,” Tommy said closing his eyes painfully as he tried not to upchuck his piece of chocotorta.

“Sorry,” the other man said contritely. “It was probably just kangaroo spit or something…I hope,” he added under his breath.

Tommy dropped his fork with a clatter and swallowed convulsively as he tried to get his shit together before an already bad situation got significantly worse.

Felicity picked up her hand slowly and held it up to her face, “Can you let me out? I really want to wash my hands again.”
“Yeah,” he said clearing his throat and sliding out of the booth so she could move past him, “Do you need me to go with you?”

“No, that’s okay,” Felicity told him even though it was obvious just from looking at her that she was still completely wigged out.

“I’ll go,” McKenna assured him.

“I’ll go with you,” Sara said sliding out of the booth.

“Me, too,” Laurel agreed following them. “My hands could use another good scrubbing as well and I think saw some Comet under the sink.”

As soon as the girls closed the door to the ladies room behind them, Tommy folded his arms and lowered his head to the table with a muffled thump, “I just wanted to give her a nice birthday,” he mumbled into his folded arms. “She gave me a party so I wanted to pay her back. I thought, ‘The zoo; that’s nice, right? Just an innocent family-friendly activity’, he moaned. “One horny kangaroo later and now she’s probably traumatized for life.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Ollie said contritely.

“S’kay, not your fault. It’s not like you slipped the kangaroo some of Brandon’s Sextasy or anything,” he muttered.

“That’s true,” Brandon said, “Of course, if you had…” he paused, “Well, let’s just say things could’ve gotten a lot worse.”

“Worse?” Ollie said flatly. “Worse than being sprayed by horny kangaroo spit while they hump each other within smelling distance?”

The other man hesitated at that, “Well, it could have gotten confused and went after one of us instead. I told you about Grammy’s portrait, right?”

“Yeah,” Ollie said in a dangerous growl, “That reminds me; don’t ever bring up the gnome thing in
front of Laurel again or I swear to God, I will slip some of that shit in your drink and drop you off in front of a nursing home.”

“Fine,” he agreed. “I won’t bring that up as long as you stop bringing up the lawn jockey thing.”

Tommy looked up at them blearily and scowled, “Really? I just scarred Felicity for life by taking her to a zoo where jacked up sex-crazed kangaroos on steroids went to town on each other while she was petting them and you two are worried about people thinking you have a fetish for lawn art?”

Ollie rolled his shoulders with a contrite look, “Yeah, well, hate to say it but what’s done is done. You can’t exactly un-hump the kangaroo once it’s been, y’know—“

“Humped,” Brandon finished.

“Fuck,” Tommy cursed, his chin dropping to his chest.

Ollie’s cheeks puffed out as he nodded, “That, too.”

“And hey,” Brandon said quickly, “when you think about it, this could be a good thing.”

Tommy pinned him with a dark look, “How in the fuck was seeing that a good thing? Felicity will probably need therapy now! Hell, after that I need fucking therapy!”

“Yeah, but at least you won’t have to have the sex talk with her now that she’s seen it for herself… up close and personal,” the other man said slowly. “Although, after seeing that kangaroo’s corkscrew dick you’ll never have to worry about her wanting to have sex anyway. Hell, I don’t even want to look at my own dick after seeing that shit.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Tommy breathed closing his eyes, “One more word about Felicity seeing that kangaroo’s freaky looking cock and I’m going to break his fucking neck.”

“Do you want me to talk about his weird looking balls instead?” Brandon offered. “Because that shit was fucked up. I mean, first off they were in front of his dick which was weird, and then they started flopping all over the place like a pair of fuzzy hacky sacks—like totally 3D in your face--!” He put
his splayed hand up to his nose, “Right there!”

Tommy jumped up but before he could wrap his hands around the other man’s throat, Ollie grabbed his shoulder and forced him back in the chair while giving Brandon a warning look, “Dude, not helping!”

“Sorry,” he said with a wince.

“Okay, now look,” Ollie said firmly looking between both men before settling his gaze on Tommy and taking a deep breath, “I know it was bad—”

“Bad? It was a fucking disaster, Ollie!” Tommy growled.

“—but she’ll get over it,” he said carefully.

“She’ll get over it? Over *that*?” he repeated incredulously. “She—I—what?”

“Hey, yeah, it was…” he cleared his throat and made a helpless gesture, “Yeah, but Thea has seen me do a lot of fucked up shit and she’s perfectly fine. Remember that time we got wasted and she saw us get into that pissing contest?”

“Over what?” Brandon asked with a frown as Tommy flushed.

“Over the azalea bushes next to the pool,” Ollie answered for him.

Brandon scratched his shoulder absently and tilted his head, “So…what? You were arguing about who had the best azaleas while stoned?”

“No, it—“ Tommy’s mouth tightened in annoyance, “We got in a pissing contest *over* the azaleas.”

Brandon’s eyebrows drew together in confusion, “I’m still not…?”
“I bet Tommy that I could piss further than he could so we whipped it out and started peeing on some bushes; it was just some stupid guy shit, you know?” Ollie said shaking his head slightly, “Only I had no idea that Thea was playing outside—I mean, it was still pretty early, not even breakfast yet, and she was having some kind of tea party with her stuffed animals on the other side of where we were standing…” He sighed, “Long story short, we wound up pissing all over her favorite teddy bear and she freaked out.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s fucked up,” the other man winced.

“It’s not like we hit her with it or anything,” Ollie muttered. “I mean, we got the table, the bear, and one of the cups but we changed directions when she started yelling.”

“Not my proudest moment…” Tommy said slowly.

Although, for the record, his did go further than Ollie’s. The other man might have a little more game when it came to the ladies but Tommy had the prostate of a champion.

“The point is she freaked but then we ran out after we sobered up and bought her another bear and a new Disney Princess tea set and she forgot all about it,” Ollie said firmly.

“So what?” he asked sarcastically, ”Your advice is that I should buy her a teddy bear and a tea set to make up for her seeing--” he gestured out the windows towards the general direction of the zoo, “—that?”

“I’m saying, replace a bad memory with a good one like we did with Thea,” Ollie said carefully. “Day’s not over, right? You can still salvage it and...” he sighed, “since it is kind of my fault for convincing the zoo lady to let us pet some of the animals, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help make it up to her.”

Tommy felt his blood pressure begin to stabilize as he looked over to his friend and recognized the fact that he was sincerely trying to extend an olive branch. After all the weirdness of the last few weeks, not to mention the shit day he’d had, it was nice to have his partner back.

“Fine,” he agreed, “So what do we do now?”
“I don’t know,” Ollie said leaning back in the booth. “Hey, isn’t there some kind of festival going on over in Central City?” he asked them, “We could hit the boardwalk, go to the carnival; maybe do the roller coaster?”

“Yeah, but by the time we drove down there everything will be shutting down,” Tommy grimaced. “Plus we’d have to get hotel rooms and…no, has to be local.”

“We could go to the movies?” Brandon offered. “Felicity loves movies, right?”

She did like movies…

“What’s playing?”

“Uh…?” Ollie whipped out his Blackberry and dialed. After a minute or two he grimaced, “Nothing; just a stoner movie, a horror movie about global warming, and some lame chick flick.”

His face fell, “That’s it?”

“The good movies don’t ever come out until later in the summer,” he shrugged.

“Is that place still open with the indoor go cart track?” Brandon asked hopefully, “You know with the animatronic bears and the pizza party zone?”

“Yeah, that could work,” Tommy said perking up slightly. “We could get some go carts, hit the arcade…”

“It’s Saturday,” Ollie told them. “That place is going to be packed full of screaming brats and that’s if we can even get in the door.”

“So we just slip the guy at the door a couple of bucks and muscle our way to the head of the line,” the other man said off-handedly.

“It’s not a nightclub, dude; it’s a kid’s party place,” Ollie said wryly.
Brandon made a disgruntled noise, “So what are we gonna do?”

“You know what? Fuck it,” Tommy said at last, “I know what we’re going to do; we’re gonna go home, pack a few bags, and head up to Big Bear tonight. There’s plenty to do up there; she’ll love it.”

“You want to take her to the lake cabin?” Ollie asked, his eyebrows lifting slightly. “Yeah, that could work.”

“What about Malcolm?” Brandon argued.

“What about him?” he retorted. “Malcolm’s not going to show up tomorrow and you know it, might as well just head out tonight that way, when he does call to offer some lame ass excuse, at least the fallout won’t be so bad afterwards.” He looked to Ollie, “You wanna come, man?”

“I’m always up for Big Bear,” he said immediately. “How long are you planning on staying?”

“As long as you want,” Tommy shrugged. “I was planning on staying up there a while, maybe through the end of summer break, but we can take separate cars if you gotta be someplace.”

“Can Laurel come?” he asked.

“I guess so,” Tommy said carefully. “Will her folks let her go?”

“Sure—” he began before McNamara cut him off.

“Dude, there’s no way Detective Hard-ass is gonna let you take his daughter out of town like that,” the other man said wryly.

Ollie, however, didn’t look all that concerned, “So she tells him that she’s having a sleepover at McKenna’s place. In fact, McKenna could tell her folks the same thing and they can both come.”
“I don’t know, man…” Tommy said uncertainly. “I don’t mind if they come, but I don’t want her folks to get pissed then blame us. Her dad would probably bust us for kidnapping or something.”

“She does it all the time, trust me,” he assured him. “She offered to spend the night at my place a couple of times saying her folks would never catch on. But,” he paused as he met his gaze, “only if you’re cool with it. I mean, you’re still okay with me being with Laurel, right?”

“Yeah, man; I was over that a while back,” he said waving him off.

“So you want me to ask her?”

Tommy took a moment to think about that. He wasn’t really worried about Laurel pitching another fit or anything. Other than a little residual stiffness that morning, she’d loosened up considerably and had even been nice to Felicity despite the whole Dr. Phil debacle at The House of Pancakes.

Plus it would be nice for Felicity to have McKenna there and he was going to ask her if she wanted to go anyway…

He watched as the girls exited the bathroom laughing, their moods significantly better than they’d been before they left.

“Yeah, okay,” he heard himself say, “If they want to come it’s cool with me.”

Ollie grinned, “Cool!”

“Hang on,” Brandon said holding up his hand, “What about Sara?”

“What about Sara?” Ollie repeated with a frown.

“Yeah, what about me?” Sara asked as she slid into the booth with the others.

Ollie slung his arm around Laurel and tugged her close with a rakish grin, “Tommy wants us all to hang out at his cabin up in Big Bear this weekend. He said, if you guys want to, you could come
“Is Malcolm meeting us there?” Felicity asked excitedly.

“Um…” Tommy gave her an uncertain look, “Maybe,” he said at last.

“What do you mean?” she frowned. “Malcolm’s coming home tomorrow, remember? We can’t leave without him.”

He took a deep breath before placing his arm around her shoulders and looking down at her carefully, “Sunshine, you know, Malcolm…he gets really busy…”

Her face fell, “Did he call and say he wasn’t coming while I was in the bathroom?”

“No,” he assured her then hesitated.

She cast her hopeful eyes upwards, “What then?”

Thinking quickly he said, “Um, Oliver was just on his phone checking on some stuff and it turns out that it’s storming pretty bad over in China.”

She frowned, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he lied, “And because it’s so bad, Malcolm might not be able to fly out as soon as he hoped.”

“Is he going to be okay?” she asked apprehensively.

“Sure,” he said quickly, “but, just to be safe, he shouldn’t try to come home until the weather clears, don’t you think?”
“I guess…” she said looking downcast.

