Renegades

by MusicWritesMyLife

Summary

When Felicity Smoak accidentally stumbles upon a half-naked Oliver Queen at a Christmas party, she never expects to be doling out life advice, much less hacking every database for information about his whereabouts five years later.

When Felicity Smoak crashes into Oliver Queen's life, he never expects she might have the answers he's been looking for, let alone that he'd spend the next five years on a deserted island wondering if he'll ever see her again.

Neither of them imagined they'd be living double lives to keep their city safe.

(Sometimes, life just throws you a curveball.)

*ON HIATUS*

Notes

Basically, this is a massive reimagining/headcanon of the Arrow universe. It allows me to change the few things that I didn't like with the first two (possibly three) seasons and explore some questions that may seem a little overdone but have bugged me since I started watching the show: What if Oliver and Felicity met before the island? What if they started
Dating in S1 and not S3? How could these changes affect the course of the story?

This story will follow the skeleton of the show. None of the major events have been changed (I'm not ambitious/brave enough to change everything, nor do I believe everything would be changed in my universe), but many things have been altered. The stakes are different. The relationships may change. I'm not 100% sure where it's going to go, but I've loved exploring it so far, and have no plans to stop.

I know that this project is a massive undertaking. I can't promise it will be updated regularly; I'll try to space the updating of banked chapters so that I don't run out, but in all honesty, updates will probably become less frequent as the story progresses, particularly once school begins.

The title of this work is shamelessly borrowed from the X Ambassadors song, which I can't stop listening to, but I also think is strangely appropriate for this whole show.
Felicity Smoak meets Oliver Queen under the most awkward of circumstances.

**Renegade**

*noun.*

1. a person who leaves one group and joins another that opposes it
2. an individual who rejects lawful or conventional behaviour

**Saturday, December 23rd, 2006**

The Queen Christmas party was both elegant and festive—and way out of Felicity’s league. When Robert Queen sent out the message over company-wide email she thought that it would be a nice way to ring in the holidays—even though she doesn't celebrate Christmas—instead of sitting alone in her hotel room, but now that she was here she realised the invitation was more of a courtesy; the only QC employees who actually showed up were the big-wig business men with tailored suits and wives involved with ten different charity organisations. Standing at the bar in the dress she got last year on sale at Bloomingdale’s, Felicity felt like a fish out of water. Her coworkers from IT were all probably at a bar downtown, telling jokes over cheap drinks and singing bad Christmas karaoke.

Trying her best not to look as out of place as she felt, Felicity drained what was probably the most expensive glass of wine she’d ever had and sidled away from the bar.

(If she had any more wine she’d end up making a very embarrassing scene later in the evening.)

All she wanted to do was find the bathroom—stressful situations seemed to make her bladder work overtime—and go home. She’d put on her pyjamas and curl up on the couch with a pint of mint chip and *Buffy* and forget this night ever happened.

A quick glance around the hallway revealed no sign of any bathrooms. Too uncomfortable to ask for directions, Felicity climbed the stairs. If there were bathrooms anywhere in this house (which was really better described as a mini-castle) they’d probably be upstairs. Out of sight, out of mind. Rich people probably liked to pretend they didn't ever have to go pee.

The doors lining the hallway upstairs were all closed, so Felicity, being Felicity, decided to use her default trial and error method (because it had worked so well in the past). Taking a deep breath (there was really nothing to be scared of), she opened the first door she saw…

…and saw Oliver Queen wrestling half-naked in bed with a girl. Who was definitely not his girlfriend.

(Felicity had a weakness for celebrity gossip, and Laurel was downstairs talking to Tommy Merlyn by the champagne bar.)

“Oh my God.”
She really should have asked for directions.

“Oh my God!” The girl, who was very blonde and looked very familiar, stumbled away from Oliver, her eyes the size of saucers.

Oliver stared.

Felicity opened and closed her mouth twice but neither time no sound came out. This was beyond embarrassing.

The blonde girl bolted from the room with nothing but a panicked glance in Oliver’s direction, wiggling into her dress as she went.

“I’m so sorry,” Felicity stammered, wishing the ground would open her up and swallow her. “I was, uh, looking for the bathrooms, which I know is the lamest excuse ever but it’s actually true and I should have asked only rich people are kind of terrifying and I was really hoping to sneak out without being noticed which has just backfired spectacularly in my face and—oh my God, you’re not wearing any pants.”

The corners of Oliver’s mouth twitched. Felicity tried very hard not to stare at his black boxer briefs. Or the very fit legs coming out of said briefs. Better to focus on his chest, which was still covered by his shirt (unbuttoned enough to give her a very good idea of what was going on under there).

“Bathroom is down the hall. Third door on the left.”

“Oh, uh, right.” Felicity swallowed. Her cheeks were probably the same colour as the roasted tomato entrées downstairs. “Thanks. And sorry again for walking in on you.”

Oliver combed a hand through his hair, suddenly very interested in the stitching pattern of the duvet. “It’s fine.”

Felicity really should have walked away. But the expression on Oliver’s face was so heartbreaking she couldn’t help taking a step closer. He looked like his whole world had imploded and he had no idea what to do about it. “Are you okay?”

Oliver blinked, raising his head to stare at her in disbelief.

“I don’t mean to pry or anything,” she continued, “but you seemed pretty unhappy and well, I know that girl wasn’t your girlfriend because she’s downstairs talking to Tommy Merlyn—and I only know who she is because I read the tabloids sometimes—okay, maybe a lot of the time—not because I’m, you know, a stalker or anything.”

(If the Queen mansion were to be suddenly engulfed in flames, Felicity would not object.)

“Anyway, I thought you might need someone to talk to,” she finished lamely, “but I’ve had a few too many drinks and I’m not exactly thinking straight so I’ll just go. Sorry.”

“Laurel’s going to kill me.”

She’d barely made it to the door before his voice stopped her in her tracks. She turned slowly, trying not to think about how much she was going to regret this. “Laurel’s the, uh, girlfriend, right?”

Oliver nodded, watching his fingers twist themselves into knots. “She’s going to kill me when she
finds out about this. And Sara. I’ve messed everything up.”

(Sara must be the blonde who’d snuck out moments before.)

Felicity took a deep breath, perching cautiously on the mattress. She couldn't believe she was actually going to do this. Playing therapist to Oliver Queen was not something she ever thought she’d find herself doing, and yet, here she was.

“You know, maybe if you just talked to her about it, she might deal with it a little better. I mean, no one’s going to take the news their boyfriend’s cheated on them well, but it’ll be better than her finding out some other way.” Like catching you in the act.

Oliver shook his head. “No way. If I tell her Sara and I—That would make things ten times worse.”

Felicity chewed her lip, trying to bite back the question burning on the tip of her tongue. “Why did you even do it? If you and Laurel are so happy, why throw it all away?”

So much for keeping it to herself.

Oliver groaned, collapsing backwards onto the bed. Felicity was pretty sure he was drunk, otherwise there was no way he’d be spilling his secrets to a total stranger. “She wants to move in together.”

And just like that, the whole story came out. How he wasn’t that guy who committed; he was the guy who slept around and threw great keg parties. How Laurel wanted them to get their own place and Oliver had panicked because he wasn’t ready for the next step. How instead of talking to Laurel like a normal human being and asking her to take things slow, he’d slept with her sister because, while he wasn’t good at commitment, he was excellent at making a mess of things.

Felicity had to admit, as far as stories went, this was pretty bad. Like epically bad—enough to make her past humiliations look like a walk in the park (and there had been many embarrassing moments in the Life and Times of Felicity Smoak). She couldn't exactly say it was a surprise—this was exactly the kind of thing someone with Oliver’s reputation would do—but the hopeless look on Oliver’s face broke her heart a little. He wasn’t sleeping around because he could, but because it seemed like the only way to get himself out of an impossible situation. It was extremely masochistic.

She didn’t know how it happened, but a bottle of wine appeared somehow, and suddenly they were reclined on the pillows swapping embarrassing college stories. Oliver had an impressive number for someone who dropped out of four Ivy League schools.

(Then again, she shouldn't be surprised.)

Felicity was telling Oliver all about her mortifying first-day-of-MIT-calculus experience when he shook his head incredulously. “I don’t understand how someone like you ended up at this party in the first place,” he said, frowning. “Only the company execs come to this party.”

“When I realised after I got here,” Felicity groaned, trying not to giggle as she recalled the experience. (She’d definitely had too much wine.) “I’m doing an internship over winter break, you know, to get my foot in the door for jobs, and I don’t really know anybody so I thought this would be a nice way to spend Christmas—not that I celebrate it, I’m Jewish—but obviously I missed the ‘don’t bother showing up unless your sixty and boring memo’.”

Oliver snorted into the wine bottle. (They never really bothered with glasses.) “No kidding. I’m only here because Laurel wants to make connections for her career as a lawyer. Which I am not
going to be a part of.”

“I can see why you’re hiding out. It is very stuffy down there.” Felicity’s attempt at a joke was swallowed in the cloud of self-loathing emanating from one Oliver Queen. “Beats cheap beer and bad karaoke. Not that I’d be having any since I’m not of age—”

Oliver blinked, staring at her like he was seeing her for the first time. “How old are you?”

Felicity blushed, wishing she didn't find this so embarrassing. “Eighteen. Almost eighteen. I’m in second year at MIT.”

“MIT. Wow.” Oliver grinned. “Are you some kind of genius or something?”

Felicity shrugged, picking at a loose thread in the duvet. She’d always hated the word genius; it seemed to carry all this added pressure and expectation. She wasn’t different from everyone else, her brain was just wired for mathematics. “I have a thing for computers.”

“And I have a thing for disaster,” Oliver muttered darkly, staring into the neck of the bottle like it would somehow divulge all the solutions to his current problems.

“I don’t believe that.”

Oliver let out a short bark of sarcastic laughter. “Really? And what is it that you believe then, Miss Smoak?”

“I believe you choose to be a disappointment to everyone because you don’t believe you’re capable of doing anything else.”

Her words were followed by a terrible stillness that made her really wish she could have just kept her mouth shut.

Oliver swirled the remaining contents of the wine bottle slowly, watching the liquid slosh against the glass. After several minutes, when Felicity was beginning to consider creeping for the door, he shook his head slowly.

“You’ve known me for all of five minutes and you can read me better than people who have known me my whole life,” he said softly, amazed.

Felicity stared at her lap, cheeks burning. The three feet of space between them suddenly seemed a lot smaller. “I’m very observant,” she mumbled.

"You're beautiful and smart, and—"

"And you have a girlfriend."

Oliver grimaced. "Not for much longer. Once she finds out about Sara—and she will, Laurel always does—it's over."

"That doesn't mean it's the end, Oliver!" Felicity wasn't quite sure where all her anger was coming from, all she knew was it was spilling out before she could do anything to stop it. "There's more to you than parties and booze and meaningless sex. I know your father probably puts tremendous pressure on you to follow in his footsteps, but just because you don't want to doesn't mean you're a total failure. You can still do things with your life, and you'd probably be a lot happier about it, too."
Oliver opened his mouth as if to say something, only to close it again when no words came out. His expression was impossible to interpret, a strange mixture of shock and something more that filled Felicity's stomach with butterflies. "You really believe that?" he said finally. The vulnerability lingering behind is words made her heart ache for him. While she and her mother hadn't always had the greatest of relationships through the years, Donna had always supported her. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to have everyone telling her she was supposed to try and be something she wasn't.

"Of course I do," she replied gently, reaching over to take the bottle of wine from him. (Not that she wanted any more, but he had had more than enough for the evening, and she was sure that he'd been drinking before.) "My mother is a cocktail waitress in Vegas who doesn't understand the first thing about computers. I never for a second considered following in her footsteps."

"Yeah, but you've always known that you wanted to work with computers," Oliver retorted. "Even if it wasn't what your mother wanted, you knew what you were good at. The only thing I'm good at is getting drunk and making tabloid headlines."

Felicity didn't think it would be helpful to point out that all her mother had really ever wanted was for Felicity to be happy, even if it meant they were living thousands of miles apart.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," she said instead, even though it was absolutely a bad thing. "You could open a nightclub or something."

"You said it yourself—the only thing you're good at is partying. So play to your strengths."

Oliver blinked. "Tommy suggested we do that once, but he was so drunk, I'm not even sure he knew what he was saying."

(Felicity wasn't sure that Oliver knew what he was saying at this point, either.)

"You said it yourself—the only thing you're good at is partying. So play to your strengths."

Oliver rolled over, closing the space between them. "You, Felicity Smoak, are a genius," he mumbled.

(His face was very close, so close that Felicity could see his eyelashes and the faint shadow of stubble on his jaw, but she was really trying not to think about any of it, he was here with Laurel, he was already in enough trouble, and the last thing she needed was to…)

"Ollie!"

Both of them jumped back as if they had received an electric shock.

"Shit," Oliver muttered. "Sorry. It's my sister, Speedy, I mean, Thea. If she—"

"If she sees us, she'll tell everyone and then things with Laurel will definitely be over," Felicity finished, trying not to think about all the horrible things that might happen if they were found, not limited to her losing her job.

( Oliver still wasn’t wearing any pants.)

(At least she still had all her clothes on.)

"Ollie!"

Thea's voice sounded from closer this time and Felicity had to fight the urge to flee. Running out into the hallway at this point where Thea was definitely going to see her was not going to help the
situation.

Oliver must be a mind-reader—which was impressive given his current state of sobriety—because he gestured to the corner of the room. “The closet. She won’t check in there.”

The closet in question was the size of Felicity’s hotel room. She barely made it in there before the door opened and a small head poked in.

“Ollie!” Thea Queen giggled. “You’re not wearing any pants!”

Oliver scratched the back of his neck, looking both embarrassed and desperate for an excuse. “I, uh, was looking for some new ones. I spilt something on mine.”

(Thea must be very gullible; Felicity had never heard a worse lie in her life.)

“And you thought you were going to find them in the spare room?” Thea asked, grinning. “Your room’s two doors down, dummy.”

“Yeah. I know. I was, uh, just going there.”

Thea rolled her eyes. Felicity got the impression this was not the first time she’d come across her brother drunk. “Okay, well, Laurel’s looking for you downstairs. Apparently, Sara really wants to go so I think they’re leaving.”

“Oh.” Felicity wasn’t mistaking the nauseated look on his face. “I’ll be along in a minute, okay, Speedy? I just need to get some pants on.”

Thea’s grin widened. “I’ll tell her.”

It wasn’t until she’d slipped back into the hallway again that Oliver seemed to process what his sister had said. “Thea! Wait! Don’t tell her about the pants!” he shouted, stumbling towards the door, but Thea was already gone.

“Fuck,” he cursed quietly as Felicity slid out of the closet, giggling.

“Have fun explaining that one,” she said.

Oliver’s aim was so off she didn’t need to dodge the pillow he threw at her. (She got the impression it would have been a very different story if he’d been sober.)

The expression of confusion on his face when he missed was enough to make her laugh so hard she nearly peed herself (she’d never ended up making it to the bathroom). By the time she got a hold of herself again, Oliver had sobered.

“I’m sorry about… all this,” he said gesturing at the unmade bed and the empty wine bottle.

“It’s fine, really,” Felicity replied, even though she was sure the sudden echo of her heartbeat meant that things were anything but fine. “I really have to go pee.”

(Shew really had a death wish. One hundred percent. Felicity Smoak was going to die of embarrassment.)

Oliver’s lips twitched. “You never did find that bathroom, did you?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I ended up drinking a lot more wine instead. Which, let me tell you, does
not do anything to help the overcrowding issue in my bladder.”

(In a somewhat more sober state, Felicity might have been a little bit more concerned about the words coming out of her mouth.)

Oliver flashed a real smile, possibly for the first time that evening. “Well, I don’t let me hold you up, Miss Smoak. I’d hate for you to pee on my rug.”

Felicity was trying very hard not to pee herself with laughter as she stumbled to the door. She wasn’t even sure where the bathroom was anymore, but the trip there couldn’t be more embarrassing than it had been the first time. She’d almost made it to the door when Oliver’s voice stopped her again.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “Really. It was— It was—”

“—It was my pleasure.” Felicity’s cheeks were suddenly very warm and all she could think about was how much she either wanted to kiss Oliver senseless or get the hell out of here.

(The tiny part of her brain that was still sober knew that Option Two was the sensible one.)

“Right. Well, I’ll see you around, I guess,” Oliver said, scrubbing a hand over his hair. His fingers left it standing in tufts and Felicity bit back a giggle.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

(They probably wouldn’t.)

(Six months later, as she lay in bed watching news coverage of the Queen’s Gambit’s disappearance, she wished they had.)
First Date, One

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity meet after five years apart and more awkwardness ensues. (Also, Oliver steals a bag of goldfish.)

Thursday, April 19th, 2012

The day Oliver Queen returns from the dead is the day Felicity knows things can never go back to the way they were before.

She’s sort of accepted that things are never going to be exactly like they were five years ago when she arrived in Starling, fresh out of MIT and determined to make a name for herself cracking code and fixing computers—your life can’t be described as completely normal when you spend your spare time tracing sunken yachts and monitoring all international communications channels for news of shipwrecked Americans—but she might someday be able to say she leads a normal life again.

(That’s not possible anymore.)

She’s at her desk when the news comes in. One minute she’s updating the QC firewall, and the next, everyone is crowded around the TV in the break room, watching footage of Oliver Queen being escorted into one of those fancy armoured cars, surrounded by about a hundred reporters.

He looks different. His hair is shorter than she remembers, close-cropped like a soldier’s. Several of the interns cluster by the coffee table, whispering about how hot he is.

“What do you think he’s single?” Felicity hears one of them ask.

“He’s been missing for five years, dummy,” her friend whispers, rolling her eyes. “Something tells me relationships have not been his top priority.”

“All the better. He’ll need somebody to get him caught up.”

“What I think he really needs is for insensitive people like you to leave him alone,” Felicity snaps, hands tightening around her mug. The girls glare at her, affronted, but she rises from her seat, determined not to let them aggravate her anymore. They’re not worth her time. (And they’re certainly not worth Oliver’s).

The next three days are probably the least productive of Felicity’s life. She spends more time reading news stories and watching the CNN coverage of Oliver’s return than anything else. The invasion of his privacy is ridiculous and watching endless reels of reporters badgering him and his family for a comment makes her skin crawl but she can’t turn it off. It’s like one of those stupid MTV teen dramas that were her guilty pleasure as a teenager: total crap but utterly addicting.

She picks up the phone three times to call him, but hangs up every time without punching any numbers. Who is she kidding, there’s no way in the freaking world that Oliver Queen remembers who she is, let alone cares that she’s spent the last five years working overtime to try and pick up
some kind of lead on his whereabouts and gained enough information to believe that he wasn't actually dead like everyone thought he was.

The firewall crashes (again) on Wednesday, and the re-encryption process (which Felicity suggested they implement ages ago) is long and arduous, which explains what she's doing in the office when Oliver Queen appears that afternoon.

"Felicity Smoak?"

For a second, she thinks she's hallucinating. There's no way Oliver Queen is here in her tiny little office and even if he were, there's no way in hell he's calling her by name. Which is why she turns around without removing the red ballpoint pen from between her teeth, only to find Oliver Queen in the flesh, wearing a crisp, dark suit and an uncertain expression.

She immediately snatches the pen out of her mouth, hoping her cheeks aren't burning as much as she thinks they are.

"Hi."

She does her best to sound casual, but her voice comes out squeaky and breathless. She sounds like one of those groupies who hangs outside of nightclubs waiting to meet her idol.

"Hi." It's comforting to know he sounds just as uncomfortable as she feels.

"I, uh—" For once, Felicity has nothing to say. What does one say to someone who's been dead for the last five years and who was a virtual stranger before then? She's pretty sure telling him she's spent the last five years amassing proof he was still alive makes her seem like a stalker. (Considering the fact that the last first impression she made was walking in on him sleeping with his girlfriend's sister and subsequently playing therapist, this is something to be avoided. Not that it shouldn't normally be avoided.) Welcome back seems a little insensitive.

"I probably shouldn't be here," Oliver says, fiddling with the button on his jacket. Felicity tries not to think about how it emphasises the musculature of his chest and shoulders (which she's sure wasn't there five years ago). "You're probably busy."

"I, uh, no!" Felicity lies, trying not to think about all the work that needs to be done now before someone tries to hack the QC network and finds out they can. (In her defence, what do you say when Oliver Queen pops into your office after five years of being officially dead?) "I was just about to grab some lunch, if you want to come. Not that I'm asking you on a date or anything," she adds quickly, "just, you know, as friends. To catch up on things. Like what's happened over the last five years because being dead you've missed out on a lot. Which is very insensitive of me to say. Sorry. I just—"

She catches sight of the amused expression on Oliver's face and swallows. There are many times she wishes she had some sort of mental filter. This is one of those times. "I'm going to stop now."

The corners of Oliver's mouth twitch. "It's almost two o'clock. Isn't that a little late to be getting lunch? Unless that's one of the things I missed while I was away."

She's forgotten about his playful side or how easy it is for him to make her smile. "I like to eat late." Taking a look at Oliver's raised eyebrows, she sighs. "Okay, so maybe I'm a little busy rebuilding the firewall before someone tries to hack the system. You can stay, though. If you're looking for somewhere to, you know, hide or whatever."
"What makes you think I'm hiding?" Oliver asks, frowning.

"Well, unless you've suddenly become heavily invested in the running of the IT department or are having some kind of technology crisis that absolutely requires an expert right now, the only other reason you could be down here is because you know it's the last place on earth anyone will come looking for you. Last time I checked, Oliver Queen didn't know the first thing about computer systems."

He chuckles, running a hand through his hair. Felicity clenches her fingers to keep herself from reaching out and touching it. "I've been gone five years and you can still read me like a book."

Felicity swallows. She's forgotten how blue his eyes are. And how quickly he can give her butterflies. "You're not a hard man to figure out, Mr. Queen. No offence."

"None taken," he replies smoothly. "And please call me Oliver. Mr Queen is my father."

"Right, but he's dead." Felicity claps a hand over her mouth, wishing she could take back the words. "I mean he drowned."

(Why does her brain seem to completely malfunction every time she tries to make sensible conversation?)

"But you didn't, which means you can come down here and listen to me babble. Which will end. In 3...2...1..."

If there is ever a time Felicity would love to be struck by lightning, it's now. The only small comfort is the smile on Oliver's face.

"What are you working on?" he asks, peering curiously at her work station. He must be trying to put her out of her misery; there's no way he's actually interested in listening to her talk about the many updates she's needed to perform on the firewall. Even her coworkers are tired of listening to her talk about it.

"Fixing the firewall. Well, really I'm re-encrypting it, which should have been done like a year ago but fell through the cracks because some people thought there were higher priorities than basic security." The relief of being able to talk about something she understands is so great she almost forgets that she is talking to the prodigal son miraculously returned from the dead and not her boss, or at least someone with a rudimentary understanding of computers.

Oliver however, looks interested. "Shouldn't that be a priority?"

Felicity rolls her eyes. "Yeah, but my boss has other ideas apparently. They want all the focus to be on the new, shiny things Applied Sciences is churning out. Apparently the firewall can take care of itself. It can't, for the record."

That tiny smile flashes again. "My knowledge of computers may be limited, but I do know some things."

“Right.” She picks an imaginary speck of lint off her skirt and tries to will the blush off her cheeks. “Sorry.”

It suddenly occurs to her that she’s being an extremely bad host. He probably hasn't had anything to eat and here she is babbling about rudimentary computer security. "I, uh, have some crackers in the bottom drawer of my desk if you're hungry."
(It occurs to her after the fact that maybe she should have considered the mess that is her filing cabinet first.)

She tries valiantly to continue with her programming, heart pounding in her chest as she listens to him rummage around in her drawer, but she can’t help imagining all the horribly embarrassing things she’s stashed in there over her years working at QC. This visit has already been awkward enough, she doesn’t need it to be made any worse by having Oliver stumble across her post-it collection or those stupid celebrity gossip magazines she keeps for emergency distraction sessions.

She’s about to tell him not to worry, she can run down and grab some tea biscuits from the break room or something when he emerges, looking at the bag of goldfish crackers with a bemused expression.

“What?” she snaps, somewhat more defensively than she intended. “They’re really cheap at Wal-Mart.”

Oliver smirks, reaching in and pulling out a handful of crackers. “I haven’t had these since I was a kid,” he says, staring at the bag like he’s surprised they’re still being stocked.

“Yeah, well some things never go out of style,” Felicity retorts.

“No kidding.”

Their eyes meet and Felicity finds the pit of her stomach is suddenly around her knees. She knows she should look away—if only because she really needs to work on programming this encryption and not because getting attached to Oliver Queen (again) is a monumentally bad idea—but his eyes have this irresistible magnetism that hooks her in and refuses to let go.

The sound of a phone ringing shatters the silence, and they both look away. Oliver fumbles in the pocket of his coat apologetically, trying to free his phone and end that god-awful ringing. Felicity turns back to her computer screen, hoping to hide the blush flaming across her cheeks. This is a terrible idea. Inviting Oliver into her cubicle in the first place probably wasn’t the smartest—though it wasn't exactly like she could say no—but exchanging long, romantic stares across her computer console is definitely the worst idea she’s ever had.

“Mom. Hi. I was just, uh—I’m in IT.”

Felicity bites her lip to try and hide a smile. Oliver is almost as bad at lying on the spot as she is. (Which is strange because she’s pretty sure he has lying down to science. Maybe he’s just out of practice.)

“Uh, visiting a friend. Yeah. Sure. I’ll be up in a second.” He’s already apologising before he hangs up the phone.

Felicity smiles. It’s cute. He’s cute. And really sweet. Of course he’s not the same playful, lost puppy guy she met at the QC Christmas party five years ago, the one who was drunk and in way over his head in the relationship department, but there are traces of that boy that five years of isolation haven't quite managed to erase.

“It’s fine,” she says, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “I get it. You've got places to be, people to see, reporters to avoid. It’s not every day the prodigal son comes back from the dead. Or the only son. Not to say that you’re not the prodigal son even though you’re the only son—You know what? I’m done. It was nice seeing you.”
"Yeah." Oliver smiles like he's surprised himself. "It was. Take care, Felicity."

"Uh, thanks. You too." She doesn't know what else to say. What does one say?

It's not until he's gone that she realises he's taken the goldfish with him. Her heart mourns the loss of her precious meal replacement, but the thought of the look on Moira Queen's face when her son emerges from IT with a bag of goldfish in his hand more than makes up for it.
Neither Oliver nor Felicity really intended on going to Oliver's welcome home party, but fate has other ideas.

(Or the one where Felicity finds herself giving relationship advice—again—and Oliver realises he's not immune to the green-eyed monster after all.)

Felicity isn’t sure what she was thinking when she agreed to let Sophia drag her to Oliver Queen’s welcome back party.

(Correction. She knows exactly what she was thinking, but given that it’s completely irrational that Oliver should have any feelings towards her after all this time—if he ever had any at all—she’s electing to ignore those thoughts.)

“It’s not like you ever have a night out,” Sophia explained, as they sat in the back of the cab. “And since Candice couldn’t come—which is such a shame, oh my God, she would have loved it—I thought it would be fun for us to do something together. We never hang out anymore.”

(They haven’t hung out in years, with good reason. In fact, the only time they ever spent any time together was at the QC mixer three years ago when Felicity was first hired. She doesn’t have anything in common with the HR girls.)

The party is loud, dark, and packed with girls in tiny dresses; exactly the kind of thing Felicity promised herself she would avoid after college. Sophia disappears within minutes—so much for wanting to hang out—onto the dance floor, leaving Felicity to shover her way to the bar.

If she’s going to stay here, she might as well have a drink.

There must be a God up there somewhere, because not only is the party open bar but the drinks are free.

(Then again this is hardly a surprise when your host is Tommy Merlyn.)

Felicity orders a whisky on the rocks, not because she’s a fan of whisky, but because it’s probably
the quickest way to get herself drunk other than shots.

“A lady who means business. I like it.”

Felicity turns, about to give this pretentious jerk a piece of her mind (she’s really not interested in being hit on, not now or ever), only to find herself face-to-face with one grinning Tommy Merlyn.

(He’s a lot more handsome in person.)

“You know, for someone with your reputation, I would have expected some better pickup lines,” she says drily, sipping her whisky and trying not to say anything embarrassing.

(It would be really horrible if Tommy got the wrong idea.)

Tommy lifts one shoulder in a casual shrug. “They’re usually more interested in the charming good looks. The lines are just a package deal.”

“Must be a sad package.”

The minute the words are out of Felicity’s mouth, she wishes she could take them back.

(Or die. Really, that might be preferable.)

“That was not at all what I wanted to say.”

Tommy laughs. “Wouldn’t be the first time. Probably won’t be the last.”

“Yeah, well that still doesn’t help my New Year’s resolution to not constantly be making a fool of myself.”

Felicity takes a large gulp of her drink and nearly chokes as the whisky burns its way down her throat.

“I gave up on that one a long time ago,” Tommy says easily, propping himself against the bar on one elbow.

It’s funny. She’s always imagined Tommy to be some roguish troublemaker, armed with a charming smile and the keys to a Maserati, but he really isn’t very different from the boy who stole her heart at a party five years ago, only with fewer masochistic tendencies.

“You know, you’re the second girl I’ve ever met who hasn’t been impressed by my charm,” Tommy says, scooting a little closer. Felicity stands as still as possible, hoping not to give off the wrong impression—she has no idea if Tommy is trying to come onto her or just being friendly.

“Really? Who was the first?”

Tommy shrugs nonchalantly, but Felicity sees his eyes slide across the room and settle on the curvaceous figure of one Laurel Lance, chatting with a couple girls by the speakers and looking like she’d really rather be anywhere else. Try as he might to play it cool, Felicity recognises the look in his eyes all too well; she’s seen it a hundred times before in paparazzi snapshots of Laurel and Oliver.

(She’s not proud of the mild stalker phase she went through after the Christmas party six years ago.)

Tonight is not the first time Felicity has found herself wondering what it is that Laurel Lance has
that makes all the boys flock to her like moths to a flame. Obviously, it’s not something Felicity has, or there’d be more ex-boyfriends in the picture. Or boyfriends, period.

(She doesn’t count the look on Oliver’s face that night years ago; he was too drunk to have any idea what he was doing.)

“Laurel doesn’t take crap from anyone,” Tommy continues.

“Which is why you find her so irresistible?”

Tommy chuckles nervously. “What?”

Felicity rolls her eyes. He can play the innocent all he wants, but Felicity knows all too well what it like to pine for someone you can’t have and pretend not to feel anything. “Seriously? You’re going to look me straight in the eye and tell me there’s nothing going on between the two of you? Because the look in your eyes when you see her tells a completely different story—like not even in the same book.”

“Even if there were, she’s not interested,” Tommy mutters, cheeks turning pink. He must be drunk; otherwise, Felicity is sure that there is no way he would be telling her this.

(Oh for crying out loud. What is it with her and playing the matchmaker to immature playboys?)

“Have you talked to her about it?”

Another half-hearted shrug. “She’s got a lot on her mind lately.”

Felicity doesn’t miss the subtext: since Oliver’s back in town.

She’s thought a lot about where her relationship with Oliver is going to go since their run-in at QC. With that has come a lot of thinking about the beautiful Miss Lance and the fact that Oliver is probably still not over her. (Because let’s be real here, Laurel is incredibly beautiful and smart and Felicity wouldn’t be over her either, if she were so inclined.)

(Oh for crying out loud. What is it with her and playing the matchmaker to immature playboys?)

(She’s really happy to just be friends with him. Obviously, it’s not what she wants deep down in her heart of hearts—or in her ovaries, but she really doesn’t want to think about it because then it might come out of her mouth and that would be beyond embarrassing—but she’s learned over the last five years meticulously tracking Oliver’s presence through shady online backdoors—she knows he wasn’t on that island for five years, no matter what the media says; the real question is what he was doing in all those places—that being with him in any capacity is better than not being with him at all. So if he’s still not over Laurel, then she’s okay with it. Or she will be. Eventually.)

“Besides, I’m not exactly her type.”

“Really? Because last I heard her type was billionaire playboys with fidelity issues, and you fit that to a tee.”

Obviously, the whisky is doing its job. A little too well, in Felicity’s opinion.

“Sorry. That was— Wow. I’m sorry.”

Tommy, mercifully, laughs. “I’ve been called a lot worse.”

“Good.” Laughter bubbles up out of her chest, allowing an escape for the nervous tension bottled in her chest. She really needs to stop coming to these things. It’s not doing anything to help her
sanity. “I mean not good that you’ve been called worse things, but good that I didn’t offend you because I tend to do that a lot, not on purpose obviously, but well, because I talk to much, which is exactly what I’m doing right now. Sorry.”

“Felicity?”

Felicity doesn’t need to turn around to know that Oliver is standing behind her. She also knows exactly how this must look to him—or anyone else around for that matter.

Crap.

The party is not his idea. In fact, it’s the last thing Oliver wants to be doing right now. Obviously, maintaining his image as a careless playboy is important to divert suspicion, but he has more important things to be worrying about right now. Like diverting forty million dollars from Adam Hunt without getting caught.

(He wishes he could use that as an excuse for being a total ass to Laurel, but he knows it’s not. He needs her far away if he’s going to continue with this crusade.)

Even once he’s managed to get the money without being killed and the SCPD are blissfully unaware of his involvement, he can’t seem to enjoy himself. There’s not enough of the old Oliver left to care and the effort of pretending is exhausting.

He’s trying to come up with an excuse to escape as he makes his way through the throngs on the dance floor to the bar, where he can see Tommy chatting up some beautiful blonde in a short, black dress. He can’t see her face, but he swears he’s seen that dress somewhere before.

Tommy says something and she laughs, tipping her head enough to give Oliver a view of her profile.

Felicity.

Oliver doesn’t know why he didn’t recognise her sooner—that dress isn’t one he’s inclined to forget.

(He can’t help wondering if she wore it on purpose.)

He’s crossed to the bar in moments, all thoughts of escape gone. The sight of Felicity and Tommy laughing together at the bar has roused a beast inside of him that he thought was long dead, and it’s more than happy to rear it’s green head in defence of its own.

“Felicity?”

Felicity starts, cheeks flaming. “Oliver! Hi!”

Tommy’s grin is open and easy. Oliver wants to punch him. “You didn’t tell me you two knew each other, Ollie. If I’d known, I would have sent out an invitation myself.”

“It’s fine. Really,” Felicity stammers, looking distinctly uncomfortable. “I didn’t think I’d see you here—not because you wouldn’t be here, obviously it’s your party, where else would you be?—and I didn’t even want to come—not because I didn’t think it would be a great party but it’s not really my scene and I didn’t know anybody going—other than you, but I didn’t think I’d see you and this is really embarrassing. I’m going to stop now. Sorry.”
The smirk on Tommy’s face makes Oliver a little uncomfortable, but it’s probably only because he thinks Felicity might be the one to end his 1,839 day dry spell and not because he suspects anything between them.

(As much as he might like to do those sorts of things to Felicity, it won’t be now. Maybe not ever. And certainly not as a means to an end.)

“Felicity here was just giving me some valuable relationship advice,” Tommy continues, blissfully oblivious to the tense undercurrent. Oliver has always loved his best friend’s ability to completely overlook things sometimes, but now, he wishes Tommy were paying more attention.

“You should take it,” Oliver replies brusquely, not interested in knowing what Felicity has told him or why Tommy is seeking relationship advice in the first place. (Last he checked, relationships were the bottom of Tommy’s priority list.)

Felicity’s cheeks are flushing deeper by the second; she looks as though she’d rather be anywhere but here.

“I might just do that.” Tommy claps a hand on Oliver’s shoulder, smirk twisting into a full-blown grin. “In the meantime, however, I need to go speak to the DJ about putting a little more 2012 in his mix and less 2001. I mean, I’m a huge Shaggy fan, but you’ve got a lot of catching up to do. Speaking of, I’ll leave you two. Nice chatting with you, Felicity.”

He shoots Oliver a lascivious wink over his shoulder as he pushes through the crowd.

Felicity cringes, downing the rest of her drink—which looks suspiciously like whisky—and gestures hurriedly at the bartender for another. “That was not at all what it looked like.”

“Really? And what, exactly, did it look like?”

He was definitely talked into doing too many vodka shots by those two supermodels after he sent the SCPD packing otherwise he’d never be so callous. He’s always been better at practicing indifference than anger.

A dangerous spark flashes in Felicity’s eyes. She’s still got no time for his crap.

(Some things never change.)

“I don’t need any judgement from you, Oliver. Frankly, you’re the last person on the planet who should be judging people, given your history and all that.”

Oliver can see the exact moment when she realises the knife she’s unintentionally twisted in his breast because her anger dissolves slightly. To his relief, however, she doesn’t back down. He’s not interested in pretending to be fine anymore.

“I’m not judging you,” he retorts sharply. “It’s your life. Do what you want.”

“I think I will,” she snaps, snatching her clutch of the bar. The bartender appears at her elbow with another whisky, which she swipes off the bar before shouldering her way past him. The old Oliver might have winced at the impact, but Oliver feels nothing but the wet splash of whisky as the contents of Felicity’s tumbler slosh over the both.

“Really?” she cries in exasperation, trying to wipe off the worst of the liquid with her fingers.

(Oliver doesn’t even bother to salvage his shirt. He’s got three different colours of lipstick on his
collar, and a closet full of shirts just like it. It won't be missed.)

Felicity's dress, on the other hand, is not disposable—whether because of sentiment or financial need, Oliver isn't sure, all he knows is she's worn it to both the formal occasions they've attended—so Oliver snags a handful of napkins off the bar and presses them to the large damp spot on Felicity's bosom.

"Here," he mutters, trying unsuccessfully to shake the residual anger from earlier. He's not even really sure what he was angry about anymore or how any of it was Felicity's fault, but it simmers under the surface like the remnants of a bad dream.

(It doesn't occur to him until later that pressing his hands—napkins or no—to Felicity's breast is a terrible idea.)

Felicity, on the other hand, realises right away because two crimson splotches appear on her cheeks. "What are you doing?!!" she splutters, flapping her hands in a wild attempt to dislodge the napkins. She looks incredibly flustered, and Oliver tries to squash the small part of himself that is equal parts satisfied and turned-on.

"Helping," he replies, slowly removing his hands and keeping them raised where she can see them. The napkins flutter to the floor like whisky-stained confetti. His lips twist into a smirk. "Is that not what you want?"

(So much for squashing his unhelpful side.)

"No," Felicity snaps. "Yes. Not the way I want."

A suggestive remark dances on the tip of Oliver's tongue, but Felicity silences it with a glare.

"Don't even say it," she hisses. "I'm so not in the mood."

She's gone before he has the chance to reply.

(It's probably for the better. Anything he would have said was likely to make the situation worse.)
Tech Support

Chapter Summary

Oliver enlists Felicity’s help with some computer troubles and pays her back for the goldfish.

Chapter Notes

This scene is the first to borrow heavily from actual episodes of Arrow (in this case, episode 1.03). It may seem a little drier than other chapters since there isn't as much new material in it, but this is the drawback to rewriting the canon: some of the canon will still be incorporated in the story. Felicity and Oliver's meeting before Lian Yu is obviously not going to change everything that happens in the show.

(That, and there are some moments that have really great dialogue that I can't help reusing.)

Enjoy!

Coward that he is, Oliver doesn't go back to QC for a week. His life has become a media circus since leaving the island, and he doesn't want her to get dragged into the web of lies, gossip, and nosy journalists that seems to follow him wherever he goes.

(Not to mention the bitter note on which they parted lingers like a bad taste in his mouth.)

His job isn't an easy one however, and his basic knowledge of computers makes it even more difficult. It’s only a matter of time before a problem lands in his lap that is beyond his limited expertise: namely a laptop riddled with bullets. The power button is absolutely useless, and Oliver has no idea how to go about dissembling the hard drive.

Which explains why he is walking through the halls of the IT department at QC once again, laptop tucked under his arm. He has his story all planned out: he found the laptop in the abandoned QC warehouse in the Glades and wants to have the hard drive checked out before handing it over to the police. Starling City’s law enforcement is very busy and he doesn't want to waste their time if there’s nothing of interest on the computer.

As usual, Felicity is completely engrossed in something on her computer. She’s wearing a pink blouse today, the kind that hugs her curves, and her hair is pulled back in its usual no-nonsense ponytail. Oliver has never seen Felicity with her hair down before and has a sudden urge to pull the elastic from her hair just to watch the blonde waves tumble over her shoulders.

“Felicity Smoak?”