God, he felt like a total shit-heel for lying to her but it was for the best, he reasoned. Better a little disappointment now than a huge letdown later.

“Hey,” he said as he tipped her chin upwards and gave her a little smile, “you’ll still have me there, plus there’s a ton of stuff to do and, maybe later, Malcolm will be able to join us after all.”

Again, he felt bad for lying since he knew there was no way Malcolm would do that but hopefully by then she’d be too busy enjoying herself to notice.

“That’s true,” Felicity said brightening up slightly. “How long are we going to be there?”

“As long as you want,” he promised, “Maybe even the whole summer. They have all kinds of festivals and stuff, including a huge Renaissance Fair at the end of August if you want to go.”

“Cool!” She said breaking out in a huge grin.

“Wait, you guys are spending the entire summer up in Big Bear?” McKenna asked with a frown.

“If Felicity wants to, yeah,” Tommy shrugged.

“Well, there’s no way my parents are going to let me spend the next couple of months living out of town with you guys, I can tell you that right now,” she told him.

He gave her a sardonic look, “I didn’t think they would,” he told her. “The plan was for us to take separate vehicles so you guys could drive home and Felicity and I could stay up there. You guys can drive back on the weekends and stuff if you want.”

“So, how big is this cabin?” Laurel asked curiously.

“Pretty big,” he shrugged, “Not huge, but the size of a regular house big. It belonged to my grandparents and they left it to me when they died. It’s got plenty of room though; three bedrooms
and a loft, plus a fold out couch. We should be fine for space.”

“And who’s sleeping where?” McKenna asked pointedly, “In case you haven’t done the math; seven people, three bedrooms…?”

Tommy noticed she was including Sara in that count which was fine by him—in theory—as long as no one got busted.

“And a loft space with two twins,” he reminded her, “Plus, all the other beds are kings and queens if we have to double up.”

“Well, Laurel and I call the master suite,” Ollie said running his fingers down said woman’s arm as he gave her a heated look. “Sara and Felicity can have the loft, Brandon gets the queen, then you and Tommy can share—“

“Whoa!” McKenna cut him off, “I’m not sleeping with Merlyn.”

Tommy gave her a look, “Thanks for that.”

“You know what I mean,” she said in exasperation. “We’re not together.”

“Oh,” Ollie said with what Tommy knew to be feigned casualness, “Well, then, you and McNamara can share and Tommy can get the queen.”

“I’m not sleeping with him either,” she told him with a glare.

“I’m sorry, I just assumed…” he said, his voice trailing off.

She narrowed her eyes at him, “And why’s that?”

“I mean, it’s obvious you’ve been spending a lot of time over at Tommy’s so I just thought you two were hooking up,” he said easily. “No need to be ashamed; we’re all adults here.”
“Dude,” Tommy said with a hard look.

Ollie grinned, “What, man? I’m just trying to help you get the girl.”

“And I already told you we’re just friends,” he said firmly.

“Friends?” he scoffed.

“Yeah.”

“Whatever happened to ‘men and women can’t be friends’?” the other man asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Men and women can be friends,” McKenna argued.

“No they can’t,” Ollie told her.

“Why can’t they?” Laurel asked with a frown. “Besides, why do you care if she and Tommy are hooking up or not?”

His grin fell and he straightened up slightly, “Uh, I mean, I don’t,” he assured her. “Like I said, I just figured that Tommy had a thing for her and was afraid to say anything so I was just testing the waters; being a good wingman, y’know?”

“Right,” Laurel said darkly.

“Besides, being someone’s friend is a lot better than just being their girlfriend,” Felicity said confidently.

“How do you figure?” Ollie asked, eager to place his attention elsewhere.
“Well, because, like I told Tommy; when you’re just someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend then you have to pretend to do the things they like to do so they’ll keep liking you, but if you’re friends first, then you don’t have to pretend,” she said simply.

“She has a point,” McKenna agreed.

“That’s true,” Sara drawled, “I mean, you pretend to like stuff for Ollie all the time.”

“She does?” Ollie asked in surprise.

“No, I don’t!” Laurel said glaring at her sister.

“Really, Laurel?” Sara said drolly.

“I don’t!” she insisted. “I don’t have to pretend with Ollie and he doesn’t have to pretend with me either; we’ve been friends since elementary school, remember?”

“Um, yeah,” Ollie agreed, albeit reluctantly.

“Then why do you guys fight about stupid shit all the time?” Sara asked with a sneer.

“To be fair, there’s always a period of adjustment in every relationship,” Felicity offered. “Dr. Phil says it’s normal to have disagreements as long as you keep the lines of communication open and engage in a healthy dialog.”

“What did I say about Dr. Phil?” Tommy asked sternly.

“I was just trying to help,” she said defensively before twisting her lips downwards in a disgruntled scowl, “Fine, no more Dr. Phil at the table.”

“Thank you,” he said gruffly.
“I still don’t know who this Dr. Phil guy is,” Ollie muttered.

“My relationship with Ollie is none of your business, Sara, so just butt out of my relationship and try getting one of your own for a change,” Laurel told her sister harshly.

“I did try, but then some skank found out he liked me more so she got jealous and threw herself at him like some pathetic loser,” the other girl said with false sweetness causing her sister to shoot daggers towards her. “You know the type; no self-respect whatsoever.”

“What guy were you trying to hook up with?” Ollie asked curiously. “Maybe I can talk to the guy and see what’s up; if she’s just some random then maybe it’s not as serious with this other girl as you think.”

“Don’t bother,” Laurel bit out before Sara could answer him, “She’s just jealous because he and his girlfriend are *completely* devoted to each other,” she said with a pointed look towards her sister. “Besides, even if they weren’t, he’d be way out of her league anyway.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Sara said drolly. “After all, have you seen his ‘girlfriend’? Talk about a train wreck; she had to get him drunk before he’d even give her the time of day and, even then, she had to practically beg him to sleep with her. In fact, the sex was so boring that he totally forgot they even did it afterwards.”

Laurel turned purple with anger while Ollie looked between them in confusion.

Felicity looked up at him with a frown, “Are they talking about…?”

He placed his hand over her mouth and shushed her, “We’re staying out of this,” he muttered. “Not a word.”

“Fine,” she whispered back, “However, if Dr. Phil were here, he’d—“

He put his hand over her mouth again, “Hush!”
“I really hate it when you do that,” she mumbled against his fingers.

“To be fair, she didn’t *have* to get him drunk first,” Brandon said, slurping at his smoothie. “I mean, a guy will sleep with anybody as long as they’re offering. Even ugly chicks,” he shrugged. “Not that she was ugly,” he said looking towards Laurel apologetically. “She was pretty hot. I’m just saying that *if* she were ugly, any guy would still do her as long as he could turn off the lights, or at least put a bag over her head or something.”

Sara snorted while Laurel turned her burning eyes towards the other man.

“And again, I meant that in general terms; guys in general,” Brandon assured her. “Not naming names or saying the chick in question was fugly or had butterface, I’m just saying that looks don’t matter to guys as long as they have a shot at getting a piece. Later on, after the beer goggles wear off; that’s when you find yourself grabbing your pants and getting the hell out of Dodge.” He looked at Laurel again, “Not to say that’s what happened or even if, in fact, it did. I’m just saying that, in general, girls don’t have to put a lot of effort into landing a guy. You can gain a few pounds, leave off the makeup, wear ratty underwear; long as you smell good, we’re a sure thing.”

“McNamara has no sense of self-preservation,” McKenna sighed next to Tommy and Felicity.

“Well, we do so we’re staying out of it,” Tommy muttered back. “I suggest you do the same.”

“So you know this guy they’re talking about?” Ollie asked Brandon curiously.

“Vaguely,” he smirked. “He used to come to my bonfires to troll for random hook ups. Until recently, of course,” he gave Laurel another respectful look. “He’s now in a mature and responsible relationship with a very attractive woman who I am most definitely *not* slut shaming…even though he did dry hump her in front of everybody. Not that I’m judging,” he assured her quickly. “I would never shame any girl who wanted to be a slut because sluts, in my opinion, are great. I deeply respect all slu—ow!” He winced as Tommy, unable to take it anymore, sent a sharp kick to his shin from under the table.

“Knock it off,” he hissed.

“Damn,” Brandon said, looking under the table while rubbing his leg, “Dude, I think you broke the skin.”
“I’ll break more than that if you keep saying ‘slu—‘, um, that word,” he said carefully.

“Yeah, because this isn’t the kind of subject we need to be talking about right now, do we?” McKenna told him with a hard look as she hitched her chin towards Felicity pointedly.

“I was just joking, damn,” he said contritely as he continued to rub his shin.

“Just one more thing; you guys were talking about Danny, right?” Ollie said knowingly as Laurel’s cheeks flushed an even deeper shade of red. He turned to Sara with a slightly patronizing look, “I thought so; that guy’s a real scumbag and the girls he hooks up with are total skanks.” He sobered up slightly and looked at Felicity, “Not that I’m, um, ‘s-word’ shaming either.” He then turned back to Sara, “I’m just saying the guy’s a player and that there’s no way a girl who had any kind of self-respect would hook up with him.”

“No, I agree,” Sara said wide-eyed, “*Totally*.” She turned to her sister, “Hey, did you know Laurel dated Danny freshman year?”

“You dated that guy?” Ollie asked, looking at her with a frown.

“I—“ the other woman began.

Sara chuckled, “She did a little more than date him. He was her fir—“

“I think we should change the subject,” Tommy said quickly as the looks between the sisters grew increasingly hostile. “Where were we on the Big Bear situation…?”

“Ollie and I would love to go,” Laurel said tightly, looking directly at her sister as she said it. “A romantic getaway sounds perfect.”

“I’m in, too,” Sara said blithely.

“No, you’re staying home,” Laurel said firmly. “You’re still grounded remember? The only reason mom even let you out of the house is because dad had to go into work today and she didn’t want to have to deal with you bouncing off the walls.”
“Why are you grounded?” Ollie asked curiously.

“Shoplifting,” Laurel said pertly before her sister could answer. “She got busted stealing clothes at the mall.”

“Why were you shoplifting?” Ollie asked her with a furrowed brow. “If you wanted something you could’ve just asked me and I would’ve given you the money.”

“I wasn’t shoplifting, it was an accident,” Sara said tightly.

“Bullcrap,” Laurel snorted. “She got caught stealing trashy lingerie from Victoria’s Secret. Why I have no idea,” she added, “It’s not like anyone would ever want to see them on her.”

“Laurel,” Ollie turned to her with a hard look.

“It’s true,” the other woman said blithely, “What guy would want to go out with someone who dresses like a skater punk straight out of an Avril Lavigne video?”

“That’s really unnecessary, Laurel,” Ollie said with a scowl.

“And I like Avril Lavigne,” Felicity offered. “Plus I think the streaks in your hair are cool.”

“Thank you,” Sara said, tucking a lock of lime green and black hair behind her ear.

“They’re extensions,” Laurel muttered.

“So what if they are? And, for the record, I wasn’t shoplifting!” Sara retorted angrily.

“Then why did dad have to call in a favor to bail you out of trouble?” Laurel asked archly.
“I was trying on some stuff and I forgot I had it on, that’s all,” the younger girl said, her cheeks flushed crimson. “I wasn’t trying to leave without paying; I just lost track of time and realized I was late for dinner so I grabbed my stuff and rushed out. They caught me at the door and when I tried to explain wouldn’t believe me. They called my dad and he had to come down and explain it to them. I got grounded,” she glared at her sister, “because Laurel had to stick her nose in it and tell them it wasn’t the first time I’d shoplifted which was a lie.”