Her name tumbles from his lips before he can stop himself, and he curses. He meant to come across as friendly and confident, but he sounds just as uncertain as he did a week ago.
She whips her head around, and all coherent thought flies out of his mind when he sees that damned pen clamped between her teeth again. Her lipstick is bright red and all he wants to do is kiss her until there isn’t any of the colour left.

(This is not what he came here to do.)

“Oliver. Hi.” Felicity pulls the pen deftly from her teeth. Oliver tries not to stare at her lips or the mark her lipstick has left on the pen.

“Hi.” God. He sounds like he’s fourteen years old again and trying to work up the courage to talk to Laurel at the annual summer barbecue after he realised she actually had curves.

“I saw you on TV the other day,” Felicity says, twisting the pen between her fingers nervously. It’s comforting to know that she seems to be as uncomfortable as he is in this situation. “At the new Applied Sciences building. Or where the new Applied Sciences building will be. You know, once they build it.”

Oliver winces. The speech at the unveiling of the future Robert Queen Applied Sciences Centre was not one of his finest moments. It was important to maintain his cover as a notorious, self-centred playboy, but not something he wanted Felicity to see. He’d rather she think of him as someone with some shred of humility. “That was, ah—I’m, uh, not the corporate type.”

Felicity’s lips twitch. “Yeah. I gathered that. You know, you could just have said no.”

Oliver smiles bitterly. “My mother is very persistent.”

Felicity chews her bottom lip. It’s very distracting. “I just think there might have been a better way to go about it, you know? I get that you want to distance yourself from your father’s work but maybe you’d be find you had more leniency if you stopped acting like such a jerk whenever you’re in public…”

Felicity’s eyes widen as her mind seems to catch up with her mouth. Oliver can’t help smiling. He’s forgotten how much her loves her honesty.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, tapping her pen nervously on the desktop. “That was totally inappropriate and I am in no position to judge your personal life or your choices and I really really need to learn some self-control. When I’m talking, that is. I exercise great control in other aspects of my life…”

She trails off, catching sight of Oliver’s smirk. “And you’re here for a reason. Which is not listening to me talk. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Oliver says. Her candidness is refreshing. “I deserved it after what happened at the party last weekend. Besides, I’ve missed your babbling.”

Felicity’s cheeks blush as bright as her lipstick and Oliver wishes he could retract his words, or at least rephrase them.

(That probably tops the list of least suave things he has ever said when trying to impress a girl. Goes to show he’s gotten rusty after five years.)

“Sorry, that was—” He breaks off, suddenly remembering the reason he came here in the first place. “I’ve been having some trouble with my computer, and I figured you were the person to come see,” he finishes, setting the computer down on her desk.

Felicity eyes the bullet holes warily, as if she’s afraid the laptop might jump up and swallow her.
“I was at my coffee shop surfing the web and I spilled a latte on it.”

(Oliver is not shocked when Felicity’s eyebrows rise in disbelief. He can’t even believe the words that came out of his mouth.)

“Really,” she deadpans in that don’t-give-me-any-of-your-bullshit tone. She taps her pen against the surface of the laptop, waiting for him to tell her the truth. “Because these look like bullet holes.”

“My coffee shop is in a really bad neighbourhood,” he replies, trying to make the best of a bad situation. He can tell from the way Felicity tips her head to the side, looking disappointed, that he has not succeeded.

“If there is anything you could salvage from it, I would really appreciate it,” he finishes lamely.

Felicity looks from him to the laptop; he can see her debating it in her head as she worries her bottom lip between her teeth. He hopes she’ll say yes; the last thing he wants is for her to think he's a lunatic.

(He’s also hoping for a chance to see her again.)

“Mhm,” she says finally, drumming her fingers on the computer’s surface. “Yep. I’ll see what I can do.”

Oliver smiles. “Thank you, Felicity.”

“Give me a couple of hours or so.”

He nods. “Ok.”

“You still owe me a pack of goldfish,” he hears her mutter as he walks away.

(The smile on his face is so wide the receptionist gives him a strange look as he passes the front desk.)

When Oliver returns a few hours later, armed with sandwiches from the deli across the street, Felicity is still at her desk. The laptop is open and connected to her desktop with a series of colourful cords. The screen is still lifeless, but he assumes she’s been able to do something with it anyways.

Her polite smile turns to a look of delight that fills Oliver’s heart with warmth when she sees him and the sandwiches.

(Mercifully, the pen is nowhere to be seen.)

“You brought lunch,” she says, surprised.

He smiles. It’s hardly the charming grin he used on ladies before the island, but it’s genuine. “I couldn't find any goldfish, but I figured lunch was the next best thing.”

Felicity blushes, suddenly fascinated with the edge of her desk. Oliver has to fight the urge to tip her chin up and kiss her right there. “Well, I, uh, managed to get something off your laptop. I haven't looked at it yet, so if you want to, uh—” She gestures to the chair in the corner of the cubicle without meeting his eyes.
“Oh. Yeah.” He sets the sandwiches down and pulls up the chair, doing his best to keep a respectable distance between them.

Felicity clicks on something and the screen is suddenly filled with what looks suspiciously like a blueprint. Felicity points this out, lip clamped between her teeth, and Oliver nods. She says they belong to the Exchange Building, which Oliver has never heard of, and that this is where the Unidac Auction is supposed to take place.

His confusion must show because Felicity turns to him, frowning. “I thought this was your laptop,” she says.

“Yes,” he replies automatically, wishing he were better at lying.

(He’s really quite good, but there’s something about her that has him tongue-tied.)

Felicity sighs, obviously wrestling with something internal struggle. “Look,” she says finally. Her tone is disappointingly kind. “I don’t want to get in the middle of some Shakespearean drama thing —”

“What?”

She chews her bottom lip again. Oliver tries not to stare. “You know, Mr Steele marrying your mom, Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet…” She looks at him expectantly, like he should have some idea of what she’s talking about.

(He doesn't, but the mention of his mother’s marriage to Walter creates an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach.)

“I didn’t study Shakespeare at any of the four schools I dropped out of,” he says, shaking his head. It’s somewhat embarrassing to admit, especially when this seems to be fairly common knowledge. Maybe he should have made some sort of effort in school.

Felicity opens her mouth, but seems to decide that explaining this whole thing is not worth her time. “Mr Steele is trying to buy Unidac Industries,” she says instead. “And you have a company laptop associated with one of the people he’s competing against.”

Oliver nods. “Floyd Lawton.” The pieces are all falling into place now.

Felicity shakes her head. “Warren Patel.” She frowns, looking at Oliver. He’s sure she can see through all his lies, but he doesn't say anything for fear of making the situation worse. “Who’s Floyd Lawton?”

A large part of him wants to tell her. This life he’s chosen is lonely and pushing everyone away takes more effort than he anticipated. He wants to let someone in, but he’s playing a dangerous game and he can’t afford to put her in harm’s way. “He’s an employee of Mr Patel,” Oliver says reluctantly. And he’s going to kill someone at that auction, unless I can stop him. Which I can’t do alone. Not when he has so many potential vantage points.

“Um, Oliver?”

Felicity’s voice interrupts his thoughts. He blinks to find her blue eyes locked with his, swimming with concern behind her glasses. It’s suddenly difficult to remember why he’s here.

“Is everything okay?” She takes a deep breath. “I’m only asking because my mind is jumping to a bunch of conclusions here, none of which are comforting, and I—”
“Hey,” Oliver interrupts gently, covering his hand with hers. Her skin is softer than he remembers, and surprisingly warm. His skin tingles at the contact. “I don’t know what any of this is about, but I’m going to bring this information to Detective Lance, okay? Maybe he’ll be able to make more sense of it.”

Felicity doesn’t look particularly comforted, but she nods. “Okay.”

“In fact, I should probably take this to him now.” There isn’t much time before the Unidac auction, and he needs to come up with a plan to take Lawton down.

“Oh.” Felicity nods, hastily pulling her hand away from his. “Yeah. Right.”

He makes it halfway down the hall, laptop tucked under his arm, before she’s calling him back again.

“Oliver, you forgot your sandwich!”

The sight of her leaning over her cubicle, waving his sandwich is both amusing and sexy. “Keep it,” he says.

She frowns. “If you think this is payback for the goldfish, it’s not.”

He chuckles. “I’ll make it up to you. How about dinner? Say, Saturday night? I’ll pick you up at eight.”

He’s not sure who’s more surprised: him or her. He hasn’t been on a date in more than five years. This will either be the best thing that’s happened to him or a total disaster. If Felicity knows what’s good for her, she should run in the other direction.

(He desperately hopes she’ll say yes.)

“I— Okay,” Felicity stammers. “Don’t be late.”

Oliver gives her a half-smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”
First Date, Two

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Felicity go on a date. Neither one is sure who embarrasses themselves more.

Chapter Notes

Oliver and Felicity's first date!

Just remembering writing this chapter makes me excited. I had such a great time writing this.

Shameless admission: I borrowed some dialogue from Oliver and Felicity's first date in season three, not only because it was adorable, but because it fit strangely well with the history I had already set up for them.

Obviously, it's not going to go smoothly, because Oliver is way out of his league, but I can promise it will not be interrupted by an explosion.

Also, I'm publishing this a little early, given that I will be away this weekend and most of next week without any access to Internet.

This is a terrible idea.

Standing in front of her bedroom mirror, bottom lip clamped between her teeth, Felicity acknowledges that as far as bad ideas go, it doesn't get much worse than this. She’s only been quasi-stalking him for the last year (well she's really been combing international databases for mention he’s alive but it’s almost the same), plus his level of celebrity has gone from star of TMZ to star of every major news network in the country. The press is going to have a field day when they see this, and the last thing she wants is for people to think she got her job at QC because of her relationship with Oliver (which didn't exist back then).

She comforts herself with the fact that he probably won’t even show up. The only thing more notorious than Oliver himself is his reputation.

So when the doorbell rings at seven on the dot, she thinks she’s dreaming. Or it’s her neighbour next door, the one’s who’s always losing her cat. Or it's the UPS delivery man bringing that new hard drive she ordered last week.

She’s shocked to open the door and see Oliver standing on the other side, looking devastatingly handsome in a tailored charcoal suit and white shirt. He’s left his collar unbuttoned and isn't wearing a tie. Felicity swoons a little on the inside.

“Hi,” she stammers, trying not to look as surprised as she feels.
Oliver swallows, eyes travelling the length of her body, taking in her slim-fitting red dress and sexy black heels (which are probably a terrible idea because she’ll end up tripping and falling on her face). Felicity’s face feels like it’s on fire. “Hi,” he says finally. “You look— Wow. You look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Felicity mumbles, suddenly fascinated by Oliver’s shoes. (She’s never seen anything so polished in her life.) “You don’t look too bad yourself.”

There’s an awkward silence. Felicity is trying very hard not to open her mouth and unleash the stream of unfiltered blabbering waiting in the wings, and Oliver doesn’t seem to know what to say. Five years on a deserted island really seems to have affected his social skills.

“We should, uh, probably get going.” (The small, rational part of Felicity’s mind wants to capture this moment. Oliver Queen stammering. Priceless. The rest of her isn’t paying attention.) He manages a small smile. “Wouldn’t want to miss our reservation.”

Felicity laughs nervously. “No.”

As Oliver leads her to his car—a classic, back Bentley that probably belongs to his mother because she’s pretty sure he drives a motorcycle—she wonders where they’re going. Knowing Mr Queen, it will be somewhere expensive, like Table Salt, that new restaurant that’s just opened downtown. And totally not her style. Fancy places always make her even more awkward, which is an impressive feat considering her track record.

So she’s shocked when Oliver pulls up to the Big Belly Burger joint three blocks from her apartment. She loves Big Belly Burger—it’s the only fast food joint she ever eats at—but it’s the last place she imagined going for dinner with Oliver Queen.

Her surprise must show on her face (she’s never been good at hiding anything, ever) because Oliver suddenly looks nervous. (Well, more nervous—he’s been distinctly uncomfortable ever since she opened her door.)

“Is this okay?” he asks, fiddling with his car keys that are still dangling from the ignition. “We can go somewhere nicer if you’d like, but I thought—”

“It’s fine.” Felicity grins. “This is probably my favourite restaurant on the planet. Which is terrible because it’s a burger joint, but you haven’t lived until you’ve eaten here. Seriously. The fries are like a religious experience.” She blushing, catching sight of Oliver’s amused expression. “Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it, Queen.”

“I wasn't going to say anything.”

“You didn't need to. It was written all over your face.”

He smiles, shaking his head. “I have an excellent poker face.”

“Yeah, well not tonight, mister,” Felicity quips. She’s always surprised when people buy Oliver’s lies; he’s painfully transparent. “Trust me, you’ll never eat at another fast food joint again.”

Oliver opens his mouth to say something, but thinks better of it and shakes his head, a small smile curving on his mouth. (Felicity is very quickly becoming familiar with this smile and the way it makes her heart pound like a jackhammer.) In one fluid motion that takes her a little by surprise (because graceful is never a word she would attribute to Oliver Queen), he gets out of the car and is around the other side opening her door for her before she has a chance to process. (Her mind is still trying to wrap her head around Oliver Queen and grace.)
He offers her his hand like she’s a lady in one of those Victorian films her mom loves to watch and of course she has to trip over those damn heels as she climbs out, pitching head-first towards the pavement. Oliver’s quick reflexes are the only thing that save her from a very embarrassing face-plant.

“Wow,” she says breathlessly, trying not to think about the proximity of Oliver’s chest to her face or the heat of his hand on her back.

“Sorry,” she adds, realising how incredibly helpless that makes her sound. “I probably should have left these shoes in the back of my closet. Or burned them.”

Oliver smiles. Felicity loves the way it makes his eyes crinkle at the corners. “I never understood how women could walk in those things.”

“Me either. As you just saw.”

Oliver chuckles. “They are great shoes.”

(They really are. Confident, sexy, and so not appropriate for Big Belly Burger.)

“I feel a little overdressed,” she confesses, as they find a table by the window. From her seat in the booth, Felicity can see the Bentley parked on the corner, looking out of place amongst the Fords and Toyotas.

“If it makes you feel any better, I am equally overdressed,” Oliver says, gesturing to his suit. “I figured you’d expect a certain standard from Oliver Queen, and since this isn't exactly fine dining…”

“What do you mean it’s not fine dining?” Felicity asks. “These are the best burgers you will ever have in your life, Mr Queen. And if you don’t agree, I’ll pay.”

“I thought that was my job,” Oliver replies good-naturedly, but he looks relieved.

Felicity laughs. “A lot has changed in the last five years. Going Dutch is definitely a thing now. Which is totally irrelevant and inappropriate to tease you about,” she amends, catching sight of the pained expression on his face at the mention of his lost years. “God, I’m sorry. You know, I went out with this guy once who refused to pay for anything after I offered to cover dinner on the first date? He just assumed that I wanted to pay for everything and was totally happy to go along with it, which is kind of rude if you ask me, I mean I was twenty and trying to pay my way through college! I didn't exactly have time to be paying for his meals, too—”

“Felicity.” Oliver places his hand over hers, and it’s like there’s an electric current suddenly flown from her scalp to her toes. She hopes he doesn't notice the goosebumps on her arms. “It’s okay.”

Thankfully, a waitress arrives, and the awkward tension dissipates into relief at the distraction. (Big Belly is probably the only fast food place that has waitstaff—another thing that makes this place so awesome.) Felicity orders her usual: black bean burger with an extra side of sweet potato fries and a strawberry milkshake. Oliver stares at the menu, looking incredibly overwhelmed and Felicity realises this is probably the first time he’s been out since coming back.

The waitress taps her pen impatiently against the pad and Felicity sees what she thinks is a flash of panic in Oliver’s eyes. The menu in his hands trembles slightly, white patches spreading across his knuckles. His face is calm and composed, almost as if he’s unaware of the disturbance he’s causing, but the tension in his shoulders tells a different story.
She orders a burger and fries for him without thinking. It’s simple, but having been away from
civilisation (hamburgers included) for the last five years, Oliver probably doesn't want complicated
right now.

He stares at her like she’s a saviour and she can’t help the blush that blooms across her cheeks.
“Thank you.”

“It’s okay,” she says, repeating his words from earlier. “This can’t be easy for you. Readjusting, I
mean. Not this. Though this probably isn’t much easier—Sorry.” She catches herself and reaches
up self-consciously to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear.

(Oliver’s eyes track her movements and her stomach feels like putty.)

“I’m really nervous,” she continues. “This is—well, let’s just say I’ve imagined this happening
under different circumstances. Very platonic circumstances.”

(If Felicity were able to shove her fist in her mouth to keep the words from coming out, she would.)

Oliver gives what Felicity thinks is a nervous laugh—she can’t tell because it sounds a little like
he’s choking.

“Which is the last thing you want to hear on a first date. I just meant that— Well, before all of this
we were friends, sort of, and then you disappeared and I became a little obsessed with looking for
you and— Wow. I’m going to stop talking now.”

(This is probably the worst first date of her life.)

“I’m—” Oliver inhales shakily. “Five years is a long time. I’ve kind of forgotten how to take a
woman on a date.”

“If it makes you feel any better, this is probably one of the nicest first dates I’ve ever had,” Felicity
says, managing a small smile.

(It occurs to her after the fact this is not very encouraging.)

He laughs again. (At least she thinks it’s a laugh. It could be a cry for help.) “I’m just—”

“Nervous?” she suggests eagerly.

He nods, looking relieved that someone else has put the words in his mouth. “Am I being crazy? I
mean, what do we have to be nervous about?”

Felicity giggles. The sound is horrible and embarrassing and she wishes she could take it back.

“Maybe because we kind of exhausted all the first date topics in your bed? Which was not at all
how I meant that to come out.”

His lips twitch. “That was some first meeting.”

“Not one of my finest moments.” Just thinking about that night makes her cringe.

“Or mine.”

The waitress arrives with their food and both of them take a deep breath.

(At least Felicity thinks the rise and fall of Oliver’s chest means that he’s letting out a breath but it
could be something else. Maybe he has asthma?)
Neither of them says anything for a minute after she leaves, both too busy admiring their food. The sheer amount of calories in front of her is enough to make Felicity momentarily forget about the trauma of the last five minutes.

Oliver eyes his burger with awe, as if he can’t believe it’s actually there, before picking it up and taking a bite with an unrestrained eagerness that makes her smile. He chews for a few minutes, eyes closed, and then sets it down. His expression is blissful.

“Best burgers ever,” Felicity deadpans.

He nods, taking another bite.

They eat in silence for a few minutes. Oliver appears to be thoroughly enjoying his food, and Felicity thoroughly enjoys watching him eat. Which sounds like a stalker-ish thing to do but he eats with the beautiful unbridled joy of someone discovering something delicious for the first time. It’s very cute.

The rest of the evening is filled with small talk about the food, and the weather, and Felicity’s work at QC. Both of them are skirting the obvious elephant in the room, but she is happy to live in blissful ignorance for a few more minutes, pretending the last five years didn't happen.

The tension creeps back in as Oliver pays the bill and both of them realise they can’t pretend any longer. Felicity bites her lip the whole way home to keep herself from asking the million burning questions she’s had since he walked into her office last week. (She acknowledges the car is neither the time nor the place for this conversation to be taking place.) Oliver is intensely focused on the road; the only sound in the car is Norah Jones playing from the stereo.

It isn’t until he pulls up in front of her apartment complex that he finally speaks.

“I’m sorry.”

An apology is the last thing Felicity expected to hear and it takes her a few seconds to wrap her head around the words. “What?”

Oliver sighs, fingers gripping the steering wheel. “When I asked you to have dinner with me— I thought I’d be able to go back to the way things were before. Which was naive because I’m not the person I was five years ago.” He pauses, collecting himself.

(He’s much more self-depreciating than the Oliver she knew. He hasn't resigned himself to his shortcomings, but rather blames himself for them.)

“This isn’t how I wanted the evening to go, and I wanted to apologise. I’m much more out of my element than I thought and you deserve better.”

These are the words Felicity has been dreading all evening, the fateful end to something that never quite got the chance to begin. He’s right. Five years is a long time, and it’s naive of her to expect they will both be the same and want the same things. Maybe they’ve just grown apart and he’s doing the kind thing by ending it all before it gets complicated. A clean break.

(He should know her well enough to know it’s anything but.)