“I didn’t have to lie, Sara,” Laurel said with a sharp look and a flip of her hair. “All he had to do is look in your drawer when you got home; the evidence was all there. You’re just mad because you got caught, that’s all.”

“Bet you’re beginning to regret inviting them to Big Bear now…” McKenna murmured.

“Can’t catch a fuckin’ break,” Tommy sighed, rubbing his eyes wearily.

“Maybe we should go to Big Bear some other time,” Ollie said looking at Tommy apologetically. “You guys should go without us and I’ll head down by myself later in the week.”

“Just because Sara can’t go doesn’t mean we can’t,” Laurel said quickly.

His mouth tightened slightly, “It wouldn’t be fair to Sara.”

“She made her bed; why should we miss out because Sara screwed up?” Laurel demanded, “Again, like she always does? No,” she said firmly, “We’re going.”

“And how exactly are you going to swing that?” Sara asked, batting her eyelashes innocently. “There’s no way mom and dad will go for it.”

“Mom won’t have a problem with it,” the other girl said confidently.

“Bullshit,” Sara said with a snort. “But even if you are right and Mom will let you go, *Dad* will lock you away and throw away the key if he finds out you’re even thinking of going out of town on ‘a romantic getaway’, especially if it’s with Ollie.”
Ollie winced at that but didn’t say anything because, let’s face it, she wasn’t wrong.

“Then I won’t tell them,” Laurel threw back. “And neither will you.”

“And why would I agree with that?” Sara asked archly.

“Because, well, first off they won’t believe you,” Laurel said pointedly. “You lie about so much crap you’ve lost all credibility at this point. Secondly, because if you do rat me out, the next time you go sneaking out in the middle of the night to hang out with the rest of the losers at the skate park I’m telling Dad on you.”

“Okay, that’s it! Enough!” Ollie snapped causing everyone to look at him in surprise except Tommy.

The reason was he knew what was coming. Unlike the rest of them, he paid attention as the other man’s expression got darker and darker, his anger and frustration ever more evident as the sisters’ bickering escalated. Ollie was usually a fairly quiet and laidback kind of guy, not quite as Hang 10 as Brandon, but fairly even keeled most of the time. However, he could get rowdy on occasion and had been known to go off or lay someone on their ass when they pushed him too far. He and Ollie had been in more than one barroom brawl together and he’d recognized the warning signs the minute Laurel started getting highhanded with both him and her sister.

Apparently Laurel had never seen that side of him though because she was staring at him in openmouthed shock, “Ollie--!”

“Cool it, Laurel!” he snapped, causing her to blink in surprise. His mouth twisted into a grimace and he shot Tommy a look of apology, “This is Felicity’s birthday and we’re not going to ruin it any more than it already has been. Sorry,” he looked at the younger girl as he spoke before bringing his gaze back up to Tommy, “As for Big Bear, sorry man; much as I’d love to go, I think I should stay close to home. At least for now.” There was a hint of warning in his expression as she shot Laurel a look causing her eyebrows to draw together.

Laurel’s face fell a little as some silent message passed between them and she looked to the younger girl in embarrassment, “Ollie’s right; it was totally inappropriate and I’m sorry if our arguing upset you.”

“Me, too,” Sara said, her eyes reflecting deep regret. “I was acting like a total bitch just now and that’s not fair to you.”
“That’s okay,” Felicity said with a slight upturn of her lips. “Fights among close sibling sets such as sisters are completely normal. You just have to learn to accept each other for your differences while celebrating your individual strengths.” She looked at Tommy, “That one was from Oprah since you said no more Dr. Phil. She did an interview with Wynonna and Ashley Judd a couple of weeks ago on her show.”

“Now that one I actually got,” Ollie said with a slight grin as his face melted in amusement.

She looked over to the sisters, “Oh, and even though it’s off subject, she did an interview with Sharon Stone last Thursday on a near death experience she had inside an MRI.”

“Sharon Stone is hot,” Brandon said bobbing his head appreciatively, “For a cougar anyway.”

Felicity looked to Sara, “If you like scary stuff it was really positive but, at the same time, pretty creepy because her eyes kept getting big and she kept waving her hands all over the place but I’m fairly certain she was just looped out on pain meds or something.” She frowned up at Tommy, “You were at your guitar lesson so I was stuck listening to Mrs. Mack talk about angels for like two hours afterwards and then she made me watch Touched by an Angel with her even though I wanted to watch Degrassi; The Next Generation instead. It was the rerun of the episode where Paige goes to the frat party and loses her license after she crashes the car she stole from the guy who date raped her. She wouldn’t let me watch it though because there was drinking and sex and stuff and she said it was the devil’s temptation so instead we got stuck watching that box set of DVDs she got from Malcolm for Christmas.” She wrinkled her nose, “There is only so much Roma Downey a person can take before that stuff gets annoying.”

“How does she say that much stuff at one time without ever having to take a breath?” Sara asked in bemusement as she tilted her head at the younger girl.

“I don’t know,” McKenna said rolling her shoulders.

“Do you guys watch Degrassi?” she asked the group, “’Cause if you do, you should check out that episode because there was a guy on there that looked a lot like Ollie,” Felicity said, blinking up at him behind her thick glasses, “Like a lot.”

“Really?” he asked in surprise.
She nodded, “You should think about going into acting. You’d probably be really good at it.”

“You think?” he asked with a slightly arrogant grin as his chest puffed out a bit at that.

“Sure,” she nodded. “You’d need to do something about your hair first though.”

Ollie’s face fell and everyone started snickering, the tense mood lifted all at once.

“Ollie? Can we talk for a minute outside?” Laurel asked with a vulnerable expression.

“Sure,” he nodded then looked to Tommy, “Be right back, bro.”

“Take your time,” he said, waving him off then watched their progress as they made their way out of the restaurant and into the parking lot.

He could see the tension between the two but it was also obvious that, even though they were fighting, Ollie was really invested in Laurel. He watched through the windows as the two talked, their heads tilted towards each other as Ollie gently laid his hand first on her elbow then up to her shoulder.

Yeah, he wasn’t happy with her at the moment, that was obvious, but he clearly did care for her. A lot. Ollie had always been a very touchy-feely guy, but he’d never been gentle with a girl before.

No, not gentle, he corrected mentally; tender.

For all his playboy ways, Ollie was always very respectful of the women he was with. He may have slept with them but he never lied and was never rough or abusive. He was a good guy, just a little careless with their feelings some times. Not with Laurel though. With Laurel he was more than gentle; he was tender. Despite his obvious annoyance at her earlier outburst, his eyes were soft as they looked down at her and even though Tommy couldn’t hear him he knew just from the expression on his face that he was speaking to her in low, hushed tones. This wasn’t a fling, it wasn’t the ‘revenge relationship’ Felicity and he had planned for them; Ollie actually cared about her. So much so he wondered why he never saw it before.
Or maybe he just wasn’t looking hard enough.

With other girls and acquaintances, Ollie was very physical. He was always flirting, dropping kisses on girl’s cheeks, throwing his arms around his buddies and pulling them into a manly hug. With Laurel though, he always kept his hands to himself. Every time she’d approach them and they’d start tearing into each other, he’d shove his hands in his pockets or lean away from her. Tommy assumed that was because he genuinely didn’t like her very much but the truth was, a truth he was only now beginning to realize, the reason he maintained such a controlled distance from her was so he wouldn’t be tempted to touch her.

Because he didn’t want to step on Tommy’s toes by bagging his Dream Girl.

“Damn,” he muttered. God, he was such a dick. Not Ollie; him. He was so caught up in his own stupid ideas about ‘Dream Girls’ and what he wanted that he never even noticed that this entire time they’d been crushing on the same girl.

“Something wrong?” Felicity asked, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“No,” he said, picking up her hand and giving it a quick kiss before sighing. “Just realizing what a screw up and bad friend I’ve been.”

“You’re not a screw up or a bad friend,” she scolded.

“This has been a terrible birthday,” he said, closing his eyes in regret. “I wanted to make it special for you and all I’ve done is—“

“You haven’t done anything,” she said cutting him off, “Stuff happens. I don’t care about all the stupid petty stuff. People fight, things happen. And today was a great birthday.”

“Felicity—“ he chuckled darkly, shaking his head.

“I got to ride in a red convertible,” she told him, “I got to eat giant pancakes, have a whole restaurant sing me a birthday song, and Sara got a sandwich named after her.”
“That was cool,” Sara agreed.

“You got to ask about the cheddar ranch pork rinds,” she pointed out.

“Big Earl did say he’d think about it,” he murmured.

“We got to go to mini-golf and Brandon got that awesome hole in one at the windmill.”

Brandon nodded, “Apparently I have a natural talent for the game. Must be from watching my old man play all these years.” He perked up, “Who knows? Maybe I’ll even go pro?”

“Pro Putt-Putt?” McKenna asked archly.

He shrugged, “They have professional dog food tasters and guys who play video games for a living, why can’t they have professional mini-golf?”

“Professional dog food tasters?” she asked incredulously. “That’s not a real thing,” she insisted. “You’re just making that up.”

“No, I’m not.” Brandon looked over to Felicity, “Am I? Tell her.”

“We saw it on Letterman,” Felicity nodded. “It was this British guy and Dave made him eat three whole cans of Alpo.” She scowled, “He was kind of rude about it, too; whenever the man tried to explain what he did, he would tell him to shut up and just eat the dog food.”

“I love Dave,” Brandon grinned.

McKenna turned on Tommy with an unhappy expression, “You let her stay up late to watch that crap?”

“Well,” he shifted uncomfortably, “The Stupid Human Tricks segment is pretty funny.”
“I like the Top Ten List best though,” Felicity told her.

“I thought we agreed to get her away from watching so much TV this summer,” she fussed at him, “And what about that 10 o’clock bedtime thing you were trying out?”

“It’s not like we watch every night,” he said defensively. “And we were in bed, we just weren’t asleep yet.”

“Yeah, we fell asleep watching it in Felicity’s room,” Brandon told her before turning to Tommy, “That flat screen of hers is awesome. Since we’re trying to curb the TV time, maybe we should think about hooking up the X-Box in her room instead.”

“We could,” Tommy shrugged.

“I’d be okay with that!” the younger girl agreed readily. “We could finish playing that game where we got to kill all the mutagenic zombies and the alien Rottweiler things with the split open heads that had tentacles and stuff coming out. That thing was sick!”

“That game is pretty sick,” Brandon agreed. “Hey, we should pick up the movie too and watch it later!”


“No!” the older girl said firmly. “Felicity doesn’t need to be staying up late watching all that sick crap. You’ll twist her brain or something!”

“I like horror movies and stuff,” Sara offered tentatively.

“Yeah, well, we already know you’re dark and twisted,” McKenna said dismissively. “Your dad leaves files on the coffee table with pictures of dead bodies all over the place so no wonder you’re completely desensitized, but Felicity isn’t.” She turned back to Tommy, “You said yourself that she has nightmares; why would you let her watch that? And how is her playing video games better than staying in the house cooped up all day watching television?”
“Um, because it teaches hand/eye coordination…?” Tommy said slowly.

“And Brandon, Tommy, and I were talking about altering the game so that it shows even more gross stuff.” Felicity offered matter-of-factly. “We’re even thinking of changing some of the levels around and programing in some cheats.” She nodded to the guys, “They’re going to come up with changes to the storyline while I hack the code.”