When she finally brings herself to look in his eyes, however, she sees that same lost boy she’d walked in on all those years ago, the boy desperate to pull himself from the misery of his situation but convinced he could only make it worse. The boy who lost himself in parties and girls and alcohol because forgetting was easier than fighting for something that really mattered.
Swallowing the lump that’s suddenly worked its way into her throat, Felicity takes a deep breath. “Do you want to come in?”

This is a terrible idea.

Oliver acknowledges this as he follows Felicity into her apartment. He’s damaged, probably beyond repair, and Felicity doesn’t need the mess that is his life—both as Oliver Queen and as the Hood—in hers. The noble thing to do would have been to politely decline her invitation, but he’s always been one for masochism.

It’s a cute place. First floor flat with a large, open living space and small, cluttered kitchen area. There’s a hall which Oliver assumes leads to the bedroom.

(He tries very hard to keep his thoughts focused on other things.)

Felicity is suddenly transformed into a ball of nervous energy. “I’m sorry,” she says, sweeping what looks like a pile of paperwork off the couch. “It’s a bit of a mess.”

“It’s nice,” Oliver says automatically, grinning when he catches sight of Felicity’s stack of exercise DVDs.

“What?” she asks defensively, when he waves one at her. “It’s cheaper than a gym membership.”

He wants to make a teasing comment but has no idea what to say. It’s not like he knows anything about gym memberships nowadays; even before the island, it was never something he had to worry about. The Queen manor boasted an elaborate home gym.

“Do you want some coffee or something? I think I have a pint of mint chip in the freezer.”

“Coffee is fine.” What with trying to keep up appearances, dodge the press, and cross names off his father’s list, there hasn’t been much time for sleeping. Not that he has any desire to sleep.

There are a few minutes of struggling with the machine, coupled with muttered curses and hasty apologies from Felicity and then there’s a mug being pressed into his hand and Oliver is trying very hard not to focus on the proximity of Felicity’s mouth.

(It’s very pink.)

“It’s probably not what you’re used to,” Felicity stammers apologetically, sinking down on the couch. She glances at her cup of coffee and then Oliver’s like she’s reconsidering having offered.

“I’m not used to having coffee at all.”

Felicity seems perplexed for a moment before she catches his meaning. Her eyes go wide and she looks like she wants the floor to open up and swallow her whole.

(Oliver is quickly learning this is a natural reaction.)

She starts to apologise, but he cuts her off. There’s no escaping the fact that he’s been gone the last five years, and if there’s anything his brief weeks in society have taught him, it’s that he’s better off facing the reality of his situation than to try and pretend it never happened. There’s a lot she doesn’t know about him, a lot that has changed since that Christmas party so many years ago (a night he has remembered all these years with a mixture of fondness and loss for what could have been).
He tells her so, and watches the thought process behind her eyes. If she were sensible, she’d jump ship now, but the steely glint in her eyes is more than enough indication she isn't going anywhere. He has a suddenly vivid memory of her telling him how much she hates puzzles.

(If he were sensible, he never would have accepted her invitation to come in in the first place.)

“The last five years…” Oliver takes a deep breath. He’s not sure if it’s wise to be talking about this at all—especially when there’s so little he can talk about—but he feels a gnawing urge to confide in her, to make her understand the horrible things he had to do.

(It’s not unlike the urge that drove him to spill his secrets to her in his bedroom all those years ago.)

“They weren’t easy. The choices I had to make…”

Memories flash behind his eyes. Slade. Sara. His father. Shado, her body a lifeless tangle of limbs at his feet.

It isn’t until Felicity pries the coffee cup gently from his hands that he realises they’re shaking. “It sounds like those years were filled with a lot of suck.”

Oliver swallows, trying to pull his attention from the past to the beautiful woman sitting across from him. She deserves better than this. He rubs a hand over his face, wishing he could somehow be transported back to the beginning of the evening before he ruined everything and make it right. Do her right.

He tries to explain that he’s out of his element, that the dating prospects on a deserted island are slim and she smiles encouragingly, telling him that she is appallingly awkward in most social situations especially ones involving someone of the opposite sex. Particularly if they’re very attractive.

(Her cheeks flame as she realises what she’s said but Oliver smiles. He loves the way her mouth gets a little carried away.)

“What I meant is you’re not the only one,” she finishes, staring at her hands. “I’m no better at this than you and I haven't spent the last five years alone on an island.”

“Thank you. I haven’t exactly been at my best tonight and you’ve been very kind.”

Felicity sucks in a breath, looking at him with eyes that are suddenly uncertain. “I’ve spent the last five years hacking into just about every database known to man combing for proof that you didn't die on the Gambit so that I could sleep at night knowing I didn't have to feel cheated out of whatever we could have had but mostly knowing that you were safe because all I cared about—is that you’re okay and alive and here even if you’re not exactly the same as you were before—”

Her lips are soft beneath his own, and he can taste the lingering hint of strawberries mingling with coffee. The salt of her lipstick clings to the tip of his tongue and he tries to commit everything to memory. He’s thought about kissing Felicity every day for the last five years and he wants to savour every second.

She’s hesitant at first, as if her brain is still processing what’s going on. Then there’s a soft sigh and her mouth opens beneath his and it’s like a deep flame has been invited inside both of them. He does his best to reign it in, letting her take control, but nearly loses it when her tongue sweeps into his mouth, delicately exploring corners that have gone untouched for far too long. His hand rises
unconsciously to cup the side of her face, fingers pushing through her hair. Everything about it feels right: the way her cheek fills the palm of his hand, the soft warmth of her hair between his fingers, the way her mouth curves perfectly to fit with his.

He’s kissed many women in his lifetime. Some of them he’s felt a connection with, most of them he’s forgotten in the hangover that follows, but none of them have felt like this. Like he’s finally found the missing piece he didn't know he was looking for.

(The thought is so cheesy it makes him cringe.)

Eventually, he pulls back, letting his forehead rest against hers and grounding himself in the sound of her shaky, uneven breaths. She smells like a peach orchard and it’s all he can do to keep from burying his face in her neck and staying there.

(It’s going to be impossible to walk away from her now. Not when he needs her to keep him grounded, like he needs air.)

“Wow,” Felicity’s dazed whisper breaks the silence. “That was…um…”

It was intoxicating and Oliver knows he should leave now before things go any farther. “I should go.”

“Oh, um, right.” She sits up straight again and he finds himself longing for her warmth. “It’s late. And you’re probably tired form all this media stuff and legal stuff and adjustment stuff…and stuff. All the stuff.”

He can’t help it; the corners of his mouth twitch. He hasn't had much cause for genuine smiles since his return home but Felicity seems to elicit them from him without trying.

“Something like that.”

“Well, I had a great time.” The nervous energy is back; she’s practically humming with it. “Really. Probably the best burgers of my life.”

“Definitely the best burgers of my life.”

She smiles, looking a little more at ease and he feels a strong thrill of pleasure at the thought that he can do that to her. “Told you. Next time you’ll have to try one of the milkshakes. Beats anything you’ll ever be able to make in a blender. Assuming there is a next time, of course.”

This time, he’s almost grinning. “Oh, there’ll definitely be a next time.”

(He kisses her one more time at the door. It’s short and sweet and he’s still grinning like a fool when he slips into the manor.)
Confessions of a Jerk Vigilante, One

Chapter Summary

Oliver gets cold feet about his relationship with Felicity and some interesting relationship advice from Thea. Felicity receives a proposition from Walter. Lots of mint chip is eaten.

Chapter Notes

I've always liked the scene between Laurel and Oliver where they eat ice cream and he talks about his problems with his mother. A version of that scene has already happened "off-screen" between Laurel and Oliver, but there are elements of that scene that will happen in this one instead - particularly the notion that Oliver has decided he needs to let someone in if he's going to move on from his ordeal.

Also, huge thanks to everyone for their feedback on the last chapter. Much appreciated! xx

Oliver doesn't call.

He should. God knows he wants to with every fibre of his being. The old Oliver wouldn't have hesitated to pick up the phone and arrange a hook-up somewhere.

(The old Oliver would have slept with her that first night.)

The new Oliver doesn't know what to do. The right thing is to leave Felicity alone, make her think he doesn't care, that he hasn't changed. The decent thing to do is make up some excuse, though he knows she'll see through any of his lies. What Oliver wants is to do neither of those things.

His work as the Hood—it’s a stupid name but at least he can’t claim responsibility for it—keeps him busy enough for the next few days to justify staying away. Crossing names off the list isn't nearly as easy as he thought it would be, and with the police—or, more specifically, Detective Lance—on his tail, he needs to be extra careful. There will be a time and a place for them to know his secret, but not until he says so.

(He knows she’s expecting the call. It’s not a coincidence one of her business cards was tucked in the pocket of his jacket with her cell number written on the back in red pen.)

He lies in bed nearly a week later, shaking from the aftermath of the latest nightmare. Shadows face still flashes before his eyes, but not nearly as often; it is Felicity who now haunts his dreams, face stained with blood, eyes wide in panic and no longer shielded by glasses.

This is why they can’t be together. What he does isn't safe. He isn't safe. He almost strangled his mother because she happened to come up on him while he was having a nightmare. If Walter hadn't been there with her… he doesn't like to think about what might have happened.
He can’t risk that with Felicity. She means a lot to him, more than any woman ever has, if the way he felt when they kissed was any indication, and the thought of hurting her, of anything hurting her…

She deserves better. He’s damaged goods. It’s why he’s pushed everyone away: Thea, Laurel, Tommy, his mother—so that they can be safe. What he does doesn’t afford the luxury of being close to people.

Maybe it’s better that way. He’s spent so long away from people that he’s not sure how to interact with them anymore; pretending to be a facsimile of his old self and keeping everyone at arm’s length spares them from the horror of what he’s become. Unrecognisable.

Eventually, he gets out of bed, unable to sit and stew any longer. A walk will clear his head. Or a glass of water.

The sounds of the television echo from the living room; Thea must have forgotten to turn it off again before going to bed. The crunch of potato chips tells him otherwise: his sister is curled on the couch, a salad bowl full of Lay’s balanced on her legs.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” she asks, popping a handful of chips in her mouth.

“Nope,” Oliver sighs, flopping down on the couch beside her. He doesn't ask what she’s doing up at this hour; he’s learned not to pick unnecessary fights. “What are you watching?”

“Peter Declan.”

“Hm?” The name rings a bell, but he can’t place it.

Thea shoots him a look. *I can’t believe you don’t know about this,* it says. “The guy who killed his wife?”

There are probably lots of guys in Starling City who kill their wives but Oliver doesn't think it’s wise to point that out.

Thea rolls her eyes. “Okay, this guy killed his wife in their baby’s room. Psycho.”

On screen, footage rolls of Peter Declan claiming that he couldn't kill his wife anymore than he could kill himself.

The volume suddenly vanishes. Oliver turns to see Thea watching him, remote in hand.

“So why couldn't you sleep?” she asks.

Oliver shakes his head. This isn’t her burden to bear. “Bad dreams.”

Thea, however, doesn't seem to know how to take a hint. (He’s forgotten how curious she is. About *everything.*) “About?”

He doesn’t know what to say. Five years may have passed, but she’ll always be his little sister. She doesn't need to hear about the horrors of his time away that keep him awake at night, and he’s not sure he’s ready to share them with anyone. His relationship with Felicity—if that’s even what it is—isn’t something he’s sure he wants to talk about yet either, especially now that there might not be any relationship to go back to. Most girls aren't into a guy who takes them on a sub-par date and then disappears.
Felicity’s voice echoes in his head. *This can’t be easy for you. Readjusting, I mean.*

“Just a girl,” he says finally. Readjusting isn’t easy, but, as Dig has reminded him several times, it won’t get easier if he doesn’t make some effort.

This is exactly the right thing to say: Thea’s lips curl into a sly grin. “Why don’t you make a play?”

He wants to more than anything, but he can’t. What he’s doing isn’t safe. He isn’t safe. “There are reasons.”

“What are they? Besides, you know, you sleeping with her sister and her dying, and her father hating your guts, and you being a total jerk to everyone since you came back?”

Oliver almost laughs when he realises she thinks he’s talking about Laurel. Those bridges have been burned, if her budding relationship with Tommy is any indication.

(He’s happy for them. They may seem like two peas in a pod, but Tommy is a much better man than Oliver will ever be.)

He still thinks about her, however; more specifically, what he did to her. Five years might have changed him, but underneath it all he’s still the boy who was excellent at making a mess of things, and Felicity doesn’t deserve to be collateral. She’s worth more than that.

“Those are the top ones.”

Thea smirks, and he can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

“I know it may not seem like it sometimes, but I’m not the same person I used to be,” he continues quietly.

“So show her,” Thea replies, like it’s the most obvious answer in the world and she can’t believe he was block-headed enough not to think of it himself. “Be yourself. I mean, your new self.”

Oliver mulls it over. Who is he, really? He’s not the man he was before he left on the Gambit; that man—boy—never would have survived five minutes on Lian Yu. (He almost didn’t.) He likes to think he’s a better person, more aware, at least, but time will only tell if that’s actually true. He’s certainly harder, less in touch with the world, than he was before—if you can call his constant partying being in touch with the world.

He doesn’t know how to relate to anyone anymore. When you spend five years fighting constantly for your survival, returning to a life of peace and luxury is—odd. Unsettling. It feels wrong; he finds himself constantly looking over his shoulder, expecting danger where there is none. Maybe that’s why he’s taken to this vigilante business.

(No. That’s not true. He’s doing this for his father. To honour his promise. He has a mission to complete, and after that— It’s a means to an end. That’s all.)

“Ollie?”

Thea snaps her fingers in his face, and it takes every ounce of self-control to keep himself from grabbing them and flipping her over the table.

*There’s no danger. It’s just Thea. You’re safe.*
(He has to keep reminding himself. He’s forgotten what home feels like.)

“Sorry.” He’s not sure what he’s apologising for: not paying attention or what he might have done.

“I know Laurel’s probably pretty pissed at you right now, but you didn't see her when you— After it happened. She was messed up, Ollie. She cried for days.”

Oliver swallows the guilt rising like bile in his throat. He’s burned bridges with Laurel beyond repair. It hurts, but it’s for the better.

(He hopes.)

“It’s not Laurel I’m worried about, Speedy.”

He’s not sure who’s more surprised at the words that came out of his mouth: him or Thea.

“You’ve already met someone else?” Thea sounds both impressed and disappointed.

“Sort of. Not really. We knew each other before.” When it becomes apparent that his non-answers are not going to cut it, he continues, “She works at QC. In the IT department.”

Thea smirks. “So that’s what you were doing that day Mom and Walter took you to QC for the first time.”

(He was, but how she knows is beyond him.)

“Mom told me,” she adds, grinning. “What’s her name? Is she cute?”

“Her name’s Felicity,” Oliver says reluctantly. “And yeah, she’s cute.”

Thea looks strangely proud. “Well, look at you getting out there in the world and meeting people. Maybe you’re better adjusted than we thought.”

(He isn’t, but now doesn't seem like a good time to bring that up.)

“Either way, I mean what I said. Just be yourself, Ollie.” Thea reaches over and snuggles into his side. Oliver wraps his arm around her on instinct, remembering many nights spent like this when they were younger and Thea had nightmares.

“I’ll try,” he mumbles, pressing his lips to the crown of her head. “I’ll try.”

By the time Felicity gets home from QC, she’s exhausted. The new developments to the security server are taking a lot longer than anyone anticipated (well, she anticipated it, but then again, no one ever listens to her), this secret project for Walter is consuming her time and fraying her nerves, and Oliver still hasn't called.

It’s been a week. Normally, she’d have given up hope and started her usual habit of eating a whole lot of mint chip and watching bad chick flicks on late-night television, but she knows that Oliver’s been stranded on an island for five years and this is probably a lot to process.

(Still, how hard is it to pick up the phone?)

She’s not going to worry about it. (Or at least, try not to worry about it.) She has bigger problems, like all the chaos at work, or the fact that she ordered Chinese half an hour ago and the delivery guy still hasn't shown up.
The doorbell rings and Felicity hops off the couch, swiping the bills she laid out earlier to pay for dinner on her way.

Only it isn’t the delivery guy standing on her doorstep; it’s Oliver, pint of mint chocolate chip in one hand and a bouquet of sunflowers in the other.

“Hi,” he says tentatively.

“Hi.” Her throat suddenly feels like parchment paper.

“I should have called,” Oliver says, shifting his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Tonight. Or a week ago.” He pauses, cheeks pink. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Felicity says. It’s not, but she's not about to fight with him on her doorstep.

“If I remember correctly, I still owe you a debt,” he continues, hefting the pint of mint chip.

Felicity’s eyebrows rise. She’s not willing to give in so easily. “And the flowers?”

“Thea’s idea,” Oliver admits. “She said that even if you wouldn't let me in, you’d have something to brighten the kitchen. The sunflowers were my idea. They remind me of you.”

(Okay, so maybe she is willing to give in that easily.)

“I don’t normally do this,” she says, holding the door open to let him in.

“What?” Oliver grins and the butterflies in Felicity’s stomach multiply. “Accept bribes from jerks who don’t call? Let said jerks into your apartment?”

“All of the above.”

He sober a little, thrusting the flowers towards her. “Does it make any difference if I tell you I don’t usually do this?”

“From what I’ve heard about you, Mr Queen, this is exactly what you usually do, but I’m willing to overlook this one given that you’ve been dead for the last five years.” She claps a hand over her mouth and wonders if she’s ever, ever, going to get some kind of mental filter.

(Probably not.)

“I’m sorry. That was— Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Oliver gives her a tiny smile that conveys exactly how not fine it is. “I kind of deserved it.”

“You totally deserved it,” Felicity corrects him, “but that doesn’t make it okay.”

She steps aside from the door with a small measure of reluctance and a larger measure of pleasure.

(Shes wants to be mad at him, really she does, and she is, but the sight of him makes her stomach do spectacular backflips.)

"Thanks," Oliver says quietly, crossing the threshold as if he's been here a million times. Felicity watches his eyes sweeping the apartment and imagines he's scanning for bugs (though why someone would think it worthwhile to bug her apartment is beyond her).
Honestly, where does she come up with these things? He's probably just being polite.

"This looks exactly the same as it did the last time I was here," he says.

The still somewhat angry part of Felicity has little trouble squashing the urge to laugh.

"Well, I haven't exactly had time to redecorate," she retorts. "If you'd waited a little longer, I might have."

Oliver swallows, visibly uncomfortable. "Of course. I, um. Wow. That was possibly the stupidest thing I've ever said."

(Felicity would be lying if she said her heart didn’t melt a little at the expression on his face.)

“So why the sudden change of heart?” she asks. She tries to keep her tone casual, but doesn’t manage to hide the hint of bitterness lingering beneath the surface. “That whole avoidance game was working out pretty well for you.”

(It’s not that she’s angry at him so much as she is angry at herself; she should have expected this.)

Oliver cringes. “I’ve been— I wanted—” He breaks off, looking furious with himself and scrubs a hand roughly through his hair. "I'm sorry, it's just— Expressing myself has never been my strong suit and five years in solitary confinement hasn't helped. What I mean is that I've been spending a lot of time with Thea lately, and it's reminded me that I'm not the only one who's been impacted by my absence."

“So you figured it was time to stop pushing me away?”

“I did that to protect you. And then I had my eyes opened yesterday and realised that I hurt you.”

Felicity’s lips twitch. “Thea again? I’ll have to send her a thank you card.”

Oliver sighs. “I’m a jerk. Before the island, I was a jerk. And now I’m just a damaged jerk.”

Felicity isn’t sure what to say. She knows what he’s said is true—five years on an island would damage anyone, and Oliver’s jerk reputation has never been a secret to anyone—but to agree with him seems callous. He didn’t ask to be marooned on an island or have to suffer through whatever horrible ordeals he went through over the last five years.

“I should probably find a vase for those flowers, before, you know, they die or something. And the ice cream should go in the freezer or it’s going to melt and I know from experience that few things are worse than liquid ice cream.”

(Obviously, she has lots of things to say. The fact that none of them are helpful is irrelevant.)

“Oh, yeah.” Oliver says, glancing from the ice cream to the flowers and back again as unsure of what to do with either. “Do you have anything—?”

He gestures to the sunflowers.

“Vase. Yup. I have one somewhere.” Felicity looks around wildly, hoping that the vase her cousin Chloe bought as a housewarming gift will magically appear. It’s been ages since anyone has brought her flowers, and she has no idea where it is. “You know what? I’ll just put them in here for now,” she says, snatching the empty wine bottle off the counter. There is a small sip of merlot left in the bottom, which she dumps hastily in the sink.
Oliver fails to hide his amusement with the proceedings.

“Wine bottles actually make pretty good vases,” he says casually, setting the pint of mint chip on the coffee table. “Beer bottles, less so.”

“Speaking from experience?” Felicity asks, pouring some water into the bottom of the bottle and letting the sunflowers fall haphazardly into it. They don’t look half bad. “I thought billionaires had crystal vases on every table.”

A tiny crease appears between Oliver’s brows that she has the sudden to smooth out with her fingers. He lets out a quiet bark of laughter and they vanish.

“I think we do, but they never seemed to be around when I needed them. Laurel was always picking up flowers to brighten up my dorm rooms at school, and I was always desperate for somewhere to put them.”

There’s a small silence at the mention of Laurel Lance. Felicity can’t help remembering the footage of them on TMZ last week outside the courthouse. She hasn’t the faintest idea what Oliver was doing there, but the cameras showed them outside chatting like old friends underneath a banner that read OLD FLAMES REKINDLED?

“Sorry,” Oliver says, rubbing the back of his neck. “I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s fine,” Felicity says quickly, twisting a sunflower leaf between her fingers. “You dated for years. That’s not going away. I dated other people too—not many, not any since college, actually, but that’s not really the point— What I mean is that it’s okay. To talk about it. With me. Or anyone else.”

Oliver chuckles. “Duly noted. Do you have any spoons?”

“Spoons?”

“Yeah.” He flashes a teasing grin that eases the tension from his face and Felicity’s heart feels warm. “I may be mistaken, but five years ago, we ate ice cream with spoons.”

Heat blossoms across Felicity’s cheeks. Of course. “Um, yeah. Spoons. I have some. Here,” she mutters, thrusting the wine bottle full of flowers at Oliver. “Put these on the table and I’ll get spoons.”

She’s considering pulling bowls from the cupboard as well, but Oliver has already settled himself on the floor, back against the couch and is holding the tub like it’s the Holy Grail. Felicity’s personal philosophy is that ice cream is meant to be eaten from the tub to conserve the flavour, and if Oliver’s planning on sticking around (she hopes he is), he might as well learn what she prefers.

He looks up as she settles herself on the couch behind him and passes him a spoon.

“Ice cream is meant to be eaten from the carton,” she explains, snatching the tub from his hands and opening it. A wave of cool, mint-scented air rises as she pulls the plastic seal.

Heaven.

Oliver plunges his spoon in right away, carving out a large chunk of ice cream and popping it in his mouth. He pulls the spoon from his mouth slowly, eyes closed. Felicity isn’t sure, but she will swear later that he might actually have moaned.
(In a very, very sexy way. Not that she’s thinking too much about it.)

“This is as good as I remember.”

Felicity giggles. “You look like you’re having a religious experience.”

Oliver grins, sticking his spoon back in the tub. Felicity swats at it with her own, but he slips underneath and lifts another spoonful. “I thought about a lot of things on the island,” he says, "but there was one thing that I thought about every day. I actually dreamed about it.”

Felicity’s eyebrows rise. “You actually dreamed about ice cream while you were stuck on a deserted island.”

“I did! And I promised myself that if I ever got a chance to eat it again, I would do it with you.”

Felicity fixes her eyes on the tub of ice cream and counts the chocolate pieces to try and hide the blush rising on her cheeks. It’s moments like these that remind her of why she continues to believe in Oliver Queen: despite his outward douchebag attitude, the real man beneath is vulnerable and surprisingly sweet.

“Felicity, I wanted to apologise,” Oliver says quietly. The easy-going smile fades from his face, replaced instead with all the pain and guilt that he’s carried back with him since he returned home. “My sister gave— My sister pointed out to me that I have been very distant lately, and that it would probably be in my best interests to let someone in.”

“Why me?”

“You’ve always been better at reading me. And you listen.” The corners of his lips twitch. “Despite all the babbling.”

Felicity throws her spoon at him. He catches it deftly, and she can’t help wondering whether his reflexes were as good before.

“I happen to like the babbling,” he adds hastily, tossing the spoon back to her.

(Felicity’s reflexes, unfortunately, are not as good as Oliver’s.)

Oliver’s mouth quirks into a half smile as Felicity searches in the sofa cushions for the errant spoon. By the time she’s pulled it out (really, why catching it ever seemed like a good idea is beyond her; she should have known it would backfire spectacularly on her) the smile has been replaced with a sad, pensive expression that seems a permanent fixture on Oliver’s face since his return.

He combs a hand restlessly through his hair before speaking. “Everyone seems to think that the island has just prepared me to embrace the responsibilities of the real world, but the truth is, it changed me completely,” he says, suddenly interested in the ragged patch on Felicity’s carpet courtesy of her cat, Robin. (A not so subtle nod from her cousin, Lois, to her sadly single life.) “The person I was before is… He’s not someone I can ever be again, but neither is the person everyone seems to think I am, either.”

“So be yourself,” Felicity says. She’s having a terrible sense of déjà vu; she and Oliver had this same conversation five years ago.

(Some things, obviously, have not changed.)
“That’s what Laurel said I should do, and… Well, you saw how that turned out.”

Felicity ignores the nervous twist in her stomach at the mention of Laurel’s name. He’s allowed to talk about it. “Are you talking about the stunt the other day on TV, or the fact that you didn’t call?”

(That last bit was supposed to be to herself. Or it would have been if she had any kind of mental filter.)

Oliver ducks his head sheepishly. “The Applied Sciences Centre opening. Which, as you already pointed out, made me look like a jerk.”

“But you didn’t have to act like a jerk,” Felicity points out. Oliver has been given a second chance to do something good with his life and she can’t understand why he’s so reluctant to take it. “There are other ways to tell your mother you’re not interested in running the family business than making a fool of yourself on live television. Just because everyone expects you to act like an ass all the time doesn’t mean you have to.”

Oliver shakes his head. “The things I have to do— My family is better off being as far away from me as possible.”

“And pushing everyone away is going to solve your problems how?” Felicity asks sharply, mouth full of ice cream.

“It’s for their own safety, Felicity. I can’t risk any more people getting hurt because of what I’ve done.”

Felicity jabs her spoon at him accusingly. “What happened to Sara wasn’t your fault. And besides, aren’t you hurting them by keeping them away? They’ve spent the last five years thinking you were dead, Oliver. And now that you’re back, you’re no better.”

“Obviously, it’s not what I want, but I don’t have any other choice!” Oliver protests. “What I’m doing—”

“—Is obviously not so dangerous that you have to keep me away. What makes me so special, Oliver? Why aren’t you pushing me away too?”

“You know how I feel about you, Felicity.”

“Do I?” Felicity retorts, temper rising again. “Because I feel an awful lot like I’ve been riding an emotional roller coaster these last few weeks that can’t decide if it’s taking me to the land of makeup or breakup. Not that we can really breakup since we aren’t dating, but—”

Whatever she was about to say (God only knows what was going to come out of her mouth because she certainly doesn’t) is silenced as Oliver moves from the floor with the agility of a cat and fixes his lips gently against hers. There’s a moment of shock as her brain tries to catch up and then her mind goes blissfully numb as sensation washes over her and she gives in to instinct.

After a moment, Oliver pulls away gently, forehead pressed against hers. His thumb brushes the line of her jaw gently and an electric shock courses the length of Felicity’s spine.

“Does that clear things up a little?” he asks softly.

Felicity nods, still trying to pull herself back to reality. Coherent sentences will come later.

Oliver smiles. “Good.” He glances at his watch. It’s obviously expensive; there are several small
dials on the watch face that measure God knows what (it’s not the time), and the hands point to an hour that is well past Felicity’s bedtime. “Listen, I have to go, but I’ll call you, okay?”

Felicity nods again. “You do have my number,” she says weakly.

Oliver chuckles, patting the pocket of his pants. She can see the outline of his wallet (or maybe his phone or—Nope, not going to think about that. It’s the wrong part of his pants, anyways.) through the fabric; no doubt the business card she slipped in his pocket during their date is there. (She’s not usually that kind of girl but it seemed less awkward than asking for his number.)

“I do. And I’ll give you mine so that if I forget to call, you can remind me not to be a jerk anymore,” he says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out an old receipt and a pen.

He scrawls his number hastily on the upper corner, and passes it to her.

“Noted,” Felicity says, taking the paper from his hands and tucking it in the strap of her tank top. (She doesn’t miss the way Oliver’s eyes track her movements.) “There will be reminders. Lots of reminders. Probably more than you want.”

Oliver presses a soft kiss to her forehead. “That’s my girl.”

His words give Felicity a thrill. My girl. I’m his girl.

(It isn’t until after he’s gone that she realises the receipt with his number on it is from a metallurgist’s. The items are intriguing.)

(Later that night, in bed, the first puzzle piece clicks into place.) He gets a text from Felicity the next morning after breakfast.

This is just a friendly reminder not to be a jerk.

A smile tugs at the corner of his lips.

“Oh my God. What is wrong with your face?”

Oliver whirls around to see Thea approaching him, looking horrified.

“What do you mean?” He’s one hundred percent positive that his adventures last night left him unscathed.

She frowns. “There’s something really weird on it. Like this thing with your mouth— It looks like a—”

Oliver rolls his eyes. Of course. “I know—”

“—Is it a smile?”

“That’s cute.”

(This shouldn’t be such a big deal. It’s not the first time he’s smiled.)

Thea smirks. She looks entirely too pleased with herself and he knows exactly why. “Why are you grinning?”
“I took your advice with Felicity to be myself.”

Thea’s smirk widens into a grin. “And…”

“And it’s helping.”

“Good. I have mad relationship skills bro. Just let me know if you need any trendy places to propose.”

Oliver shakes his head. “You’re getting a little bit ahead of yourself.” He pinches his thumb and index finger together to demonstrate.

Thea sticks her tongue out at him and saunters up the stairs.

(Later, when they’re dragging him into the precinct in handcuffs, his phone buzzing merrily away in the evidence bag, he can only hope that Felicity will watch the nine o’clock news.)
Cellblock Tango

Chapter Summary

Oliver is arrested on suspicion of being the Hood, and Felicity isn’t sure how to cope with her maybe-boyfriend being in jail.

Or the one where Oliver thinks he has everyone fooled and Felicity decides it’s time she starts digging a little deeper into Oliver’s extracurricular activities.

Chapter Notes

This is officially the end of the banked chapters! Fingers crossed that I will still be able to keep updating every week but classes start this week and then the insanity of life will begin and I don't know how much free time I am going to have.

This time, Felicity is a little concerned when Oliver doesn’t call. Last time, she figured he was taking time to process everything and adjust to being back in the real world and having to act like a normal person, but this time, after everything they talked about two nights ago, she knows he’s going to call. They’ve agreed that the best way for him to get over all this is to let someone in, and he made it pretty clear she’s that person.

(Not to mention the multiple text messages she's sent reminding him about it.)

So when two days go by without any word, Felicity starts to freak out a little bit. She almost calls him three times, but doesn’t because it is possible that he’s busy, or that when he says he’ll call her, it will take him a little longer than the ordinary person because of, well, everything. He’ll call when he’s ready.

(That doesn’t stop her from panicking about all the horrible things that could have happened to him, however.)

Her cousin Lois calls that evening, and Felicity spends the entire conversation watching for the flash of the call waiting button in case Oliver tries to call.

(Even if he does call, she’s not sure she can end the conversation with Lois in time to answer. There’s a reason her cousin is The Daily Planet’s star investigative journalist.)

“—So I told Luthor that if he thinks he can just scare me off the trail of a good story because he’s got scary mob connections just about everywhere in the world that he had another thing— Felicity? Are you even listening to me?”

“Hmm? Yes,” Felicity says hastily, pulling her fingernails out of her mouth. She’s fallen back into her old habit since Oliver’s return. “Yes. Definitely listening to you.”

Lois snorts. “I’ve spent my entire life pretending to listen to people, Fee. You can’t pull that one on
“Sorry,” Felicity says, dragging a hand through her hair. “I’ve had a lot on my mind lately. Work stuff, mostly. And personal stuff. A lot of stuff.”

“Really?” Felicity can practically hear the smirk she knows is on her cousin’s face. “What kind of personal stuff?”

(She really should never have said anything.)

“Nothing.”

“Felicity.”

“It’s nothing, really—”

Anything Felicity was about to say vanishes from her mind as she catches sight of the banner flashing at the bottom of the nine o’clock news bulletin.

**OLIVER QUEEN ARRESTED ON SUSPICION OF VIGILANTE ACTIVITY**

“Lois, I’m going to have to call you back.”

She hangs up before Lois can finish protesting. There will be a dozen messages from her cousin later, demanding an explanation, but right now, Felicity couldn’t care less.

The news bulletin is fairly brief; the newscaster simply states that Oliver Queen, newly returned to Starling after a five year disappearance, has been arrested by the SCPD on the suspicion of being the vigilante known as the Hood. They then launch into a long description of Oliver’s past arrests (there are a lot more of them than Felicity had thought), none of which is really relevant to the more pressing issue at hand: that Oliver is in jail. Because the police think that he is a hooded vigilante.

The newscaster seems to have trouble believing that a billionaire playboy known for his womanising nature and total lack of responsibility would moonlight as a bow-wielding crusader of justice. Felicity has her own suspicions about what Oliver may or may not do in his spare time, but they are currently eclipsed by the more pressing issue of Oliver being in jail.

He doesn’t answer any of Felicity’s four phone calls—not that she expects him too; the police have probably confiscated his phone.

She’ll have to go to the police station in the morning. They may not let her see him, but at least then she might be able to get some more information.

(All she needs is two minutes in the station to hack their network.)

As she lies in bed that night staring at the shadows cast on her ceiling from the streetlamp outside, Felicity considers breaking him out. Not like Tom Cruise in one of those *Mission: Impossible* movies (though it might be hilarious to everyone else to watch her try), but hacking the network and changing Oliver’s file or cutting the power or something. Anything to give him the time to slip out of there.

It’s a monumentally **stupid** idea. First of all, it’s definitely not legal, and she swore to herself that she’d give up all illegal activity after the whole fiasco with Cooper in first year.
(She made a small exception over the last five years when searching for Oliver. Not that it matters, all of her activity was completely untraceable.)

There's also the small part of her brain that can't help wondering if this is exactly what Oliver wants. The publicity is great for the irresponsible jerk image he's been projecting ever since he returned to Starling, and if he really is the man behind the hood…

Felicity doesn't know for sure if Oliver is the man behind the hood, but it seems like a pretty reasonable explanation for everything that he's done since coming back from Starling: the douchebag attitude; the total lack of responsibility when Felicity knows he's been through hell and back to get home; the mysterious disappearances; the fact that his welcome party was conveniently located right next to Adam Hunt's office building, where the vigilante was seen stealing forty billion dollars; the receipt from the metallurgist's for an order of carbon fibre tubes on which he'd written his number; and the need to keep his family at arm's length all the time.

It makes a whole lot more sense than the image Oliver is trying to present: that he came back from the island no different from the man he was before.

(Honestly, she's surprised anybody's buying it. They should know that five years on a deserted island changes people.)

If it is Oliver behind the hood, however, then he's obviously gotten himself arrested for a reason. A man who goes to such care to keep his true nature a secret, particularly when it's at the expense of his own happiness, wouldn't be careless enough to get caught.

It's a genius plan. If the police arrest Oliver now and he manages to prove to them he's not the Hood, then they have no reason to suspect him later. If he can prove to the that he's not the Hood.

(Which is a pretty big if, considering, you know, he is the Hood.

She thinks.

Maybe, when this is all over, she'll have time to prove it.)

There is a mess of reporters swarming outside the police station when Felicity pulls up. It takes her twenty minutes to find a spot to park her Mini, leaving her with frayed nerves and a lot less patience than when she set out from her apartment an hour ago.

(This is probably a bad thing.)

Oliver still isn't answering his phone, though, at this point, Felicity is really only calling to hear his voicemail. The sound of his voice in her ear is soothing reminder that he's still alive.

(He should be. No one gets killed in a holding cell, and there's no reason for them to have put him in jail, where he could actually get killed.)

She wishes she had his bodyguard's number. John isn't in jail, and he probably has a better idea of what's going on than Felicity does.

(She has no idea what's going on. Barring the nine o'clock news report last night and her theories about Oliver's secret life.)

Making it into the lobby is the easy part. The press have no interest in a lowlife from the IT department at QC. Getting in to see Oliver is the hard part.
"I just want to speak to him for two minutes. It's very important," Felicity says for what feels like the hundredth time.

(It probably is.)

The officer shakes his head. "I can't allow any visitors, Miss. His lawyer only got ten minutes."

"It's really important. Like life and death important—"

"Can I help you?"

There are a million different things to say running through Felicity's mind, all of which vanish when she turns around and comes face-to-face with Laurel Lance. She's immaculately dressed in black slacks and a plum coloured sweater and wears a look of contempt that Felicity can swear is directed at the officer and not her.

"No," the officer begins.

"Yes," Felicity says at the same time.

Laurel frowns. "What's the issue, officer?"

"This woman is trying to get in to see Mr Queen, Miss Lance, but I have strict orders from Det. Lance that he is not permitted visitors. You weren't even supposed to be allowed in."

Felicity has never seen daggers shoot out of someone's eyes before, but she's pretty sure Laurel could do it right now.

"I'm Mr Queen's attorney," she says icily. "I have a right to speak with him."

"You maybe, but she doesn't."

Laurel shoots the officer one last deadly look before turning to Felicity with a smile. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Felicity?"

"Um, yes. But I have to ask, how do you know my name?" Felicity asks as Laurel steers her off to the side. "I mean, I know who you are because I've seen you in the papers before, but we've never actually seen each other before, unless you count Oliver's welcome back party—I mean I was there and you were there but we didn't actually talk to each other—and you did not pull me aside to listen to me babble. Obviously."

Laurel smiles. "Oliver mentioned that you might come by. He said you'd probably be freaked out and that I should expect a lot of talking."

"Oh." Felicity's cheeks flush, touched by Oliver's concern. "Right. So he's okay then?"

(The blush deepens when that last part registers. She's going to kill Oliver when she gets her hands on him.)

"He's fine. A lot better than most people would be in his situation, actually. Actually, it kind of feels like he's been through this before."

Felicity shrugs; she doesn't know exactly what went on in the five years Oliver was away, but there was probably a lot of torture involved. "I think he went through a lot over the last five years."

"More than he's willing to talk about."
(It's in this moment that Felicity realises she and Laurel might actually become friends.)

"Anyway, if you want to see Oliver, I can sneak you in for five minutes or so. Nobody's watching him right now because my father's got them setting up that stupid polygraph test."

Felicity swallows, heart hammering in her throat. "Polygraph test?"

"My father's convinced Ollie's not telling the truth so he volunteered to do one." Laurel rolls her eyes, clearly not impressed with the display of male ego.

Felicity is more concerned about the fact that Oliver has agreed to take a lie detector test. Unless fooling a polygraph is one of those things that you learn on a deserted island, there's no way he can pretend not to be the Hood.

(She's totally abandoned the notion that her theory could be wrong.)

Then again, operating under the assumption that Oliver planned to get arrested, he probably expected this. Which means he probably knows how to get around it.

"Felicity?"

Laurel is staring at her, mildly concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, um, yeah. Totally fine. Just, you know, police stations make me a little jumpy." She forces her best smile.

"Okay." Laurel doesn't look convinced, but doesn't argue either. "Come on. We don't have a lot of time."

The SCPD holding room is tiny. If Oliver were so inclined, he could walk the length of the room in three strides. The only source of light come from the stark bulb in the centre of the ceiling and the tiny window in the door, though the latter isn't big enough to make any significant contribution.

(It doesn't even offer a great view; all Oliver can see is the corner of a desk and a three feet of the hallway.)

Not that he's particularly interested in window gazing right now. Detective Lance has insisted that he take a polygraph—well, Oliver volunteered, but only because it was becoming apparent that Quentin Lance was not going to believe a word that came out of his mouth otherwise—and he needs to focus on preparing his answers. He can't predict all the questions they're going to ask, but he knows that there's only so much of his past he can reveal at this point.

(Or any point, really. He's not ready to talk about most of what happened to him on the island. He might never be.)