“Wait, you can do that?” Sara interjected looking at Felicity in amazement.

“Oh huh,” she nodded.

“Yeah, see, that’s educational, plus she’s learning strategy, and teaching us computer crap,” Brandon nodded. “Oh, and she’s getting really good at sniping zombies. When the zombie apocalypse happens she’ll be totally prepared thanks to us. How many other thirteen year old kids can say that?”

“Any one of them that owns a video game console!” she snapped. “I cannot believe you; we talked about this,” McKenna said, her expression a mask of stern disapproval, “Fresh air, Tommy; sunshine, exercise!”

“I’m taking her to Big Bear,” he said contritely. “There’ll be plenty of sunshine and exercise there.”

She ignored his protests and leveled an accusatory finger in his direction, “There is more to taking care of a kid than playing video games and having her make you and your ‘bro’ snacks all day!”

“You told her about the cupcakes?” Tommy asked Felicity with a wounded expression.

The younger girl shrugged, “It was her recipe.”

“Those were some awesome cupcakes, by the way” Brandon said slowly before looking at McKenna hopefully, “Got any more recipes you can share with Felicity? I’m a big fan of anything involving caramel and apples.”

“Oh shut up,” McKenna told him, “Everything’s awesome to you. You know, getting her outside, keeping her on a schedule; it isn’t just for her benefit,” she said meeting Tommy’s eyes again. “You
said you wanted to start developing better habits yourself before school starts so you could get into Harvard. You can’t do that if you’re staying up all night eating junk and sitting in front of a video game. That’s just as destructive as partying all the time was. Also, with Felicity’s allergies and stuff, she needs as much fresh air and exercise as she can get to build up her immune system.”

“Sorry, you’re right,” Tommy told her repentantly. “I promise we’ll limit our TV time from here on out and leave the game console at home when we go to the cabin.”

Brandon made a disgruntled noise. McKenna leveled a glare at him and he grimaced, “Fine.”

“Are you sure you guys aren’t hooking up?” Sara asked curiously, “Because you two sounded exactly like my mom and dad just now.” She shook her head slightly, “I mean, you’re not just married; you’re a thirty year mortgage and 2.5 kids kind of married.”

“They really are,” Brandon agreed, “It’s like living in a sitcom some days; Tommy is the bumbling but fun dad, McKenna is the hot but strict mom, and Felicity and I are the mischievous little scamps that drive them both batty with our hilarious hijinks.”

“Bumbling but fun dad?” Tommy repeated, taking umbrage. “I’m not ‘bumbling’. What the hell kind of word is ‘bumbling’ anyway?” he grumbled.

“And I’m not your mother,” McKenna said flatly.

“And I’m very grateful for that, trust me,” he returned drolly, ignoring Tommy’s gripe, “because, *if* you were my mom…” He shook his head, “Yeah; that would be bad.”

“And why’s that?” she asked archly, “Because I would’ve drowned you at birth?”

“No,” he said smoothly, a smile playing around his lips as he looked at the deep ‘V’ of her bright white tank top that emphasized her curves and made her olive skin glow. “It would be bad because last week when you came over to Tommy’s wearing that black bikini with the little metal thing in the middle,” he pointed at the center of his chest while making a circular gesture with his finger, “I nearly wound up giving everybody a free show. I mean, when you took your top off before jumping in the pool….” His smile widened as his eyes locked on her cleavage again, “Although, since we’re on the subject of my Oedipal issues anyway, what’s your stance on breastfeeding?”
“Jerk!” she growled, tossing a sugar packet at his head.

He batted it away handily and winked, “What can I say? It was a really great bikini and milk does a body good.”

“You disgust me,” she told him with a grimace.

He merely smirked and wriggled his eyebrows comically before using his tongue in a suggestive manner to pull his straw into his mouth.

“What’s the difference between dating and hooking up?” Felicity asked suddenly.

Tommy looked down at her helplessly, his mind completely blanking out, “Uhh…McKenna?” he said slowly, looking to the only other person at the table that was closest to being an adult at the moment.

When it came to taking care of Felicity, he was willing to go the distance. He gave up partying, was willing to adopt a more mature lifestyle, but giving Felicity the ‘hooking up’ versus dating speech was not his area of expertise. After his last attempt to talk to her about stuff like that…

…yeah.

Tommy might not be the smartest guy in the room, but he at least had sense enough to know when it was time to hand off the baton.

However…

“What?” McKenna asked with a belligerent expression as she folded her arms across her chest, her chin jutting out stubbornly.

He frowned, “Aren’t you, um…” he waved at Felicity helplessly as he looked to her in confusion.

She arched a delicately curved eyebrow at him, “Aren’t I what?”
“‘Aren’t you what’ what?” Ollie asked as he and Laurel returned to the table and slid in beside them.

Tommy noted that he and Laurel both seemed much calmer and more relaxed than they had before they left but, while he was glad Ollie’s personal crisis was resolved, his was still going strong.

“Oh, nothing,” McKenna said giving Tommy a narrow look. “Just that Tommy asked me to ‘help’ him with Felicity, which I did,” she said testily. “However, even though I tried ‘helping’ him time and time again, giving him the best advice I could, he keeps taking everything I say and just ignoring it, making him look like the good guy and me into the bad guy.”

“But--!” Tommy began, raising his hand to object.

“No!” she told him. “You asked for my help, you asked me to be your friend, your partner in helping with Felicity, but ‘helping’ is one thing and ‘**doing your job**’ is something else entirely.”

“But—see—“ Tommy tried again.

“I am not the mother!” McKenna burst out. “I know what’s going on here, Tommy Merlyn,” she said in a dangerous registry as she leveled an accusing finger at him once again. “I have a big family with lots and lots of cousins, and nieces, and nephews, so this is not my first rodeo!”

“Mother?” Laurel repeated in confusion.

“What the hell did you do, dude?” Ollie asked taken aback by the vehemence in McKenna’s tone.

Tommy looked at him wild-eyed, “I don’t…”

“I’ll tell you what he did,” McKenna told them, “Somewhere along the way, Tommy decided that I was going to be the mean, boring, disciplinarian mom who gets to make all the rules and do all the hard stuff while he and Mr. Hilarious Hijinks with the Oedipal Complex get to have all the fun parts and stay up late watching Letterman!”
“This is all your fault,” Tommy growled casting a dangerous look in Brandon’s direction, “You just had to make that crack about her being the mom, didn’t you?”

“No, no, I was just trying to let her know how much I appreciated her penchant for tasty eats and boobage,” the other man shrugged wide-eyed.

“You shut up!” the incensed woman snapped before turning to Tommy again, “I don’t mind helping but I’m not going to be cast into the role of the parent who makes all the rules while you and Brandon get to be the fun dads who let the kid stay up all night long playing video games and eating junk. You told me you wanted to be more responsible, well here you go; handle it!”

“Yeah, this is exactly like my mom and dad,” Sara murmured.

“Wait, so I’m a dad, too?” Brandon turned to Tommy in surprise. “I thought only you guys were the parents and I was the fun uncle with no job who lives in the attic or something.”

“Fun uncle who lives in the attic?” Laurel repeated slowly, “What kind of family do you come from?”

Tommy felt his mind warp slightly at that, “Uh…? I don’t…I mean, I guess, sort of…?” He waivered for a moment, “I mean, she’s not really our kid but, in this context, I guess…I mean, seeing as we’re all taking care of her then…” his mouth opened and closed a couple of times before saying, “Yeah?”

“Holy shit,” Brandon said quietly, looking dumbstruck, “I’m a dad.”

“Yeah, this is weird,” Sara said staring between the three of them, “Like Twilight Zone weird.”

“That’s a lot of responsibility,” Brandon said looking mildly panicked. “I’ve never even had a dog before.” He looked at Tommy, as close to tears as the other man had ever seen him, “What am I gonna do?”

Ollie looked at them warily, “Okay, before McNamara has a stroke or something, mind filling us in on what we missed?”
“Felicity asked what the difference was between dating and hooking up and Tommy,” McKenna bit out, “as usual, tried to get out of it by asking me to handle it because he’s chicken shit.”

“To be fair the last time I asked him about sex and stuff he yelled at me and said I was never allowed to have sex because I’d either get pregnant or die,” Felicity offered. “Also, he wouldn’t let me pee.”

“What?” Laurel burst out incredulously before turning on him. “Why would you--?”

“Now that—“ he pointed in the younger girl’s direction, “that was taken completely out of context. What happened was—”

“What happened was you pussied out because you’re chicken shit,” McKenna repeated.

He opened his mouth to object then faltered, “…yeah, okay, I am.”

“Dude,” Ollie’s eyebrows drew together as he gave Tommy a disapproving look.

He scowled at his best friend, “Okay, so you try answering her and see how you do!”

“Fine!” Ollie snorted then turned to the younger girl, “What’s the question again?”

Felicity looked up at him, her bright blue eyes huge under the thick lenses she wore, “What’s the difference between dating and hooking up?”

Ollie stared at her blankly, still as a statue, not saying a word.

“Told you so,” Tommy muttered resentfully.

“We should get a dog,” Brandon said apropos to nothing, still looking pale and dumbstruck. “I always thought if I had kids, I’d get them a dog to play with. Pets teach kids responsibility and I always wanted a dog, you know, they…kids…kids like dogs. Dogs are good.” He paused, “Or maybe a cat. Kids like cats. Or a…turtle. I don’t know.”
“I think you guys broke Brandon,” Sara said still looking at all of them in a mixture of confusion and amusement.

Laurel rolled her eyes at all of them and looked to Tommy, “Do you need some help? Because I can handle this if you can’t.”

“Because Laurel definitely knows a lot about hooking up with guys,” Sara breathed causing her sister’s mouth to tighten in annoyance.

“Sara…” she warned.

“No; no, McKenna is right,” Tommy interrupted before they wound up with another Lance sister catfight on their hands. He took a deep breath, “this is my responsibility, so…” he cleared his throat and looked down at Felicity.

“Okay,” he said rubbing the bridge of his nose as he gathered his thoughts, “Uh, so dating is when two people make plans to go out with each other and, um…” he paused, “Let me start over.” He shifted in his seat, sitting up straight and squaring his shoulders in determination, “Okay, it used to be that when a guy liked a girl, he would ask her out on a date—“

“Wait—hold up,” McKenna said stopping him. “What do you mean, ‘used to be’?”

He looked at her with a frown, “I just meant that back in the day—“

“No.”

“But—“

“No!”

“Are you going to let me explain this to her or not?” Tommy demanded.
“Not if you keep screwing it up!” she told him. “You’re making it sound like people don’t date anymore.”

“Well, they don’t,” Ollie said slowly, finding his voice again.

“Yes, they do,” Laurel said looking at him askance, “We’re dating.”

“I mean, yeah; *we* are,” the other man said quickly, “but we’re the exception. I mean, most people our age just hook up because ‘dating’ is mostly for old people.” At the hard looks the women were giving him, he swallowed, “‘*Older*’ people, I mean. You know, like people in their thirties who are worried about getting married and having kids and stuff.”

Good answer, Tommy thought approvingly.

“That’s crap,” McKenna said flatly.

…Or not.

“Yeah, Ollie,” Laurel said with a hint of hostility, “Where did you even come up with that crap?”

The man in question turned to Tommy and Brandon as if seeking moral support.

“Do not drag me into this, man; I have enough on my plate as it is,” Like coming up with something better than what you just said, Tommy thought with a sigh as he rubbed the back of his neck wearily.

He needed to come up with something good, too, because his ass was starting to feel like that Dog Food Taster’s favorite chew toy.

“Okay,” Brandon said at last, “Turtle, definitely a turtle, because we saw that giant Galapagos tortoise at the zoo. That’s way better than a dog or a cat because you can ride around on it and it’ll live forever, plus you don’t have to worry about fleas or taking it for walks or anything. Oh, and as a bonus, they don’t chase cars or tear up the furniture with their claws.” He frowned, “Turtles don’t have claws, right? I’ve never actually had a turtle before either.”
Sara pooched out her bottom lip, “Okay, yeah; he’s gone.”

“Enough,” Tommy said holding out his hands, “I’ve got this!”

“Well?” McKenna prompted after a pregnant pause.

He stared at Felicity’s big innocent eyes and rosy cheeks, his confidence wavering, “I’m…I’ve almost got this.”

“The difference between dating and hooking up is that when you hook up with someone all you’re interested in is sex without the hassle of getting to know them and dating is when you want to get to know them before jumping into sex.”

They all turned to look at Brandon in surprise but he was focused entirely on Felicity.

“See,” he began carefully, “most guys, when they’re in high school or college, all they see when they look at a girl they just met, are the girls they’re missing out on meeting while talking to her. That’s why they don’t want to be tied down to any one person; you never know when someone better is about to come along. Dating happens when you finally meet that one girl that you really want to stick with for a while because you stop thinking about other girls. In fact, you can’t think about any other girl but her and you don’t want her thinking about anyone else but you back.”

All three women stared at him in varying states of shock.

“Wow,” McKenna said quietly.

“So dating is better than hooking up?” Felicity asked curiously.

Brandon frowned and tilted his head in a bird-like manner as he folded his arms on top of the table and leaned forward slightly, “No, I’m not saying that. One isn’t necessarily better than the other; it’s just about needing different things from different people at different times. Sometimes you meet someone and you have that instant connection but you’re just not ready to label it or invest a lot of emotion into it because you don’t know what you want yet so you’re trying to figure it out by meeting different people and trying new things. Dating is…it’s when you think you might know
what you want and that other person looks like they might be it, so you gather up your courage to ask them out on a date in the hopes that you can figure it out together.’

“What he said,” Tommy said dumbly.

Felicity looked at Brandon curiously, “Have you ever dated anybody?”

“Me?” the older boy asked in surprise.

“Yeah, come to think of it I’ve never even heard about you going out with anybody before,” McKenna said with a frown.

“That’s because I haven’t really,” Brandon shrugged. “I mean, yeah, I’ve hooked up with people but, like I said, sometimes you have to look around a little before you decide what it is you want. Sometimes you never do, and sometimes you find out that you don’t want to choose at all.”

“Ah,” Felicity nodded knowingly.

“Wait, what does that mean?” Sara asked in confusion.

“What does what mean?” he asked.

“That you don’t want to choose?” she elaborated. “Does that mean that you keep hooking up with random people forever, or…?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “Sometimes it just means that you don’t want to be with just one person or that you’re not sure if you want to be with a girl, or a guy, or both—sometimes neither.”

“Wait, what?” Ollie blinked in surprise.

“Are you…?” Laurel asked carefully.
“Am I what?” Brandon asked her.

“Um,” her brow furrowed and she took a careful breath, “gay?”

“No,” he chuckled.

“Oh,” Laurel nodded and Ollie relaxed next to her.

“I mean, that’s not to say I haven’t done stuff with guys before, just that I’m not gay,” Brandon said easily.

Everyone froze.

“Oh,” Laurel said quietly.

“I’m confused…” Ollie said slowly.

“I mean, if I had to label it, I’d say I was sort of bi but not really,” Brandon said off-handedly before turning to Felicity. “Bi means—“

“Bisexual, I know,” she nodded, not looking the least bit affected by his revelation. “The Kinsey Scale; they had that on Oprah, Dr. Phil, and in health class,” she told him. “I figured that’s what you meant when you said some people never feel the need to choose. So what’s your number?”

“I’d say I’m more than a one but less than a two,” he answered her without hesitation.

“What are you talking about?” Tommy asked still feeling like he’d just been run over by the shocking revelation bus.

…that then backed up so it could hit him again just in case.
“The Kinsey Scale,” Felicity told him. “It’s a human sexuality sliding scale that goes from zero, meaning people who identify themselves as exclusively heterosexual with no experience with or desire for sexual activity with their same sex, to six, for those who would identify themselves as exclusively homosexual with no experience with or desire for sexual activity with those of the opposite sex, and one through five for those who would identify themselves with varying levels of desire for sexual activity with either sex, including incidental or occasional desire for sexual activity with the same sex.” She gestured to Brandon, “Brandon is between a one to two, leaning more towards two, meaning he considers himself predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual.”

“You don’t want to be a gay?” Ollie asked suddenly. “I’ve seen you hook up with girls before.”

“Dude, I just told you, I’m not gay,” he repeated. “If I was gay I wouldn’t have a problem telling people that I am, but I’m not; I still like girls.”

“But she—you—both of you just said *you* had sex with guys,” the other man said slowly before shifting uncomfortably, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Personally, I’m cool either way.”

“Like I said; me too, bro,” Brandon said dryly. “That’s kind of the point.”

“But what does that *mean* you hooked up with a guy?” Ollie asked, still looking horribly confused.

“Well, if you’re asking if we had all out butt sex the answer is no, but we did stuff,” he said with a hint of annoyance. “I’m not ashamed of it or anything. Like I said, it was just one of those things. We both felt a need, liked each other, stuff happened, we had a moment, and that was that. If you’re asking how many guys I’ve hooked up with the answer is more than a couple but mostly I’ve been with girls and if I was to date someone, while I’m not saying I couldn’t date a guy, I’d probably be more interested in dating a girl at this point. Later, who knows?”

“In other words, heteroflexible,” Felicity interjected.
“What?” Now it was Ollie asking the question.

“It’s a term that falls between bi-curious and bisexual that’s characterized by minimal homosexual activity in an otherwise primarily heterosexual sexual orientation distinguishing it from bisexuality. I saw it on Gilmore Girls,” Felicity told him, “Also on Sex and the City. Oh, and Ally McBeal.”

“Again with the television,” McKenna said with a note of exasperation.

“At least it’s educational television,” Sara pointed out.

Laurel’s brow furrowed, “I have got to start watching more Gilmore Girls.”

She turned to Tommy, “But, for the record, I don’t think Dr. Phil’s done a show on that yet. He mostly just covers stuff like marital problems and out of control teenagers, but Oprah might do something on it eventually. Oh! Or Ellen! We should start watching her, too. I think Mrs. Mack will like it since she dances a lot on that show.”

“McKenna’s right,” Tommy muttered, “We have got to start getting you out of the house more.”

“But I don’t get it,” Ollie insisted.

“What don’t you get, Ollie?” Laurel asked, her eyebrows drawing together in growing annoyance.

“It,” he said with a deepening frown. “I mean, I get gay, and I get straight, but…” He paused, “I just…I don’t get it.”

“Ollie, you know people can be bi,” she said snappishly.

“That’s true. I still remember that whole conversation you had at Jeremy’s where you were talking about that very thing. What was it you said?” McKenna asked rolling her eyes at him, “That being Ollie Queen and having to please so many women was hard work and that it was only fair that girls should be willing to take on some of the work load by doing each other while you supervised?”
“You’re a pig!” Laurel said in disgust.

“First off, that was a joke!” he insisted. “Secondly, that just applies to girls, not guys.”

Her mouth fell open slightly before she drew herself up and glowered at him, “What?”

“Girls can be bi but guys…” he shrugged, “Look, okay; it’s a hardware versus software thing.”

“What?” All four women and Brandon said at once.

Tommy, however, kept his mouth shut, not because he was any more enlightened than Ollie was, but because, as the saying goes, you don’t have to be faster than the hungry lion, just faster than the other guy.

Yeah, if there’s one thing he inherited from his old man, it was his sense of when to keep his mouth shut and let the other guy take the hit instead.

“Okay, so girls,” Ollie began, “girls have software. You guys have all this good stuff going on and plenty of different parts plus, because you already know where everything is and how it works, you can just go for it.”

“We can just ‘go for it’?” Laurel repeated incredulously.

“I really wish we were recording this right now,” Sara said under her breath.

“Yeah, you can go for it,” he told them. “Your software works with pretty much anything but guys, we have hardware,” he told her. “While girls have all these options, we’ve only got that one thing.” He frowned, “I mean, with hardware…there are only a limited number of places you can plug into and then stuff starts getting kind of…tricky.”

The first words to pop into Tommy’s head were, ‘God, I am so glad I wasn’t the one who said that out loud first.’
“Ollie!” Laurel said in outrage.

“I’m not trying to say there’s anything wrong with it, swear to God!” he said quickly. “I have no problem with what people do in their personal lives and I have no problem with gay people, lesbians, bi; whatever! I’m just trying to figure out how this works!”

McKenna eyed him dangerously, “What do you mean, how does it work?”

“I mean—“ he made a helpless grunt of frustration before lowering his voice and addressing Brandon directly, “I mean, how do you go from a girl, to a guy, to back to a girl again? They’re like completely different things. Not to keep harping on the hardware/software thing but doesn’t your programming get all screwed up?”

“Programming…?” Now even Tommy was feeling confused, “What do you mean programming?” he found himself asking against his will.

“I mean, girls are soft—“

“Don’t do the ‘girls are software’ thing again,” McKenna warned him.

“Fine,” Ollie said in aggravation. “I was just trying to say that guys and girls are a lot different, that’s all.”

“They’re not that different,” Brandon told him. “I mean, they are; they’re completely different experiences, yeah, but—and not to be graphic or anything—hands and mouths both work pretty much the same no matter who or what you’re dealing with. The only real difference is that sometimes one might have a five o’clock shadow and the other one hopefully doesn’t. Although, again, different strokes…so to speak.”

Ollie’s brow furrowed at that, “But, I guess what I’m asking is why; why go for a guy at all even if it’s just every once in a while?”

“I can’t believe we’re talking about this,” Laurel said with a huff, glaring at her boyfriend.
“I can’t believe we’re talking about this in the middle of my family’s bakery,” McKenna said, presumably looking around to make sure her aunt and cousin weren’t listening in.

It was after lunch but well before five o’clock rush hour so the place was fairly empty and their table was far enough from the counter that they had a reasonable amount of privacy. While he was fairly certain her cousin Vicki and Aunt Betulia wouldn’t have a problem with anything they were saying, it was still a very personal conversation to be having out in public.

Brandon, however, didn’t appear to be the least bit embarrassed, merely flummoxed by Ollie’s question.

He knew Ollie wasn’t lying when he said he was cool with people of all sexual orientations; he was one of the most open-minded guys he knew, in fact. The truth was, sad to say, that in the privileged realm of the one percent, racism, sexism, homophobia, and a lot of other phobias and isms ran rampant. People who talked a good game in public, tended to show very different attitudes in private.

The Queens were one of the few who lived up to the legacy the Dearden’s passed onto them through Moira. They were a political powerhouse of crusading democrats in the tradition of the Kennedy’s. His own father, Malcolm, was exceptional in that one regard as well. Although he was a lifelong republican, he was a fairly moderate one. He knew, for example, that both their families supported gay issues and even provided comprehensive benefits for their employee’s same-sex partners and families. His dad’s best friend (other than Robert) and CFO, Michael Graham, was gay. After Malcolm took off to the ashram, it was Michael who stayed that first night with him and checked in with Mrs. Mack about how he was doing. He wasn’t around nearly as much as the Queen’s, but he and his partner were always there for the big stuff.