Beating the polygraph isn't hard. The machine is designed to detect the spike in heart rate and blood pressure associated with lying. If he can keep his heart rate within a normal range during the interrogation, it doesn't matter what bullshit is coming out of his mouth—the machine won't pick it up. He's used polygraphs before. He's beaten polygraphs before. He can do it again, but he needs to stay focused.

(The whole purpose of being arrested is to clear his name, not incriminate himself.)

Though if he were to be found guilty and convicted, perhaps it would be just as well.
No. He can't think like that. He must finish his father's crusade. There will be time to atone for his own sins, but first he must respect his father's wishes.

Oliver has begun to understand the appeal of the holding cell to a police officer during his time here. He came here with a plan: do everything in his power to retain the irresponsible image he's been projecting since his return and deflect all suspicion so that when the police release him, he can continue on his mission without worrying about the SCPD getting in the way.

(He has no doubt they'll keep looking for him—Lance will never give it up—but they won't be able to catch him in the hood.)

The doubts start creeping into his mind in the middle of the night. In the brief moments when the interrogation ceases and the exhaustion threaten to overtake him, Oliver wonders if this is the right plan. Should he be trying to exonerate himself? What right does he have to walk free? True, the lives on his hands since returning to Starling are those of people who have done terrible things to this city, but how are they any worse than him? Their crimes may have impacted the lives of hundreds of people, but does that make them any worse than him, a man who has killed and worse?

Maybe Lance is right. What right does he have to deliver justice when his own hands are stained just as dark?

The sound of the door snapping open echoes through the room like a gunshot. Oliver tries his best not to flinch, bracing himself for the next onslaught of questions, but the figure slipping into the door is far more soothing.

"Felicity."

Her name falls from his lips like a whisper, or maybe a prayer. He mentioned to Laurel this morning that she might be by, but he never expected she would actually come. (He should have known better than to doubt her.)

"Oliver. Oh my God." Felicity swallows. Oliver can see her hands trembling and wants to reach out and gather them in his own. "Are you okay? God, you look awful. And by that I mean awful for you which is really not that awful at all because you're beautiful—seriously, the genes in your family are insane— Did that really just come out of my mouth? God, I'm just going to stop right now before I drive myself crazy or you crazy and then you'll wish I'd never come—"

"Felicity." Oliver's voice belies a calm he hasn't been feeling since they brought him in here. He rises to his feet slowly, chair squeaking in protest against the linoleum. "Come here," he says softly, overcome with a sudden urge to hold her and pretend that the world outside doesn't exist.

He barely has time to open his arms before Felicity is in them, holding onto him like he's her lifeline. (She should really know it's the other way around.)

"I was so worried about you," she whispers, face pressed into his chest. "I mean, I know we haven't talked about us or anything yet, but I still— When I saw you were in jail—"

"Hey," Oliver interrupts softly, one hand rubbing soothing circles on her back, "I'm okay."

Felicity lets out a breath. "Good. Because I have a really overactive imagination and it was kind of going haywire last night."
There's something, a strange look in her eyes that Oliver can't decipher like she's hiding something from him, but he brushes it off. It's nothing that needs discussing now.

"I'm fine," he repeats, pressing his lips to the crown of her head. He can smell the sweet, fruity scent of her shampoo; the scent eases some of the tension building in his shoulders like a powder keg primed for detonation. "I'll be glad when this is all over."

Felicity nods. A lock of hair escapes from her ponytail and Oliver brushes it back gently. "Me too. It'll be nice to have you to myself again." A blush blooms across her cheeks. "And by that I mean not having to visit you in a police station."

Oliver chuckles. "I'd like that."

There's more he wants to say, words lingering on the tip of his tongue, the temptation dancing in the back of his mind to just tell her and get it over with, but a sharp rap on the door cuts him off.

"You have to go," he says, gently pushing her away. "The officers will be back any minute."

Felicity looks up at him, eyes very large behind her glasses. Oliver has never noticed how blue they are before.

(A small part of him is surprised at the steely determination in her eyes where most women would show fear, but the larger part of him isn't. She's not most women.)

"I know." She pushes her glasses up her nose. "I just— Be safe, Oliver."

He can hear the words she doesn't say.

I've already lost you once. Don't make me go through it again.

"I will," he promises, squeezing her hand.
Chapter Summary

Oliver is released on bail and decides to celebrate with a party. Felicity wholeheartedly disapproves.

(So does Oliver, but he has appearances to keep and a name to clear.)

Chapter Notes

This chapter was supposed to be the beginning of Felicity's adventures as a detective, but the party ended up snowballing into something much bigger than I planned on it being, and got it's own chapter. There's some dialogue borrowed from S1 here because I thought it was too good to waste, but it's all used in a new context.

The next chapter will feature Det. Smoak. I promise!

Oliver is released on bail the next day. Felicity doesn’t go to the arraignment—it’s going to be a media circus outside the courthouse and the last thing she needs is her relationship with Oliver splashed over the covers of all the magazines in Starling before the two of them have figured out what’s going on; instead she spends the whole morning cleaning her apartment.

(It’s not dirty, but having something to do keeps her mind off what might be happening to Oliver right now.)

She’s so busy trying not to think about Oliver that she nearly jumps out other skin when her cell phone buzzes. She left it on the kitchen counter, and the sound echoes through the apartment twice as loud as usual.

Her hands are shaking so badly from leftover adrenaline that she almost drops the phone twice.

*I'm okay. They’ve let me out on bail with a GPS tracker. No fear of losing me now.*

Felicity doesn’t think she’s imagining the note of bitterness. Which makes total sense—he can’t exactly be running around saving the city with a GPS tracking bracelet on his ankle.

*That’s better than being in jail! Not that they would arrest you right away, because obviously they need evidence which they don’t have, but the judge could have decided no bail until the trial which would have sucked because jail.*

(A regular person would probably be able to filter their text messages *a little bit.*)

Fortunately, Oliver doesn’t seem to mind that the rambling extends to all forms of communication.

*Always looking on the bright side ;)*
Felicity isn’t sure what to make of the wink face. Is this some kind of innuendo that she doesn’t understand? Did she make some kind of intentional innuendo?

Also, I’m having a little release celebration tonight if you want to come over. Should be starting around 8.

Felicity swallows. Oliver is inviting her to come over to his house. To meet his friends. Granted, she’s already met Tommy and Laurel, but neither of them know that she and Oliver are… Well, she doesn’t know exactly what they are right yet, but it seems like they’re heading in that direction.

Okay. Yeah. Sure. I’ll be there.

(It doesn’t occur to her until much later that she never thought to ask for directions.)

It becomes very apparent as soon as she pulls into the drive in front of the Queen manor (which is a really inaccurate term—Oliver lives in a freaking castle) that this is not a little release celebration. There are cars lining both sides of the drive, and the grounds are full of scantily-clad people gyrating to the beats pumping out of the giant stereo units hiding behind the shrubs.

There is no sign of Oliver or Tommy or Laurel or anyone that Felicity knows. She seriously considers turning around and going home again—her super cute jeans-and-sweater ensemble is definitely not going to cut it for tonight, and she’s really not in the mood to party à la rich-and-famous—but her car is parked all the way at the end of the drive and she doesn’t feel like walking all the way back.

"Felicity!"

Felicity whirls at the sound of her name, expecting to see Oliver, or at the very least Laurel or Tommy.

She doesn't expect to find herself face-to-face with Thea Queen.

Thea looks almost nothing like the girl Felicity glimpsed at the QC Christmas party all those years ago. She and Oliver have the same striking facial features, but whereas Oliver grew up to be a super-hot and also very muscular man, Thea has the grace and delicacy of a supermodel.

It's weird; Felicity has watched her grow up in the tabloids, from the girl in the black dress crying over her father and brother's tombstones to the girl with a dangerous habit for drugs and parties, and yet, she realises that she really knows nothing about Thea.

(It's no secret that TMZ is all junk.)

Thea's grin looks like it should be featured in a Crest Whitestrips commercial. Felicity wonders how it is that the Queens have managed to inherit only beautiful genes.

"It is Felicity, right? Ollie mentioned you once—which is not a bad thing; Ollie never talks to anyone about anything these days—but I wasn't sure if you were her. I'm sorry. Does that make any sense?"

Felicity smiles, feeling a little bit more comfortable. They may be perfect on the outside, but it seems that Thea may be as flawed on the inside as her brother.

(Really, no one starts a drug habit that young unless they've got some serious problems.
"Actually, yes. But probably only because I have the horrible habit of babbling all the time, which Oliver's probably mentioned to you. He seems to be telling everyone lately."

Thea laughs. "That's my brother; never thinking about other people before he opens his mouth."

Felicity finds that this definition of Oliver doesn't match the man she knows at all, until she remembers that as far as Thea is concerned, Oliver is a damaged asshole. "He's not as callous as you think he is. He's just trying to get his feet under him again."

Thea rolls her eyes. "Maybe, but he's got a funny way of going about. Throwing a massive party is the last thing I'd want to do if I'd been stuck on a deserted island for the last five years."

(She has a point there.)

Felicity has no idea how to respond to Thea's comment without sounding like an idiot. Fortunately, Thea has already moved on to another topic.

"So I hear you've got some pretty good matchmaking skills," she says with a knowing wink.

Felicity swallows. Of all the things she wants to be talking about with her maybe-boyfriend's sister, this is not one of them.

"Tommy mentioned that he came to you for advice about the whole Laurel situation," Thea adds, seeing the discomfort on Felicity's face. "He came to me for advice too." She grins. "Another thing we have in common."

Felicity chuckles, remembering the first night she met Tommy at Oliver's welcome back party. "It wasn't exactly matchmaking. More like him talking about all the reasons he couldn't go after her and me drinking way too much whiskey and making very inappropriate comments."

Thea snorts. "Either way, you made an impression. I'm not the only one he consults for his relationship advice anymore. Which is probably a good thing—I am wise beyond my years but it's a little creepy when a twenty-seven year-old is always asking you for relationship advice."

"Speaking of relationship advice, I meant to thank you for the other day. Whatever you said to Oliver really helped him out of whatever hole he dug for himself."

Thea's lips twitch. "He does that, doesn't he? Got the whole 'dark and broody' thing down pat."

Felicity laughs. He really does.

"Felicity!"

Oliver looks like he's just stepped out of The Shawshank Redemption in an all-denim outfit, complete with the little prison number stitched onto his shirt.

He presses a quick kiss to her cheek, one hand resting on the small of her back. "I'm glad you could make it."

Felicity shoots him a look. "This is not a small get together. A small get together involves wine and cheese and people sitting around listening to Norah Jones and making small talk. Not scantily clad twenty-somethings doing Jaegerbombs and dancing to Usher remixes."

Oliver laughs nervously. "It wasn't supposed to be this big." He glances around, rubbing the back
of his neck. "Things just got a little out of hand."

Thea gives a loud cough that sounds suspiciously like *Bullshit*. Oliver shoots her a pointed look, which she ignores.

Felicity's eyebrows rise. That lie might have worked with the airheads dancing by the open bar, but it's not going to work with her. "Really? Because it looks to me like you hired a DJ and bar service for exactly this big a party."

Oliver sighs. "Felicity, I—"

"You have an image to maintain. I get it. Well, actually I don't get it at all, but if you want to act like a giant douche all the time instead of being yourself, that's your problem."

(She does understand why he's doing this, but since he isn't ready to tell her how he spends his nights, she's going to have to feign ignorance.)

Thea snorts. *Smooth bro*, she mouths, before flitting away, smirking.

"Sorry," Oliver mutters. "I probably should have said something."

"You definitely should have said something, but that's beside the point." Felicity shoots a glance at Oliver's outfit. "You could have at least let me know about the dress code."

"Felicity!"

*Again?*

(For a girl who knows almost no-one at this party, she sure feels popular.)

Laurel lets the front door swing shut behind her. She, apparently, didn't get the memo about the dress code either; her cream sweater and grey slacks make her look like she's just come from the office.

She flashes both of them a wide smile. Felicity returns it with only a small flutter of nervousness in her stomach.

(She's probably reading way to much into this but it seems ridiculously unfair to her that Laurel looks flawless *every time* they see each other.)

Which *has* only been a grand total of three times.)

"It's so great to see you," Laurel says, pulling Felicity into a hug before she has the chance to step away. "I wasn't sure if Ollie was going to invite you to this *little get together*, but I'm glad he did."

Felicity flashes a wry smile. "I'm glad to know I'm not the only one who thought this was going to be a little get together."

Oliver groans. "Are you ever going to let that go?"

Laurel and Felicity exchange smiles. "Never."

Oliver mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like, *Great, now there's two of them.*

Laurel glances around the house, shaking her head. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve been to a party here.”
Oliver grins. “I can. Halloween 2005. Tommy moved his party here at the last minute because he forgot that his father was having a dinner with Merlyn Global investors.”

Laurel groans. “I wore those awful fishnets.”

“I thought you looked pretty good in them, actually.”

(Felicity wishes her cheeks weren’t so red right now. There is absolutely no reason she should be feeling like a third wheel right now. Well, maybe a little.)

“Listen, I just came here to apologise for my father’s behaviour today with the whole polygraph thing,” Laurel says. Felicity is willing to bet every dollar in her bank account that the other woman has realised exactly how this looks to Felicity. The fact that she’s doing something about it makes Felicity think that they can definitely be friends.

Oliver shakes his head. “You don’t have to apologise for him. He has a right to feel anyway that he wants.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just Sara.”

“What?”

There’s a sad look on Laurel’s face, the kind Felicity has seen before people are about to unload a whole lot of personal crap. She suddenly feels like an unwanted voyeur.

“I’ll, uh, be going then,” she says, clearing her throat nervously. “To get a drink or something. Away from here.”

Oliver opens his mouth to say something, but she scurries off before he can say anything else, Laurel’s eyes burning holes in her back every step of the way.

Oliver has screwed up big time.

He should have said something to Felicity before she left. He would have if he’d bothered to think about how this might look to her before she was making her excuses and slinking away.

(There’s a reason he was hesitant to embark on this whole dating thing.)

Things aren't going to be the way they were before. He knows that. He's accepted that the damage done to him in the last five years is not going anywhere, and that it's going to take him a long time to get back to a point where he can get through the day without being haunted by memories of what he's done.

That doesn't mean he isn't frustrated with himself. He doesn't want to be like this. There's a large part of him inside that wants to have a normal life: a house, a girlfriend, the prospect of children in the future.

None of that is possible for him anymore.

(Maybe it could be, if he weren't so incapable of having normal relationships with people anymore.)

He doesn’t need Laurel to point any of this out to him, but she does anyway.
“You should probably go find Felicity,” she says, as she gathers her car keys. “You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Oliver sighs, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I know. I have enough women who hate me in my life already.”

“I don’t hate you, Ollie.”

This is another thing that amazes him. “I don’t know why. You should.”

“I did. For a long time. And then today, I realised I’d been so focused on what had happened to my family that I didn’t even stop and wonder what could have happened to you. I didn’t know about the tortures, or the scars… What happened to you on that island was far more than you deserved and I was wrong that I didn’t ask you before. I want to ask you now, I want to see,”—she takes a deep breath, swiping a hand under her eyes—“but I’m not the one you should be showing these things to. I’m not the one you need to let into your life, Ollie.” She flashes him a small, sad smile. “I don’t hate you, Ollie. But neither does she.”

Oliver nods, swallowing. "You know, Tommy's outside by the DJ tent. I'm officially hosting the party, but he's the one who's really handling things. You should stop by and say hello before you go.”

He's still not sure how he feels about their budding relationship, but all he's ever wanted is for his two best friends to be happy, and if that's with each other, than he'll support them.

(God knows they both deserve it.)

Laurel lifts one shoulder, a small smile curling on her lips."It's been a long day. Besides, I'm sure he's busy handling things."  

( Oliver is beginning to think he might not be the only one having trouble with relationships.)

Tommy, as it turns out, is not alone. Oliver spots him standing with Felicity at the bar.

(The green best rears its head briefly, but Oliver pushes it down. He might have been concerned before, but Tommy's newfound devotion to Laurel makes him think his best friend won't be sleeping around any time soon.)

"Sounds like you've had many exciting evenings, Mr Merlyn," Felicity is saying as Oliver approaches. There's a note of skepticism in her voice.

Tommy grins. "I don't remember most of them, but from what I hear, they were memorable. Isn't that right, Ollie?"

Felicity shifts uncomfortably, suddenly interested in the rim of her glass. Oliver isn't sure what she's drinking, but it looks suspiciously like a Coke.

"Uh, yeah," he says distractedly, glancing at Felicity. "Could I talk to you for a minute?"

Tommy smirks. "I know when I'm not wanted," he says gallantly, stepping away from the bar. "Catch you later, Ollie."

Tommy's exit is followed by a painfully awkward silence. Oliver knows that he is the one who should be talking right now, but he acn't seem to find any words.
"Do you want to go upstairs? It's, uh, quieter there."

Felicity fiddles with her glass. For a terrible moment, Oliver thinks she's going to say no, that she just wants to go home, but then she nods.

The walk upstairs is silent. Oliver can feel his heart pounding painfully against his ribcage and wonders if Felicity can hear it beating as loudly as he can.

He's never been this nervous around a woman before. Maybe it's the fact that he's been away for so long, that he's so out of practice, but he thinks it has more to do with the fact that he's desperate not to ruin the one good thing that's happened in his life in a long time.

Vaguely, Oliver wonders how John is doing. It's crucial to the plan that John be seen as the Hood while Oliver is clearly engaged elsewhere; it's the whole reason he threw this party in the first place. Oliver could care less about celebrating his release from jail—it's not the first time he's been released on bail and it probably won't be the last—but the party provides the perfect alibi. The police will have no choice but to drop the charges and let him go free.

Felicity makes an immediate beeline for the first door on the right. Oliver puts a hand on her arm, corners of his lips twitching as he remembers the night they met.

"My room is this way," he says quietly.

Felicity blushes. "Oh. Right. I assumed that was your room because that's where you and Sara were, well—going to do things, since you hadn't actually done anything yet when I walked in on you— one of the most embarrassing moments of my life, by the way."

"I'm glad it is. Not that it's your most embarrassing, but that it's a moment. That happened."

(The thought of stuffing his fist in his mouth to stop the flow of words is looking very appealing right now.)

The red patches blooming on Felicity's cheeks grow. "I'm kind of glad too."

Oliver smiles. A strange warmth blooms in the pit of his stomach, something he hasn't felt in such a long time he's not even sure he knows what it is anymore.

"Here we are," he says, opening the door and stepping aside to let Felicity into his room.

Felicity glances around the room. Oliver suddenly feels very nervous that she won't like it. (It's stupid, but it's been a very long time since a girl has been in his room.)

"Wow. This place is almost the size of my apartment."

Oliver scratches the back of his neck. "Uh, yeah."

(It really is, but he needs to spit this apology out before the words get lost again.)

"Look, the whole thing with Laurel… I should have said something—I just—I didn’t realise what it might look like to you until it was too late. I’m sorry."

"Hey," Felicity says softly, putting a hand on his arm. "It’s okay. You’ve been through a lot in the last couple days."

"So have you."
“Yeah, well it was nothing compared to what you had to go through. You know, polygraphs, and bail hearings, and reliving all the horrible things that happened to you while you were gone—”

Oliver blinks, surprised. He’s never talked to Felicity about what happened to him during the polygraph test. It’s not something he wanted to think about; reliving it once was enough. “How did you know?”

Felicity rolls her eyes as if it’s the most obvious thing ever and Oliver has the uncontrollable urge to kiss her. She knows him better than he even knows himself. “It was all over your face, Oliver. I figured that Det. Lance would ask you some pretty uncomfortable questions and when I saw you, I figured he was right. I mean, if I were stranded on a desert island and then I came back and a vigilante magically appeared in the city with a pretty specific skill set, I wouldn’t be surprised if the police came sniffing around.”

For a second, Oliver wonders if she knows. How she can know, when he’s gone to such lengths to keep it all a secret is beyond him, but he wouldn’t put it past her; she’s the one who knows him better than anyone else, after all.

“I— I had to think about a lot of things I never wanted to think about again today,” he says slowly. “Things I had to do— things that happened to me while I was gone. It’s not pretty, but— Well, Laurel got to hear about it all at the polygraph test and so it’s only fair that—”

The words are starting to spin out of control and he has no idea how to get them back on track again.

“Oliver.”

Felicity’s hands cover his, her skin soft and warm against his own calloused fingers.

“You don’t have to tell me anything that you don’t want to. It doesn’t matter if you’ve had to tell it to Laurel or Det. Lance, or the whole freaking city. I’ll never make you tell me anything.”