He knew—or, at least, kind of knew what Ollie meant though. He couldn’t quite put it into words and, going by the murderous expressions on the girls’ faces, Ollie definitely couldn’t, but he got the general gist of it at least.

If he were forced to translate for Ollie (and he had a feeling that was coming next), he’d say that comparing guys to girls was like comparing, not hardware to software, or apples to oranges, but fishing to skydiving. They were both fun, you could like both, but you didn’t whip out a fishing pole and cast a line while falling out of an airplane. Those activities called for two completely different mindsets and, once you’ve jumped out of a plane, spending all day sitting in a boat probably wouldn’t have the same thrill it once had.

He thought about that for a second.
Well, okay, so maybe that didn’t work after all. Now he was confusing himself.

Still, it was kind of a shock. It’s not every day that a guy you thought you knew drops this kind of bombshell so of course they were confused; both of them. It was a lot to take in. They weren’t being dicks, they were just trying to wrap their heads around it, and it’s not that either of them thought any differently about Brandon or planned on dropping him as a friend. He couldn’t speak for Ollie, but he didn’t care what floated the other man’s boat or popped his chute…so to speak. Also, he wasn’t saying he’d never admired another man’s parachute before, just that he was never interested in strapping one on for himself. He was a man in the boat kind of guy, that’s all. That particular activity held all the thrills he was looking for.

He shifted his eyes towards an incensed McKenna and gulped.

If she called on him to try to translate this shitstorm of Ollie’s…

Yeah, parachutes and boats weren’t gonna cut it. He was a dead man.

“I got it,” Brandon said at last with a nod. He looked at Ollie, “You know how you have a thing for brunettes and Tommy has that weakness for blondes?”

“What?” Laurel asked only to have Ollie wave her into silence.

“Yeah?” he said carefully.

“Well, every once in a while—not often mind you—but you look up and across the room…” he looked to the door then back to the other man, “Redhead.”

Ollie’s head fell back at that, “Oh! Okay,” he nodded.

“I’m just—what just happened?” McKenna asked looking between them.

“I don’t know,” Laurel said in confusion before turning to Tommy. “What…?”
“You don’t want to ask me because I was going to go with fishing and skydiving,” Tommy said quickly.

“Now I’m really confused…and somewhat disturbed because now I really want to figure out what skydiving has to do with fishing and redheads,” Sara muttered.

“Not to mention the blondes and brunettes,” McKenna added. She looked to Felicity, “Did you get any of that?”

“Yeah, but then again I live with them; I’m pretty much acclimated to it by now,” she said wryly.

“Mind explaining it to us then?” Laurel asked her.

“I would, but it’s really hard to translate boy-speak into girl-speak,” she told them. “It’s like trying to get an IBM PC jr. and an Apple IIe to work together without using BASIC as the communications handshaking protocol.”

Both girls just stared.

“I give up,” McKenna said flatly.

“Okay, so wait,” Ollie said suddenly, “We’ve known each other a long time.”

“Yeah,” Brandon shrugged.

“We’ve done sports together, gone to the gym, surfed…”

“Yeah,” he said again.

“Did you ever once…” his voice petered off and he lifted his eyebrow slightly.
“Oh my God,” Laurel breathed, hiding her face in her hands.

“What? Think you were hot?” Brandon asked with a snort.

“I mean…yeah,” he shrugged.

Laurel reached out and smacked him on the arm, “Ollie!”

“What? It’s a legitimate question!” he argued jokingly, holding his hands up in self-defense. “After all, I am the most attractive guy he knows, right? Why wouldn’t he want a piece of this?”

“Wait!” Tommy heard himself saying, “What about me?”

“What about you?” Sara asked.

Aw, fuck it.

“I mean,” he said turning to both men, “I was there, too. I was at the gym and the beach and stuff.”

“Tommy, it was a joke, man,” Ollie chuckled.

“I got that,” he said reasonably, “but still, there was some truth in there. I mean, why would you assume that Brandon would find you more attractive than me?”

“Oh, this is getting good,” Sara said leaning forward in anticipation.

Ollie scratched his head, grin still in place, “Well, I mean, that’s fairly obvious, isn’t it?”

“What’s obvious?” he demanded.
“I’m obviously more his type.”

“Ol—” Laurel began before McKenna cut her off by placing her hand on her shoulder.

The other girl’s eyes twinkled as she looked between the three men, “No, Sara’s right; this is getting good.”

Tommy frowned at that, “How are you more his type than I am?”

“Dude…” Ollie said slowly.

“No, I wanna know.”

“When was the last time you worked out?” Ollie asked pointedly.

“I work out,” he scoffed.

“No, you don’t,” the other man snorted.

Tommy glowered at him, “What are you talking about? I’m in great shape!”

“Okay,” Ollie said roundly.

“What are you trying to say?” he demanded.

He gave a short laugh, sighed, then lifted the bottom of his shirt exposing his abs, “See?”

“Ew! Put your shirt back on, dude!” Tommy said in disgust, “People eat here!”
“He doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to,” Felicity said, tilting her head to the side.

Tommy’s mouth tightened and he slapped his hand over her eyes.

“Hey!” she objected, pulling his hand away and pouting slightly as Ollie tucked his shirt down.

“I’m just saying that there’s a definite home field advantage going on over here, that’s all,” Ollie told him. “Me and Brandon surf, we work out, and you…do other stuff.”

“Oh yeah?” Tommy rolled up the sleeve of his tee shirt and curled his bicep before slapping the muscle, “Look at that! That’s…” he stared at it, “There’s some definition in there…somewhere.” As Ollie began to snicker he turned to Brandon, “Okay, so which one of us do you think is hotter; me or him?”

“Honestly man…” Brandon said reluctantly, shaking his head slightly, “I don’t really think of either of you like that.”

“Right,” Ollie said confidently. “It’s okay, man. I’m not gonna get mad and Tommy’ll get over it; just go ahead and tell him.”

“You’re a dick,” Tommy said flatly as he looked at Ollie.

His (former) best friend shrugged, “It is what it is, dude.”

“No, seriously,” Brandon told them, “I haven’t been with a lot of guys but when I have gone for it I mostly preferred Hispanic or black dudes.”

McKenna gaped at him, “That’s, um…”

“Hot,” Laurel said looking awestruck.
“Yeah,” the other girl breathed.

“I’m totally picturing that in my head right now,” Sara said quietly as all three of the older girls nodded as one.

“But if you had to pick someone, right here and now, who would you pick?” Tommy demanded.

“McKenna,” Brandon said casually.

“Really?” she asked in mild surprise.

“Yeah,” he drawled looking over at her, “Like I said; you’re hot.”

As McKenna flushed crimson, Ollie made an irritated noise, “No, between me and Tommy, who would you pick?”

Laurel shook her head at him, “Seriously?”

“Hey, I’m just saying,” Ollie told her. “Besides, now it’s a matter of principle.”

“Principle,” she repeated.

“Yeah, because I work hard to look this good and all Tommy does is a couple of laps in the pool and play video games.”

“Hey!” the slacker in question objected.

“It’s true,” Ollie told him.

“There is more to being attractive than just being ripped,” Tommy told him. “And it’s not like I’m a troll or something. This,” he waved his hand in front of his face, “is the full package; beauty, brains,
and a sunny disposition.”

“I’m not disputing that,” the other man told him. “If anyone asked I’d be the first to say that Tommy Merlyn is a charming son of a bitch and a mighty fine specimen to boot—”

“Thank you!” Tommy harrumphed as he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his seat.

“He’s just no Ollie Queen,” the other man said with a smirk.

“Oh, this is on,” Tommy said in a low voice. “You’re going down, Queen.”

“There is an obvious joke here that I will not be saying out loud,” Sara said pursing her lips.

“What joke?” Felicity asked innocently.

“Don’t,” Tommy said leveling his finger warningly at the other girl before turning to Brandon, “Choose; me or him.”

“I don’t want to choose, dude,” Brandon told him.

“You have to choose,” Ollie told him.

“You do know you’re being ridiculous, right?” Laurel said looking between them, “Both of you.”

“Hey, I don’t back down from a fight,” Ollie told her before looking to both his friends, “If you need me to take off my shirt again—”

Tommy threw him a dirty look, “Keep your shirt on, dude! I told you, nobody wants to see that shit while they’re eating!”

“You just don’t want me to pull out the big guns,” Ollie said knowingly, “But if you want to make
“this a grudge match, I’ll go. I’ll even take my pants off in the middle of this bitch if that’s what it
takes.”

“Keep your pants on, dude! If you’re gonna make me do this then I can manage without the visual,”
Brandon told him.

“Aww!” Felicity pouted only to wince when Tommy threw her a dirty look, “Sorry.”

“Well?” Tommy prompted.

“I’m thinking,” Brandon scowled as his eyes shifted between both men.

“Think faster,” he said testily.

“Don’t rush me, dude; there’s a lot of different stuff to consider here and I’m not that good under
pressure, especially since I got sober,” Brandon told him.

Ollie took a deep breath and leaned forward, his hands coming up as if framing a scene, “Okay,
picture this; the world is going to end and the only way to save it is to either do me or Tommy. You
have one minute to save the world; go!”

“How is this not rushing me?” Brandon demanded.

“It is what it is, man! Fifty-five seconds on the clock—go!” the other man said stubbornly.

“Wait—time out! So—“ he looked between them, “So do I pick within a minute or do I pick and
then we have a minute to get it on before the world explodes because, if it’s a minute and
then—boom—that’s more on you guys then on me.”

“Wait, what?” Tommy said in confusion.

“Yeah,” the other man nodded, “because then it’s about me just picking whichever one is quicker on
the draw, if you know what I mean, and not necessarily which one I would want to hook up with.”
He looked between them, “I mean, if it’s the world at stake then I’m not gonna be selfish here.”

“Well, if you’re not worried about foreplay you should definitely pick Ollie then,” Laurel told him. At her boyfriend’s pointed look, she shrugged, “This is your stupid game, not mine.”

He gave her one last chastising look before turning to Brandon, “Okay, so you have one minute to pick but five—ten—”

“Twenty,” Tommy offered.

“Thirty minutes to do the deed,” Ollie finished. “Now pick!”

Brandon took a deep breath, squinted his eyes, pursed his lips, then spoke.

“Tommy.”

“Yes!” he said doing a triumphant fist pump.

“This is bullshit!” Ollie burst out.

“In your face!” he said ignoring the sour grapes being hurled his way, “I win! Hah!”

McKenna smirked, “You do realize that what you’ve won is the right to stop the world from exploding by having sex with Brandon, right?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tommy said gleefully, “Like Ollie said, it’s the principle of the thing.”

“I still call bullshit,” Ollie said grumpily. “There is no way—no offense,” he said looking to Tommy, “that I would take second place here.”

“Well, okay; body wise, yeah, you have the advantage,” the other man admitted.
Tommy scowled at that, “Hey!”

“But—“ Brandon said in a soothing tone, “Tommy has those puppy dog eyes and goofy grin that makes you want to hug him to your chest like a little lost teddy bear.”

Tommy’s eyebrows drew down at that, “Huh?”

“See, like that face right there,” the other man said pointing at him.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Ollie said musingly.

“You know what? Fuck both of you,” Tommy snorted as both men broke out in wide grins.

“I think the point was that I was supposed to—“ Brandon began playfully.

“Okay—ha ha, now knock it off,” he said rolling his eyes. “Now what are we doing here?”

“I guess we head back to the house and pack,” Brandon shrugged.

“Are you coming?” Tommy asked, turning to McKenna who shook her head regretfully.

“Not this weekend,” she told him. “I was planning on spending the night over at Sara’s place but maybe some other time. I’ll talk to my mom and see if she’s cool with it. I don’t think she’ll have a problem with it once she knows it’s just you guys and Felicity.”

“Wait, what does that mean?” Tommy asked, frowning again. “Not that I want your mom to worry about you spending time with us, but still.”

“Well, besides the fact that Sebi, Lydia, and Vicki vouched for you, Mrs. Mack met up with my parents after church and introduced herself so you guys are officially off her ‘potential bad boys out to bag my daughter’ radar,” she said easily. “It also helps that I talk about you guys like I do my
brothers.”

Tommy’s face fell slightly as Ollie began to snicker, “Thanks. Yeah. That-that’s a real ego boost right there.”

“My car’s at Sara and Laurel’s though,” she told him. “We can swing by and get it and I can come back to your place to help you pack?”

“That sounds cool,” Tommy nodded.

“I guess I’ll go with you guys to help since I’ve got nothing better to do,” Sara shrugged as they began to clear the table and dispose of their trash.

“I think Laurel and I will just take off then,” Ollie said throwing his arm around her shoulders causing Laurel to give him a knowing smirk.

“Maybe later in the week you can make it down, man?” Tommy said, moving to clasp the other man’s hand in his own.

“Yeah,” he agreed, pulling away from his girlfriend to lean forward and give the other man a hearty clap on the back. At that moment Laurel’s phone rang and she moved away from the group to talk. Ollie looked down at Felicity and smiled, “And hey; happy birthday and sorry again about the kangaroo thing.” Felicity’s face fell slightly at the mention of the kangaroo and he winced, “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” she told him, “This will just be one of my things like you with the gnomes and Brandon with the mailbox.”

He nodded with a sympathetic look, “Between you and me that story doesn’t bother me because I’m embarrassed or anything, it bugs me because of what went down afterwards.”

“What happened?” she asked curiously.

Ollie looked to see Laurel still talking on the phone near her sister. His voice fell to a more confidential level, “The old lady whose garden I passed out in was the DA’s aunt or something so
that’s how I landed the plea deal to do her weeding and crap for the rest of the summer. The thing is though that she was an evil old—“ he paused, his mouth tightening slightly, “Let’s just say she wasn’t very nice.”

“Why man, what happened?” Tommy asked him. “I mean, I know you told me she liked to hassle you, but…?”

“What do you mean, ‘hassle’?” McKenna asked curiously.

“She used to do things like turn the sprinklers on me while I was working and say she would tell her nephew to send me to jail if I didn’t do things just the way she wanted them,” he said grumpily. “Just little petty shit but when I served up all my time she tried to say I took off early a few times and that I faked her signature on the sign off sheet even though she would make me stay late all the time.” He grimaced, “The judge threatened to pull my plea deal unless I could prove I didn’t take off and, for a minute there, I was convinced I was going to wind up working as that old hag’s gardener forever. Luckily my lawyer got her to agree to sign off on my final hours if I bought her those stupid gnomes, and birdbaths, and crap.”

“She blackmailed you into buying her gnomes?” McKenna asked slowly.

Ollie’s jaw clenched in embarrassment, “Yeah.”

Brandon’s mouth twitched, “Damn man, I’m sorry it was such a traumatizing experience for you. I’ll lay off making fun of the gnomes next time.”

“It’s not funny,” Felicity said sternly, her brow furrowed and her eyes flashing in umbrage. She looked at Ollie, “That old lady shouldn’t have done that to you, she shouldn’t have been able to get away with that!”

“Sunshine, did you miss the part where he said her nephew was the DA?” Tommy reminded her before looking at Ollie, “And didn’t you tell me another one of her nephews or her son or something works for City Hall?”

“Yeah,” he grimaced, “Of all the lawns to pass out on while on a candy roll, right?”

“Candy roll?” Felicity repeated with a frown.
Before Tommy could handle that one, Brandon stepped up, “A ‘candy roll’ means you’re rolling on Molly–MDMA,” he clarified. “They call it a ‘candy roll’ because a lot of people like to mix it in Pop Rocks or Tootsie Rolls because it can mess up your taste buds for a while.”

“What does it do?” she asked curiously.

“Nothing you ever need to be concerned about,” Tommy said gruffly.

Brandon gave him a mildly disapproving look, “While I’m with you that she should stay away from that stuff, making it into a mystery is only gonna make her want to try it, dude.” He waited for the other man to nod reluctantly then told her, “It feels good,” he told her. “I mean, obviously otherwise people wouldn’t do it but it sort of makes you want to hug the world. In fact, a lot of ravers will ask if you want some ‘Hug’ which is their way of asking if you want to drop a tab.” He frowned, “If I had to describe it, it hits about fifteen to twenty minutes or so after you take it, that’s if you get good stuff and not the stuff someone cut with other crap. You start feeling a little weird, like anxious and you want to move; that’s why most people like to drop during raves or in clubs. There’s a head rush then you feel warm, and just really, really happy and full of energy. Everything feels awesome and just...” he shrugged, “It’s like falling in love with the world basically. The bad part is the side effects later,” he told her, “but, I’ll be honest, I never had a lot of trouble rolling or candy flipping.”

“Candy flipping?” she repeated.

“I am really uncomfortable with where this conversation is headed,” Tommy told him with a pained look. “I don’t know if we should be telling this stuff to Felicity.”

“No, she should hear this,” McKenna said much to his surprise. “She’s going to hear about it eventually, especially if she goes to Starling Academy next year. At least if we’re honest with her she’ll know what’s up and that she can come to us if she ever has any questions. I mean,” she frowned slightly, “I come from a cop family so I’ve heard all the speeches about how drugs were bad and don’t do them. I knew why I shouldn’t do them, heard all the horror stories, but I also knew people must have been doing it for a reason, right?” She shrugged, “The whole reason I tried weed and stuff in the first place is because I was curious to see what the big deal was. I think if someone had been honest with me about some stuff I wouldn’t have been as tempted to try it.”

He turned to Ollie, “If Felicity was Thea, what would you do?”

“I don’t know, man,” the other man shrugged. “I mean, Thea’s five and Felicity’s a lot different.” He
looked down at the younger girl with a slight smile, “Frankly she’s smarter than all of us combined from what I can tell so I think she can handle it but it’s ultimately up to you. I’m not really in this so my vote shouldn’t count.”

Ollie was right but it still stung a bit to hear him admit that he wasn’t in this with him. He didn’t mean it that way, but it was still the truth. Taking on the responsibility of Felicity was ultimately his deal and his alone. Brandon and McKenna went all in with him, yeah, but this was still his responsibility. Even when he let them take lead, he was responsible for all of it.

That was scary. It was all scary, but some part of him had been lost in this fantasy of…whatever it was they were building here. Ollie, whether he realized it or not, had just drawn a line in the sand. He was Tommy’s friend, his bro, but he wasn’t going to play Three Men and a Baby with them. It was obvious he liked Felicity, he wasn’t worried about that, he just wasn’t as interested in making that kind of a commitment.

Tommy frowned, that was a hard realization to come to. Yeah, after Ollie sniped his Dream Girl he talked up a good game, said he could drop everything to be her world, but this was…real. This was reality creeping in and, yeah, it was a choice he had to make and not just about what information they should and shouldn’t be sharing with a kid, but whether or not he was going to continue to follow Ollie’s lead and go with what he knew, or make his own way.

Ollie, without even meaning to, just told him to take point because this wasn’t his deal; he was out.

He looked towards McKenna. Even though she was a little pissed at him dumping a lot of the hard stuff on her lately (and he did, he readily admitted), if he gave up she’d step in. He knew that. She’d deny it but, yeah, she’d step up because that was who she was. Other people might see the party girl but he’d grown to know the strong, confident woman behind all that, the one who took charge and made it happen. A big part of him regretted the fact that he didn’t make his move on her a long time ago instead of wasting his time on girls like Caroline or fantasizing about Dream Girls like Laurel.

Dream Girls, as he was coming to realize, were cotton candy; they looked so beautiful and sweet, but when you took a bite they disappeared because they weren’t what you thought they were. McKenna though, she was a steak dinner; meaty, real. He wished he had seen that earlier but now it was too late. It wasn’t that he didn’t still think she was attractive, because he did; it was that he no longer thought about her in terms of a potential girlfriend.

Weird as that sounded even to him.

She was beautiful, curvy, smart; the whole package, but she was also his friend and he liked having
her as just a friend. Felicity was right when she said sometimes it was better to have a friend than a girlfriend. Moreover, he respected McKenna and her opinion of him, something he’d never really cared about until recently. If he pussied out now, if he dumped this responsibility on someone else, he’d lose that feeling of…wholeness.

Maybe that was the wrong word, but that’s how he felt when he looked around him. He felt whole for the first time since he could remember. He, Felicity, McKenna, Brandon; they felt whole. Yes, the lion’s share of it was squarely on him, but they helped balance out the load. What hurt was realizing that Ollie…

He looked at the other man again, his expression open and laidback as ever, and knew that, for the first time, he was having to go out into battle without his brother at his back. For such a seemingly small moment, it was pretty fucking profound.

He looked to Brandon and nodded, “Go ahead.”

The other man hesitated for just a moment before nodding in return. He looked down at Felicity, his expression as serious as it had ever been, and spoke in quiet but firm tones, “Candy flipping is when you mix Molly and LSD,” Brandon told her. “People like mixing MDMA with lots of stuff because it’s usually a pretty mellow high and it’s a psychedelic so it adds to the entertainment value of the experience. When you candy flip though, because you’re dealing with two types of psychedelics, some people have a bad trip but, then again, sometimes you can do that on Molly alone. I never did,” he told her. “I had a bad trip on ‘shrooms once and the first time I did weed I got a little paranoid, but I never really had anything bad happen to me. I guess that makes me one lucky son of a bitch because, God knows, I did a lot of stupid shit,” he said with a sober expression. “I never shot up or anything, but I’ve done coke and some other stuff. Never did heroin but was offered it, never did base either.” He looked at her, “That’s basically a better quality of crack.”

“Crack?” she repeated wide-eyed and Tommy began to regret his decision but held back and let Brandon finish.