Oliver doesn’t know what to say. Ever since he’s come back, everyone has been pushing him to open up, to talk about what happened so that they can all help put him back together again, like he’s a piece of pottery that’s fallen off the shelf. They don’t seem to understand that he can’t be fixed; he’s been damaged beyond repair.

Felicity is the only one who has never pushed him. He’s lied to her more times than he ever wanted to since coming back, and though he’s pretty sure she sees through it all, she’s never said anything.

(He might be in love with her. Right now in this moment, when he isn’t thinking about what he does with his nights or who he is or what he’s done, he loves her more than he’s ever loved anything.)

He tells her everything: the torture; how Sara’s death was all his fault; how awful it was to sit there and talk about things he wasn’t ready to remember in front of the person who probably hates him the most. He tells her all the things Laurel told him moments before—about her father’s alcoholism and their divorce and how she doesn’t hate him even though she should.

(He’s not sure that he should be sharing this with Felicity, but the words just keep coming out. He wonders if this is what she feels like all the time.)

It’s long, and painful, but Felicity listens patiently, her hands wrapped around his, grounding him. Her eyes are shining by the time he’s finished, but she doesn’t say a word.
There’s a moment of silence after he finishes that seems to stretch on for ages before Felicity finally speaks.

“I’ve wanted to ask this a million times before today, but I didn’t want to push you to talk about things you weren’t ready to remember. And I know it’s terrible and selfish of me to ask this of you today after everything that you’ve been through, but I need to know because my imagination is doing some pretty horrible things right now. I need to—Can I—?” She gestures wordlessly at his shirt. He notices that her fingers are trembling, and he wraps them in his own, returning her earlier gesture.

“Are you sure?” he asks quietly. His scars are reminders of a dark part of his past, one he doesn’t want to burden her with.

Felicity nods, bottom lip clamped between her teeth. “I’m going to see them eventually, aren’t I?”

The corners of Oliver’s lips twitch. She will. Hopefully.

Unbuttoning his shirt is a long and painful process. His fingers are shaking so badly he can barely manage the buttons. Felicity’s fingers twitch in her lap, but she makes no move to help him, and for that he’s grateful.

At first, Felicity stares. Oliver watches her eyes rove over his chest, debating whether or not she can reach out and touch. After a moment, she reaches a hand tentatively to brush the edge of his shirt out of the way. Her fingers skim over one of his scars; the touch feels like a live wire searing his skin.

She moves slowly after that, exploring each one of the scars marring his torso. Her fingers are gentle, and for the first time in a long time, Oliver feels a strange sense of peace.

“How did you survive this?” she asks thickly.

Oliver swallows, trying to remember how his vocal cords are supposed to work. “There were times when I thought I wouldn’t. In the end, there was something I wanted more.”

(His voice is strangled, but he’s past the point of caring.)

He’s not sure who moves first; the space between them closes in a second and they’re tangled in each other—not in a fit of passion, but to reassure one another that the other is there.

He would have happily stayed like this forever, his hands threaded through Felicity's hair as her fingers trace patterns across his shoulder blades, but eventually Felicity pulls away.

"You have a party to get back to," she says quietly. "It doesn't look to good if the host goes AWOL."

Oliver chuckles, brushing his thumb against her cheek. "It wouldn't be the first time."

She reaches up and catches his hand in her own, twining their fingers together. "Come on, Mr Queen."

He's happy to let her drag him out into the hallway and down the stairs, following the sound of the bass thumping outside. This is something he could get used to.

"This may seem like a dumb question," Felicity being as they make their way back into the foyer, "but are Laurel and Tommy a thing? And by thing, I mean—"
"—Dating?" Oliver finishes, a wry smile curving on his lips. "I'm not sure."

"Because Thea mentioned that Tommy was asking her for relationship advice, and he's talked to me about it before. I mean, really, it's totally obvious if you look at him that he's madly in love with her, but I don't know how she feels and wow this must be so weird for you, you know because of the whole"—she gestures at Oliver and then the door—"you and Laurel thing and the fact that Tommy is your best friend…"

Felicity trails off abruptly, the colour draining from her face as she catches sight of Det. Lance coming towards them, his partner hot on his heels.

(Oliver is relieved to note she doesn't let go of his hand; if anything, her grip tightens.)

"Mr Queen." Lance's tone borders on a sneer. "Not the life of the party this evening, are you? I expected to see you outside but I can see you were otherwise occupied." He jerks his head at Felicity.

A blush blooms across Felicity's cheeks, and Oliver wonders if punching a police officer will land him in jail again. Felicity must feel the tension running through him because she squeezes his hand and shoots him a look that says, Don't. He's not worth it.

"Is there something I can do for you, Det. Lance?" Oliver mutters through clenched teeth instead.

"It's more what we can do for you," his partner cuts in, obviously hoping to diffuse the tension. "There was another sighting of the vigilante this evening. Given that we no longer have any evidence with which to build a case, all charges have been dropped."

(Lance looks crushed. Oliver resists the urge to say, "I told you so".

Something tells him that won't help the situation.)

Felicity is smiling, but there's a look in her eyes, and for the second time this evening, Oliver thinks she knows.

(She can't. And if she did, he's just proved her wrong.)

"Thank you, Detectives," he says calmly. "I really hope you catch this guy."

"So do we," Lance mutters.

"We're sorry about the mixup," his partner adds.

"Not a problem," Oliver replies. Everything is going according to plan, though he'll probably have to buy John several drinks later. "You're just doing your job."

The detectives don't linger. Lance stalks out of the house with a snort of disgust; his partner bids them goodnight before following.

"Jesus," Oliver hisses as the door closes behind them.

"Hey," Felicity says firmly, grabbing his face between her hands. "It doesn't matter, okay? Remember that whole thing about how Laurel should hate you and you can't understand why she doesn't? Lance is having no issues with the hating you part. And he sort of has a right to given that you seduced his daughter and she ended up dying—God. What is wrong with me?"

Oliver's lips twitch. The mention of Sara's death cuts deep, but he's becoming accustomed to the
pain; the guilt haunts him every night in his dreams. He pulls Felicity into his side, pressing his lips to her forehead.

"Nothing. I like the babbling, remember?"

"You say that now. Give it a few months."

"Who said anything about a few months?"

Felicity punches his arm playfully. "Ass. Let's go join this party now that you actually have something to celebrate."

"Being released on bail is a perfectly valid reason to have a prison-themed party!" Oliver protests.

"Maybe if you're a fratboy."

"Never was, actually. Tommy was, though. Alpha beta something. He'll tell you all about it if you ask him—"

"Oliver."

Oliver chuckles, threading his fingers through Felicity's once again. "Come on. We've got freedom to celebrate."
The Adventures of Felicity Smoak, Private Detective, One

Chapter Summary

The only sensible thing to do when your face is on the cover of every gossip magazine in the country is to do some detective work.

There are many things Felicity never knew about the QC building.

Like that it has a gym. And that she has free access to said gym—which is better than any of the gyms she's seen in her life—as an employee.

Fitness has never been Felicity's top priority. She usually starts a half-hearted fitness regime sometime after New Year's, or whenever she's feeling particularly guilty about her eating habits, but they don't usually last more than a week.

(Mostly because working out alone in your apartment to fitness tapes from your mom does not inspire motivation.)

At first, the whole process is intimidating. The thought of changing in the locker room in front of people who will probably judge her total lack of muscle mass makes Felicity's stomach feel like it's been taken over by a horde of not-so-friendly butterflies.

Once she's managed to wiggle into her clothes (Christmas sale at Walmart three years ago and definitely needing to be replaced), however, she finds herself wondering what there ever was to be nervous about.

When she steps into the gym and takes one look at the gleaming exercise machines, all of them worth more money than she makes in a month, the butterflies come back with a vengeance. Felicity hasn't the faintest idea what to do with any of these things and the thought that she might break one by mistake makes her break out in a cold sweat.

The treadmill seems like the safest option. Felicity makes a beeline for one of the unoccupied ones farthest from the help desk; the last thing she needs is for someone to witness her making a total fool of herself on it. No one is on either of the treadmills beside her either—an added bonus.

She makes it about five minutes in before the burn starts somewhere in her thighs. It’s mildly unpleasant, but not so uncomfortable that she can’t shove it aside and keep going.

(The man two treadmills over has been running a four-minute mile for the last half hour. She may never be able to attain that pace, but she has her pride.)

After three miles, the burn has spread through her whole body. Felicity has never been in so much pain in her life. She can’t understand why anyone would choose to do this to themselves.

She’s trying her best to focus on finishing the next mile (next week she’ll try for five but right now she’s going die if she doesn’t stop) when there’s a flash of movement on the treadmill beside her.

Great. The last thing she needs is a witness to her failed workout.
“Hey, Felicity.”

Felicity nearly jumps out of her skin when Oliver’s voice comes out of the mouth of the stranger on the treadmill beside her.

“Oliver!” she gasps, heart hammering so hard against her ribcage that she’s pretty sure it’s going to explode any second. “Jesus!”

Oliver grins. He looks entirely too comfortable jogging. Felicity wants to hit him. Or throw her water bottle at him, but then he might get concussed and that would be bad.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, once her heart has slowed to a somewhat normal rhythm and she’s managed to slow the treadmill down to a reasonable speed—no way was she going to be able to maintain a conversation otherwise.

“I could be asking you the same question,” he replies cheekily. “Tommy and I come here every Wednesday to work out, but I’ve never seen you here before.”

Felicity’s cheeks flush. (Which is impressive given that they’re already beet-red from her run.) “I didn’t actually know we had a gym here until a few days ago. Hence the fact that you’ve never seen me here before.”

Oliver’s raised eyebrows suggest that he believes they may be more reasons behind Felicity’s absence from the gym.

(He’s right, but she’ll never give him the satisfaction of saying so.)

“Besides, I would have worn nicer clothes if I’d known is was going to actually see people.”

_I would have worn nicer clothes?_ Really? What other clothes would she have worn to the gym? A pantsuit?

Oliver’s lips twitch and she knows he’s trying not to laugh. “What's wrong with your clothes?”

"I bought them three years ago. From Walmart. Walmart, Oliver."

Oliver grins mischievously. “When you got your goldfish?”

“What?”

“You said you got your goldfish at Walmart,” Oliver clarifies.

Felicity is honestly surprised that he remembers this.

(That doesn’t mean she wants to hit him any less.)

“I do, but even if I had gotten goldfish then—which I don’t remember because it was three years ago—they wouldn’t be the same goldfish that you stole—still haven’t forgotten about that, by the way—because that was three years ago and I would have eaten them. Probably within a couple days. You know, because goldfish.”

Oliver chuckles. “Maybe we should go shopping, then.”

“What?”

Felicity should probably come up with a more creative response, but Oliver is being very weird
today and she has no idea how to deal with it. Shopping? With Oliver?

Oliver shrugs, suddenly looking embarrassed. “Thea dragged me to the mall the other day to help her pick a birthday gift for a friend—which inspired Thea to replace her entire wardrobe—and I saw a lot of couples there. You know, buying things. And I thought we should—I don’t know.” He shakes his head ruefully. “It’s stupid. Ignore me.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid,” Felicity said, trying to tamper the butterflies in her stomach at the fact that Oliver compared them to other couples—they aren’t, not yet, not officially anyways, but the thought makes her heart do backflips. “My bank balance might think it’s stupid, but I’m willing to overlook that. Especially, you know, if I’m going to be coming to the gym regularly.”

(He spots Tommy on the elliptical machine as they make their way out. He gives her a very lascivious wink. She ignores him.)

Shopping with Oliver, as it turns out, is a surprisingly normal experience. He opens the car door for her, holds her hand (which makes her stomach do spectacular acrobatic feats), and makes her laugh with his ridiculous suggestions.

“I really think this one is great,” he says as Felicity steps out of the changer at Nordstrom wearing the most expensive workout clothes she’s ever seen in her life, gesturing to the painfully bright garment in his hand.

Felicity laughs. The dress is hot pink and orange checked with wide geometric cutouts. “I’m pretty sure that is what people would call an eyesore. A very expensive eyesore.”

“Yes, but it’s a designer eyesore,” Oliver says with a feigned seriousness that makes Felicity giggle. He looks like a bouncer.

She tells him as much, and as she watches the smile transform his face, it comes to her.

“You should open a nightclub.”

Oliver blinks, surprised. “What?”

“Seriously, Oliver,” Felicity says, studying herself critically in the mirror. The top is great, fitted and flexible and pink, but she’s not sure about the pants. Their ribbed pattern looks great on the rack but she’s not sure that it’s particularly flattering.

It’s perfect, really. Felicity hasn’t given up on her theory, in fact, Oliver’s recent jail stunt has only reinforced her belief—if you’re going to go to the trouble to have yourself arrested, it makes sense to have an escape plan.

(She knows it wasn’t a coincidence Dig was not at that party. Not, she imagines, that he was happy about it.)

Opening the night club gives Oliver the perfect alibi to be out all night, while also providing him with a chance to act like a somewhat mature adult instead of a giant douche all the time.

"It gives you an excuse to get out of the house and do stuff at night. You know, other things."

A strange expression crosses Oliver’s face and Felicity mentally smacks herself.

Could you have been any more obvious?
"Or just to get out of the house. Get some space. Take responsibility for things," she finishes weakly. It's a poor attempt to cover up her earlier blunder but Oliver doesn't seem to notice.

"Those look nice," he says, nodding at her outfit.

Felicity tilts her head, considering. "The top, definitely. Not sold on the pants, but I am willing to be persuaded." She glances at the price tag. "My bank balance, less so."

"Does frequent use justify the expense?" Oliver asks as she slips back into the fitting room.

"Maybe not for the pants," Felicity mutters, casting a dubious glance at the ruffles.

(Shel leaves them in the fitting room on her way out.)

Oliver wanders away on their way to the cash, which has Felicity mildly concerned because what if he gets lost in the department store and can't find his way back?

She's envisioning all sorts of traumatic events (totally ridiculous but her brain has never been rational) when Oliver reappears, holding what looks suspiciously like a (very expensive) evening gown in his hands.

"You should try this on," he says.

"Um." Felicity literally has no idea what to say. She really wants to try it on because it’s beautiful, all red and flowing, but the price tag is likely going to more than her annual salary and she can’t afford to spend that kind of money on something she’ll only wear once.

That might be Oliver’s world, but it’s not hers.

Oliver frowns. "Is it not your size?"

"More like not my price range," Felicity replies. "I have nowhere to where a dress like that."

"I thought you could wear it to the benefit," Oliver says. "Unless you have something else to wear, in which case, I’ll just, uh, put it back."

"Benefit?"

Oliver scratches the back of his neck. "Didn't I tell you about the CNRI benefit Saturday night?"

"Nope. No benefit. Otherwise, I’d probably be freaking out right now because if this is what I think it is, then we would be going as a couple, which would mean that it would be a date, and your mom will probably be there, and Laurel, and people, and—"

"Felicity."

Oliver puts a hand on her arm. "If you don’t want to go, you don’t have to. I just thought that it would be nice to have someone there with me to make the evening somewhat bearable."

Felicity manages a small smile. “That would be nice. But I still can’t afford this dress.”

"Consider it a thank you for putting up with me."

She shouldn’t accept it, she really shouldn’t, but it so beautiful and it fits perfectly, and Oliver refuses to let her put it back, so she lets herself be persuaded.
Beautiful as it is, the dress does not inspire a dedicated work ethic. Felicity sits in her office for a full ten minutes wondering if they give out insurance for these kinds of things because the damn dress is having in her closet and what if someone breaks in and steals it?

(It’s not her money, but still, it’s a lot of money, and, all expenses aside, she won’t have anything to wear to the benefit Saturday night.)

There are more important things she should be doing right now. Like her job.

She never should have let Oliver buy her that dress.

Her mobile buzzes loudly and Felicity snatches it up, eager for an excuse to stop worrying about that stupid dress. (The job, at this point, is not in the picture at all.)

**Have you seen the magazines today?**

As much as Felicity loves texting Oliver, his messages are always a little obscure. She recognises that he hasn’t quite got the hang of texting yet—it wasn’t as much of a thing five years ago as it is now—but she would love not feeling like she needs to decrypt every one of his messages.

**Nope. Never been a fan of magazines. Except People. And US Weekly. Sometimes. When I’m really feeling guilty about something.**

Oliver’s response comes back almost immediately.

**Good. Don’t bother.**

**Why? Have you gone around acting like a jerk again? ;)**

**Um, no, actually. Just— Nevermind. Don’t worry about it.**

Now, Felicity is concerned. Oliver has never cared whether or not she keeps up with celebrity gossip before, so why should he care now?

Unless…

**Oh frack.**

Felicity fingers are trembling as she opens her web browser and types **Oliver Queen girlfriend.**

The results are staggering, but People is the first link that appears, so Felicity sticks with the tried and true.

**MOVE OVER LADIES,** the headline reads. **OLIVER QUEEN IS OFF THE MARKET.**

*Despite insistences from his family that he needs time to adjust after his five years abroad, Oliver Queen has wasted no time changing his relationship status. The billionaire and media favourite, was spotted downtown yesterday holding hands with Felicity Smoak, an IT analyst at Queen Consolidated.*

*The couple, who were spotted going in and out of several high-end stores in Starling’s waterfront district, were reportedly very friendly with one another. Oliver didn’t appear to be shopping for himself, but didn’t hesitate to drop some cash on his new lady: reports indicate that he purchased a*
Roberto Cavalli dress valued up to $15,000!

The sum is so staggering that Felicity has to take a moment to catch her breath.

Please tell me you didn’t spend $15K on a dress for me.

Felicity, I’m a billionaire. That’s like 20 bucks as far as I’m concerned.

Frack. She’s going to have to put it in a safety deposit box.

Rumours are flying about how the couple met, but Smoak’s close friend, Sophia Rogers, says the relationship has been budding for a while.

“We all knew it was going to happen,” Rogers says. “He’s been in and out of her office for weeks, and she practically dragged me to his welcome back party… A little desperate if you ask me, but if that’s what he likes, who am I to judge?”

“Close friend?” Felicity hisses. “We’ve barely spoken to each other in four years! And you dragged me to that freakin’ party!”

These reports come as a surprise, after Queen was spotted lunching with ex-girlfriend Laurel Lance last week.

Are you Team Olicity or Team Lauriver? Let us know in the comments below!

Before Felicity has a chance to process what she’s just read, her phone buzzes.

(She has a feeling it’s going to be doing that a lot over the next couple days.)

Since you’ve obviously read the articles, what do you think of the name? Olicity - pretty cute, huh? ;)

THAT IS SO NOT IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW OLIVER!!!

While Oliver’s attempt at flirtation is cute, it is eclipsed by the much larger issue that their relationship is all over every news network in the country.

Lois and Chloe are going to kill her.

This is really a terrible idea. Probably the worst idea she’s ever had.

Felicity considers this as she stands outside the fence surrounding the old Queen Consolidated foundry. Not only because the Glades are a terrifying place at night, but also because she is about to break in, and possibly run into Oliver, which would be bad.

He shouldn’t be here. Felicity hacked his phone’s GPS, so unless he’s managed to send out a fake signal or decided to no longer carry his phone on him—which is a possibility given that he may not have gotten the memo about cell phones being absolutely mandatory to have on you at all times in 2012, but is unlikely—he left the foundry ten minutes ago.

(Given Oliver’s lack of computer skills, she’s probably right.)

Besides, it’s not like anyone is using the foundry right now. If anyone catches her, she can just pretend she’s lost or something.
Most people, when confronted with a stressful situation (which is the biggest understatement ever; having your face plastered on the cover of every gossip magazine in the country is more then stressful) do something relaxing, like disappear to a spa for a long weekend, or take sick leave. Given that Felicity can’t afford to do either of these things, she’s stalking Oliver.

Well, not stalking stalking. That makes it sound creepy—which it totally isn’t. Sleuthing is a better term. She has a hypothesis and she’s testing it out. Nothing wrong with that.

The fence is the first roadblock she’s encountered. Obstacles are expected—despite Oliver’s rudimentary understanding of computer systems, he’ll obviously have some kind of security—but Felicity figured they’d all be obstacles she’d be able to get through with her tablet.

The tablet, unfortunately, does not have a laser-cutting function. Or a jump-twelve-foot-fences-in-a-single-bound function.