“Yeah,” he told her. “People who use base get really up their own asses if you refer to their shit as crack for some reason so, yeah,” he said rolling his eyes, “stay away from those guys. Anyway, Molly, to me at least, always seemed fairly harmless, kind of like pot, even though I knew it wasn’t. I mean, people do OD and die while flipping or rolling if they don’t know what they’re doing or get a bad cut, but I never had a bad experience on it. I did sweat like a pig and sometimes I had a hard time peeing after, your heart races a bit, and your brain stops working right for a while so, after you come down, you glitch out and might be a little forgetful for a day or two. Then there’s what happened to Queen,” he said, glancing at Ollie, “Not to poke fun again, man; I’m just using what happened to you as an example,” he looked to Felicity again. “People on Hug, Molly, Candy, whatever they call it, are so filled with this feeling of connection and euphoria that it makes everything seem like a good idea. Plus you have all this energy and you want to share the experience, like you just discovered the
key to world peace and you want to shout it from the rooftops, so doing stuff like taking off all of
your clothes and rolling all over some old lady’s lawn can happen, especially if you don’t have a
spotter to take care of you.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely a downer right there,” Ollie said wryly.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is…Tommy’s right,” he said at last. “I’m not going to be a hypocrite
and say all drugs are evil, or that dropping acid will melt your brain, or rolling on Molly will make
you eat someone’s face off, or turn you into a junkie instantly, but if you don’t know what you’re
doing or if someone slips you something bad, it could kill you; it’s a risk,” he said seriously. “You
need to be able to trust your dealer and most dealers, as a rule, aren’t the most trustworthy of guys.
They’re selling drugs and getting you hooked so they can make money is the point. Sometimes
they’ll cut it with something hard to get you into the habit of coming back, sometimes you just have
some dumbass who figured that since he uses he can cook too and he doesn’t know what the hell
he’s doing. The thing is, always be safe. If you know where to look there’s lots of places around here
that sell kits to test it to make sure that’s what you’re getting. Still, most of the time people who do
drugs, people like me, they don’t bother. All they want is the high so they can feel good and damn
the consequences,” he said meeting her eyes directly, “They do it because they don’t have anything
else going on that’s important enough not to take those kinds of risks. You, on the other hand, don’t
need it; you have plenty going on without it.”

Ollie looked at all of them with a frown and stepped back a little as Brandon spoke, removing
himself from the tight circle and looking around for Laurel. Tommy noted the movement as well as
the uncertainty and confusion in his eyes as if, like him, he was starting to realize that something
fundamental had changed within their group and he wasn’t sure if he liked it.

Unlike the decision the rest of them had obviously made to go forward, Ollie…something told him
that Ollie wasn’t quite there yet. Maybe eventually but not now.

“Thank you,” Felicity smiled up to Brandon, her eyes shining with gratitude and that soft, warm
compassion that she always seemed to radiate.

“You’re welcome,” he told her with a crooked grin. “Also, even though I said I wasn’t going to be a
hypocrite, I lied; don’t do drugs because, if you do, I’ll break your neck.”

“Seconded,” McKenna snorted.

“Thirded,” Tommy said taking a shaky breath and realized he had been holding it through most of
what Brandon was telling her.
Damn, maybe he was becoming a dad.

“Got it,” she nodded, “And I’m not going to do drugs, I promise. I know everybody says that but that glitching out thing you mentioned…” She shook her head, “Nuh huh, I like my brain cells too much. Being the smartest person in the room is my version of getting high,” she grinned.

“Yeah, well, take it from me; it’s better to be stupid and sober than dumb and on drugs,” Brandon joked.

“You’re not stupid,” Felicity objected. “I hacked your records; your grades are lots better than Tommy or Ollie’s. I didn’t even have to change them or anything.”

“Wait, what?” Ollie burst out, joining the group again as he stepped towards her in confusion, “Are you saying that you’re the one who changed my grades?” His eyebrows drew together and he frowned, “Damn, no wonder. I kept sweating balls, waiting for my mom to drop the hammer and say she had to pay somebody to clean up my mess again, and this whole time it was you? Why?”

“I had to,” she told him. “I didn’t want to risk you and Tommy not being able to get into Harvard.”

“Why would you care if I got into Harvard?” he asked in confusion. “You didn’t even know me.”

“Because I’m going to MIT and I figured that if Tommy got into Harvard we could hang out together but since you’re his best friend I knew he wouldn’t want to go without you,” she explained.

He stared at her, “Oh.”

“That explains a lot,” McKenna said wryly. At Ollie’s glare she snorted, “What? Did you really think you could take off to Guadalajara during midterms and pass? And I don’t even want to talk about what you did during finals,” she said rolling her eyes, “When I found out you managed to pull that off I was pissed. I had to bust my ass to keep my grades up last year in order to keep my scholarship. I figured your parents must’ve paid someone off, but this,” she waved at Felicity, “Yeah, this makes more sense, plus it’s cute, so now I’m not as pissed at you anymore.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ollie grumbled.
Tommy, on the other hand, was looking between Brandon and Felicity in confusion, “His grades were better than ours? Before or after you changed them?”

“Both,” she told him.

“Really?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yep,” she said pertly as she put her hands behind her back and bounced on her toes slightly, “In fact, he’s consistently had a 3.9 or higher since kindergarten.”

All three of his friends looked to Brandon in surprise.

“No way,” Ollie said disbelievingly.

“You’re a straight A student?” McKenna said slowly.

“Okay, this…” Tommy squinted at the other man, “This is a joke, right? You guys are pulling our legs.”

“It’s not a joke,” Brandon told them. “School’s just never been that big of a deal for me,” he shrugged. “I mean, I partied a lot, yeah, but unlike you and Ollie, I always showed up for class and managed to keep sober during school hours. No offense,” he added. “It’s just that the whole reason I threw so many parties on the weekends and during break was so that I wouldn’t have to deal with the quiet, y’know?” he said off-handedly. “Having to sit in a quiet house just…” he made a noise, “it drives me buggy, so why would I skip school? The only place I could really go is home or something and since most everybody I knew and wanted to hang out with was in class, I just went.”

“Oh,” McKenna said faintly. “Yeah, that makes sense…I guess.”

He looked to Felicity, “My question is why you were checking my grades in the first place? Ollie, sure, but why me?”
“I looked at yours later,” she admitted. “Tommy told me I wasn’t allowed to change his or Ollie’s grades anymore—“

“Dude,” Ollie burst out, “Why would you stop her from doing that?”

“Just—shut up and listen,” he told him.

“Anyway, I knew that if Ollie and Tommy got into Harvard and you didn’t, you’d feel left out, so I wanted you to get in, too. Plus, by then, you were my friend, too, and I didn’t want to lose you.”

“Wow,” Brandon’s mouth fell open slightly, “Thank you,” he said as soon as he could find the words.

“You’re welcome, and I really appreciate you answering my questions without treating me like I’m stupid or just a kid. A lot of people would have but you didn’t so I want you to know that means a lot to me,” she told him before turning to Ollie, “As for what happened to you and the gnome lady; look, I know drugs are bad and you shouldn’t have done what you did, but it also shouldn’t matter who her nephew is because what she did was wrong,” Felicity insisted, “Yeah, you should have made better choices but that doesn’t mean she had a right to treat you like that and you shouldn’t have had to buy her anything. She should be punished for that because she lied to the judge and that’s a crime, too.”

“I told my lawyer the same thing but he said no one would believe me,” he said with a soft smile. “Doesn’t matter though, it’s done. Now I’m free and she can enjoy all the creepy little gnomes she wants and I never have to see her again.” He paused, “Well, except for if she’s in her yard when I’m picking up Laurel but then I usually just flip her the bird and that helps.”

“Wait, are you talking about old Mrs. Nudocerdo?” McKenna asked wrinkling her nose. “Oh God, she is a horrible—“ she turned to Felicity, “You know that wicked witch who lures little kids to her house to bake them in the oven?” She nodded. “That’s her. Not literally, but if she thought she could get away with it, she would be baking kids into pies all day long,” she scowled darkly, “She lives down the road from our house in that old subdivision in this creepy white house with narrow windows that look like they’re staring at you, kind of like the Amityville house. I remember this one time when we were kids, me, Sara, and Laurel were walking from my place to theirs and we had to pass by her house….” She blew out an angry breath, “She had this shitty little Yorkie named ‘Toto’ and she would sic it on us. One day it chased after us while Sara was on her board and she sort of ran it over a little.”

“Sara ran over her dog with a skateboard?” Tommy asked incredulously.
“Not a lot,” she said quickly, “just a little—in fact, not even that. It was more like the little shit was trying to take a chunk out of her ankle and Sara stepped back on the board to get away and it caught the little monster and…” she whistled under her breath and made an arching gesture with her finger, “Right back over the rainbow—didn’t even hurt it or anything, just scared it a little. Anyway,” she said rolling her eyes, “she called the cops on us and wanted us to be brought into custody to do a line-up; the whole nine yards. She said we tortured her dog and that I was some kind of Mexican gang banger or something.” She scowled, “Yeah, did I mention she’s a racist, too? Luckily my dad defused the situation by reminding her that her dog wasn’t on a leash and if she pressed charges then he’d have to call animal control since it bit Sara on the ankle before she catapulted it back over the fence.” Her lips curled back in a sneer, “That old hag still stares at us when we pass her house holding that nasty little dog like she’s thinking of putting a hex on us or something. I keep waiting for her to send her flying monkeys after us, seriously.”

“Her flying monkeys are what forced me to be her garden slave for three months,” Ollie grumbled.

“Hey, Felicity?” Laurel called out, walking over to them with Sara.

The younger girl looked up curiously, “Yeah?”

“Our mom was working on a paper and her laptop messed up or something,” the older girl told her. “Do you think you could fix it?”

“Yeah,” Sara said stuffing her hands in her pockets and shrugging, “I’m pretty good with a computer but I’ve done all I can do over the phone and, truth be told, I’m out of ideas. Would you mind stopping by our house and looking at it?”

“You want me to come to your house?” Felicity asked, her expression tensing slightly.

“Yeah, would that be okay?” Laurel asked her.

She looked at Tommy, her eyes filling with apprehension. Confused, Tommy automatically stepped closer to her and put his hand on her shoulder but, before he could ask what was wrong, she spoke, “Is your dad going to be there?”

“Shouldn’t be,” Laurel said with a frown. “He had to go down to the station and do some paperwork, said he’d be gone all day. Why? Is that a problem?”
“Let’s just say your dad and I have met,” Tommy said wryly. Instead of relaxing though, Felicity continued to look worried for some reason.

“He won’t be there,” Sara assured them. “He’s so far behind on his paperwork he said he’d be lucky to get home by midnight. So are you coming?”

She looked to him again and he tightened his hand on her shoulder reassuringly, “Do you want to go?”

“I guess,” she said quietly before looking back at Sara and Laurel nervously, “Tommy can come, too, right?”

“Yeah,” Sara shrugged. “In fact, you can all come; Mom won’t care.”

“Well, if you’re going home then Ollie and I are taking off,” Laurel told her as she looped her arm through her boyfriend’s, “Tell Mom I won’t be home for dinner.”

“Why don’t you call her and tell her yourself?” Sara asked acerbically.

“Because my battery is low and I need to recharge it,” Laurel said with a suggestive look towards Ollie who leered in response.

Her sister made a disgusted noise, “Gross; fine, whatever.”

“Oh, and tell Mom that I plan to be home late,” Laurel gave Ollie another come hither look, “Very late.”

“Use protection,” Sara said to Ollie flatly.

The other girl’s head whipped around in outrage, “Sara!”
“What? It’s good advice,” the younger girl drawled. “After all, dad does own a gun.”

Ollie’s mouth fell open slightly at that and he started to say something when Laurel grabbed his arm and tugged him towards the door, “Come on, Ollie. *We*,” she emphasized with a pointed look towards her sister, “have more important things to do than deal with my baby sister and her jealousy.”

“Jealousy?” Ollie repeated, glancing over at a now thoroughly red-faced Sara as her sister dragged him away.

“I hate her,” Sara pouted as the trudged outside and they all began to pile into Brandon’s Jag.

“I know, honey,” McKenna said patting her hand comfortingly.

Felicity looked up at Tommy with a frown, “Teenage girls are really, really…” she paused, “intense.”

He sighed, opening the door for her, “Tell me about it.”

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