Climbing the fence is a very undignified act. Felicity almost rips her pants on two separate occasions, but manages to make it to the other side with nothing but a few small scratches.

In comparison, getting into the foundry is easy. The whole building is unfinished—falling apart is more accurate—and the keypad on the back wall sticks out like a sore thumb.

“It’s a good thing nobody comes in here anymore, Oliver,” Felicity mutters to herself as she studies the keypad. It’s a simple three-digit access key; she’s been hacking these since she was twelve. “Otherwise your secret wouldn’t be secret for very long.”

The door opens on a staircase that has definitely seen better days. It’s totally industrial, all wrought iron and creaking and suspended from the ceiling by chains that are totally not going to support Felicity’s weight.

(They will, but the point is that they’re terrifying and they’re the first thing that has to go if Oliver ever finds out she knows about this place.)

As far as secret hide-outs go, the basement is pretty sparse. The room is dominated by three large steel tables, the furthest of which bears a couple really outdated computer monitors.

Honestly. If he’s claiming to be the city the hero needs, the least he could do is get a computer system with the processing capability to at least hack the police database.

(Not that it would be of any use to Oliver—he probably couldn’t hack the SCPD server if he was in the station.)

There’s a rack full of arrows on another table, and the third is suspiciously empty. Felicity can’t help thinking it looks a lot like an operating table and wonders if this is where Oliver patches himself up.

She hopes he never has to see him on it.

The only other object in the room is a large wooden case shoved underneath one of the tables. Felicity’s hatred of puzzles makes her want to unlock it, to find yet another piece to Oliver’s past, but she can’t bring herself to touch it. If Oliver isn’t ready to talk about what happened to him, she has no right to pry.

The computer, however, is totally fair game.

It takes all of her strength not to cringe as she turns on the monitor (not even password protected
—*really, Oliver?*) and accesses Oliver’s browser history. He’s looked up quite a lot of information about Starling’s dirty rich over the last month, but he seems to have given up his crusade against the scum of the earth to go after the bank robbery gang. Felicity heard about them on the news last night—apparently they’ve been hitting banks all over the city.

According to Oliver’s latest research—which, much to Felicity’s surprise, does include basic hacking skills—the gang is supposed to be hitting up another bank tonight.

Obviously, this is where he is right now.

There isn’t much else of interest on Oliver’s computer. He seems to have broken into the SCPD and photocopied files from the robbery case—something she could have done from here in about five minutes—and the rest is information on people the Hood has already put away.

Her phone pings, a friendly reminder that Oliver is now on his way back to his cave.

(It’s cheesy, but she really can’t think of it any other way.)

She has plenty of time before he gets back, but the last thing she wants is to be caught in the act—especially with that damn fence.

She’ll have more time to look later. Tonight’s mission was reconnaissance—and it was successful. Chances are, Oliver is going to need her help sooner or later. That’s when she can let him know she’s in on the secret.

Felicity can’t help the giddy grin that spreads across her face as she slips her tablet back into her pocket and makes her way up the stairs.

Being a detective is *so cool.*
The Adventures of Felicity Smoak, Private Detective, Two

Chapter Summary

Now that her suspicions have been confirmed, Felicity decides it’s high time the Hood got some proper tech support.

(Oliver really needs to stop coming to her office in the middle of the day to get help with his cases. Especially now that they’re dating.)

Chapter Notes

As I may or may not have mentioned before, I have a giant convoluted DC head canon where everyone is connected and related. It's totally possible in the real world that these characters would have known about each other and interacted with each other, even if we don't see it on the show, because they live in the same world. That being said, the characters that exist in my head canon aren't going to be the same as the counterparts that we've seen in cinema universes. Lois Lane, for example, who shows up in this chapter, is similar to the Lois you've seen on Smallville or in Man Of Steel, but she also has her own character and her own backstory that is very different from either of those.

Obviously, not everyone is going to agree with this canon. You're more than welcome to share your opinions about it, but please do it respectfully!

Also, for anyone who wants a little insight into some of the inspiration for the process or just feels like reliving the angst of season 3, I have uploaded my Olicity angst playlist that I have written a lot of chapters to (most of them future but some of the past) on 8tracks. The link is here: http://8tracks.com/ktjurdle/don-t-ask-me-to-say-i-don-t-love-you

Next chapter is going to rely heavily on this playlist and possibly feature some steamier scenes! ;)

Somehow, Felicity thought knowing Oliver is the Hood would be different.

She’s not exactly sure what she expected, but it certainly wasn’t that she’d be sitting in her office like any other Friday, counting the hours until she can go home and work on tech projects that actually matter.

The only thing that’s changed are the sidelong glances she gets from coworkers in the break room, and that has nothing to do with Oliver’s secret identity.

That, and the fact that her phone has literally been ringing non-stop since yesterday. Chloe sent three text messages innocently enquiring after Felicity’s well-being and a message saying that if she was actually in a relationship with Oliver Queen and happy about it then good for her but to
beware of his reputation (“Maybe five years away has changed him, but I just want you to be careful, Fee.”). Lois is much more forceful: five text messages all to the tune of “Answer your messages for Christ’s sake!” and a very long voice message (so long the answering machine just cuts it off) berating Felicity for not having told her about any of this sooner and demanding that they have a long talk about it soon.

Her mother is the worst, though. She’s been calling Felicity every few hours, and leaves a message every time, even though it’s probably clear that her calls are being screened. Felicity can’t bring herself to listen to any of the messages. She knows what they’re going to say.

“Felicity! Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing someone? And that that someone was Oliver Queen! I shouldn’t have to find these things out from eTalk, you know.”

She’s going to have to answer her mother’s messages at some point; otherwise, Donna will probably show up on Felicity’s doorstep in two days time for one of her surprise visits.

(This is the last thing Felicity wants to deal with right now.)

She’s really trying not to think too much about this. She and Oliver went shopping. They got photographed because Oliver is rich and famous and the media have no concept of privacy. The whole world thinks they’re dating. She isn’t sure they’re dating yet—they are but they haven’t talked about it yet. Made it official or whatever.

“Felicity?”

Felicity jumps so violently she almost knocks her keyboard on the floor. Oliver is standing in the doorway, looking way too casual (and handsome) for the office in a soft, grey crewneck and jeans. Her pink blouse—the same one she was wearing the last time he came here—seems very prim in comparison.

“Oliver. Uh, hi,” Felicity stammers.

“What’s up?”

“I’m trying to find someone,” Oliver replies, taking a seat in her extra chair like this is her living room and not a tiny soulless cubicle. Diggle, who Felicity had not noticed until now, follows behind him, perching on the filing cabinet in the corner of the room. He seems perfectly happy there, so she offers him a smile instead of a chair.

Oliver clears his throat. This is obviously Hood business, or he wouldn't be so uncomfortable. “Do you think you can help?”

Felicity rolls her eyes, reaching for her laptop. A tiny shiver of excitement runs up her spine, which she tries to ignore. She’s helping the Hood. With a real criminal case. Well not a criminal case, but a vigilante case. Whatever. The point is, it’s cool. Super cool.

“I should add personal researcher to Oliver Queen to my job description,” she says, flipping open her laptop. “Happily, I mean,” she adds, seeing Oliver’s raised eyebrows.

(In the corner, Diggle smirks. Felicity resists the urge to stick her tongue out at him.)
“His name is Derek Reston. We were close before I—” Oliver pauses, forehead creasing as he tries to find the right words. “Before I went away, and, uh, I want to get back in touch with him.”

The likelihood of them knowing each other is zero, but Felicity isn’t about to comment.

“Guess you didn’t have Facebook on that island,” is what comes out of her mouth instead.

_Jesus._

“Nope,” Diggle says swiftly, as Felicity focuses on typing and not trying to stuff her fist in her mouth to prevent embarrassing outburst like that one. “Not even a MySpace page. It was a dark time.”

“Well, there’s not much here that’s recent.” It’s probably better to stick to the topic and not try to make small talk. Since, you know, she can’t. “No credit activity, no utility bills…” There’s really nothing on it at all, and she’s about to say so when a Queen Consolidated ID badge pops up.

The urge to smirk is strong. _Have fun lying your way out of this one, Oliver._ “I guess you must have met him at the factory.”

This information is obviously unexpected; Oliver doesn’t even make an effort to lie.

“What factory?”

Does he really think she’s so dumb that she wouldn’t have caught on by now? _Honestly._ If he ever tells her the truth, the first thing she’s going to do is teach him how to lie properly. After she fixes his computer system. And gets him to replace the stairs.

“The Queen steel factory. Derek Reston worked there for fifteen years before it shut down in ’07.”

Oliver swallows. His expression is dark and unreadable. It kills some of the butterflies in Felicity’s stomach. “Derek Reston worked for my father.”

“I guess you weren’t really close friends, were you?”

She wants it to come out as a quip, but the storm brewing in Oliver’s eyes makes her uneasy and the sass falls flat.

Unable to meet Oliver’s gaze any longer, Felicity looks down at the computer screen, bringing up as much information about Derek’s employment at QC as she can.

(That’s why they’re here after all, her computer skills, not her inability to make jokes.)

“Looks like Derek was the factory foreman until you outsourced production to China. Six hundred guys got laid off.”

It’s not reasonable to blame Oliver for any of this. It’s not like he had anything to do with the running of his company, and he was fighting for his life God-knows-where when all of this was happening. Still, Felicity can’t help the bitterness that creeps into her voice as she reads on.

“Looks like the fat guys found a loophole in the union contract so they didn’t have to pay severance and pensions to their employees. Most of them lost their homes. Including your _friend._”

The last sentence comes out sharper than she intended and Felicity finds herself looking up to an icy stare. She’s always known Oliver had a dangerous side, but knowing and seeing are two different things.
“Anyway, there isn’t any more on here,” she mutters after a minute, closing the laptop and passing it back to Oliver. “He doesn’t have a permanent location or anything.”

“Right.” Oliver seems to come back to himself. As quickly as it came, the storm settles, and he looks like her Oliver again. “Okay. That’s great. Thanks, Felicity.”

“No problem,” she replies quietly. “Part of my job, remember?”

The corners of Oliver’s lips twitch, and he presses a kiss to her temple. “I know. And I’m grateful.”

Felicity blushes, fully aware that Diggle is watching them with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Anyway, I’ve gotta go, uh, take care of things, but I’ll see you tonight. Seven o’clock.”


“Hey.” Oliver squeezes her hand. “You don’t have to come. If you’re not ready, that’s okay. This is my life, but it doesn’t have to be yours.”

(Olicity swears she sees Diggle roll his eyes.)

“No. I’m okay. I mean, I want to.” She smiles. “When else am I going to wear that dress?”

Oliver grins. “It’s a date.”

She catches some of her coworkers not-so-subtly staring as Oliver leaves her office.

They really need to stop meeting like this.

Oliver pulls up outside Felicity’s apartment at seven o’clock. He can’t help feeling a terrible sense of déjà vu: he’s in a suit, driving his mother’s Bentley, exactly as he did that first night he took Felicity to dinner at Big Belly Burger. The only difference is now their relationship is the hot topic on TMZ—he doesn’t watch it, but Thea was all too happy to inform him before he left—and they’re about to head off to an evening filled with the city’s biggest and brightest—including Carter frigging Bowen—and Felicity is probably going to meet his mother. Which can only end in disaster.

Oliver really wishes he were simply picking her up for their first date.

This time, when Felicity answers the door, she doesn’t look mildly alarmed to see him standing on her doorstep. Instead, she’s ready to go, delicate silver clutch clenched in a white-knuckled grip that belies how nervous she is.

The dress looks fantastic. Oliver’s never prided himself on his fashion sense, but he has to pat himself on the back for this one. The red dress clings beautifully to Felicity’s figure without seeming obscene, and her hair, tumbling long and loose over one shoulder, makes her look more relaxed.

(Shes probably doesn’t feel relaxed, but neither does he.)

She’s left her glasses behind for the occasion, which gives Oliver the opportunity to note the delicate bones structure of her face, usually obscured by those square frames. Everything about her is softer, and more genuine than the neat, perfectly assembled image he sees at work every day.
It’s beautiful.

“You look really great,” Oliver says quietly, wishing he could find more eloquent words to express his feelings.

Felicity smiles, cheeks flushing. “I know this guy with really great taste. Which is funny because if you looked at him, excellent fashion sense would be the last thing that came to mind.”

Oliver chuckles. “I’ll bet he’s full of surprises.”

A strange look slits briefly across Felicity’s face. “I’m sure of it.”

The benefit is in full swing by the time they arrive. Oliver notices the usual swarm of reporters outside, looking for a shot of Starling’s finest as they arrive. Normally, he’d just brush them off—the cameras have been a part of his life for as long as he can remember—but being with Felicity makes him hyper-aware. He can see the way she clenches her clutch a little tighter, bottom lip clamped between her teeth at the sight of the cameras; they make her nervous, even though she’d never admit it.

He’s tried to hide her from it. They were lucky for the first few weeks: the cameras were far more interested in stirring up old rumours about him and Laurel to pay attention to anything else.

He should have known they’d be hovering downtown. It’s the prime location to snap pictures of celebrities in the city, but he was so busy enjoying himself that the thought never crossed his mind until he saw their picture splashed all over the newsstands the next day.

Oliver reaches over and takes Felicity’s hand in his, tracing gentle patterns against her skin with his thumb.

“It’ll be all right,” he says quietly, when she looks at him. “The media get bored after a while.”

“I’m fine,” Felicity says, quiet determination in her voice. “If this is the price to pay to be with you, then so be it. I’ve never paid attention to the gossip anyway.”

Something tells Oliver that this is very much not true, but he’s touched nonetheless.

The first flash bulb pops as he comes around to open her door. Voices are screaming his name, asking him to “just look over here” or “can he comment on his new relationship” or “are things with him and Laurel really over?” (they are), but Oliver ignores them all, focusing on the grip of Felicity’s hand in his. The crush of paparazzi following him wherever he goes has made him feel claustrophobic since his return, but Felicity’s presence makes it easier to remember how to breathe. He doesn’t want to lash out or run and hide when she’s with him.

(It’s funny: he’s supposed to be the strong one, but she’s the one that keeps him afloat.)

Felicity offers him a soft smile as he closes the door behind her. “Are you ready?” she asks, squeezing his hand. It’s as if she knows how difficult this is for him.

Oliver nods.

It’s chaos. There is no other word for it. Oliver keeps one hand on Felicity’s back, pressing her against him as the reporters descend, like predators closing in for the kill. Black spots dance across his vision from the flash bulbs, and the sound of his own name echoes in his ears.
The world seems to get narrower with each step, the lights and the noise and the heat pressing closer and closer on him, crushing his lungs. A cold sweat breaks out across Oliver’s skin and rolls down the back of his neck. The only thing that seems real is the curve of Felicity’s back under his palm.

Just when it seems like everything is going to collapse and he’ll be crushed, Oliver hears John’s voice, asking everyone to step aside. Slowly, the world expands again, and Oliver can feel the air rushing back into his lungs.

“Are you okay?” Diggle asks quietly as they make it inside, seeing the sweat glistening on Oliver’s brow.

Felicity tips her head to look at him, concerned, but Oliver forces a smile. He may not be okay, but the point is, they made it through. The rest he can handle.

“I’m fine,” he says.

Neither Diggle or Felicity believe him. Felicity looks like she might have something to say about it, but there isn’t time.

“Oliver!”

As if he needs more problems in his life right now, Carter fucking Bowen is marching towards them, smug grin plastered on his face. Oliver can feel his hand curling reflexively into a fist as he smiles.

“Carter. Hi.”

Diggle fades into the background, as he’s supposed to, leaving Oliver to fend for himself against this asshole.

(He’s not worried about what will happen to him but what will happen to Carter.)

“So good to see you again, especially after our visit was cut short this morning.”

Felicity’s eyebrows rise; Oliver complained vehemently about the brunch with the Bowens while they were shopping. Obviously, she understands what he was talking about.

“Yeah. Sorry about that. Work is— Well, you know how it is.”

Carter’s smile is predatory. “Certainly.” He catches sight of Felicity and gives her a long slow once-over that makes Oliver regret buying the damn dress.

“And who is this lovely lady?”

“Felicity,” Felicity says frostily. Oliver snakes an arm around her waist and she leans into him. “I’m Oliver’s girlfriend.”

The way she says it, so confidently, as if heaven and earth couldn’t convince her otherwise, makes Oliver’s heart pound.

Girlfriend.

I’m Oliver’s girlfriend.

It’s one thing to hear the word printed in a paparazzi article rife with speculation and lies—none of
that is real. Felicity’s words leave no room for doubt.

_They’re doing this._

There’s no backing out now. Not that he wants to, but it may be what’s best for her.

(Regardless of what they talked about, he still feels the need to protect her, and the best way to do that is to stay the hell away.)

“Girlfriend?” Carter’s eyebrows shoot up, surprised. “I didn’t get the impression Oliver was the serious type.”

“Well, obviously, you don’t know Oliver very well,” Felicity snaps, eyes sparking dangerously. Maybe Oliver should be concerned about what Felicity will do to Carter.

Carter chuckles humourlessly. “Obviously not. I’m sure I’ll see you two later.”

“God, what an asshole!” Felicity hisses as Carter walks away. “I can see why you didn’t want to sit through brunch with him.”

Oliver’s lips twitch. “I wasn’t there for very long. Anyway, forget about Carter. We’re here to have a good time, and that requires drinks.”

“Not scotch,” Felicity says quickly. “That will end very badly for everyone. Especially me. Especially if I’m meeting your mother.”

Oliver isn’t sure that he’s ready for that yet. His mother may not have seen the articles about him in the paper, but either way, she will have her own opinions about Felicity that she will not hesitate to share.

“I guess that’s a no to shots then,” he teases.

Felicity’s cheeks turn pink. “God, no. The last time I did shots was at the MIT class of ’09 party and I swore to myself that I’d never do them again after that.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“It was awful. I don’t remember much, but there was extensive video documentation. Apparently, I have spectacular projectile vomiting skills.”

“Felicity Smoak, vomiting something other than words? This I’ve got to see.”

Tommy sidles up to them with a vodka martini in one hand and a grin plastered on his face. He claps Oliver on the back, and he can’t help smiling.

It’s good to be back.

(Also, being able to gang up on Felicity is so much fun.)

“No one will ever be seeing it. _Ever._ I am still trying to un-see it.”

“Besides,” Oliver butts in. “I don’t think this is the right time or place to be recreating the scene.”

Tommy shrugs, glancing around. “You’re probably right. Laurel would skin me alive.”
“Laurel would probably roast you on a spit and eat you for Christmas dinner,” Felicity amends.

Tommy laughs and even Oliver can’t help chuckling at the image. Felicity barely knows Laurel, but she seems to have the other woman nailed down.

“You need to keep this one around, Ollie,” he says, wrapping an arm around Felicity’s shoulders. “I might be thanking you for messing up your last relationship spectacularly, but if you let this one go, you’ll be the one we’ll be roasting on a spit.”

Oliver swallows. He knows how special she is, that she’s different from the other girls, but keeping her isn’t something he can control anymore. He’s not someone he can control anymore.

“So I saw you two talking to Carter,” Tommy continues smoothly, sensing he’s touched a nerve. The contempt in his voice is unmistakeable; Tommy hates Carter almost as much as Oliver does.

This is no surprise given that Carter is a total asshole to everyone.

"That’s one way to put it," Oliver mutters.

Tommy chuckles darkly. "He was hitting on your girl too? Doesn't surprise me. Carter's always preferred another man's girl."

Tommy will never let anyone forget that Carter slept with his high school girlfriend.

Felicity frowns. "He was talking to Laurel?"

Tommy blushes. "Uh, no. At least I don't think so."

"This was high school," Oliver clarifies. "And it didn't last very long. Lois was never the staying type."

"Still, I thought I was better than Mr Perfect!" Tommy protests.

"So does Lois," Oliver chuckles. "So much that she knocked on our door at three in the morning to tell us, remember?"

He'd answered the door in his boxers, still half-asleep, to see Lois standing in the other side in what could only be described as a long tank top—he has no doubt it was supposed to be a dress—yelling about how much she hates Carter Bowen and she was never going to let anyone "charm the pants off her” again.

Tommy laughs. "Yeah. Asked if we wanted to have a threesome to make up for it."

Felicity, who has gone strangely quiet, is watching them both with a vaguely queasy expression on her face. Oliver opens his mouth to ask if she's okay when his phone rings.

There's a number displayed on the screen but it could be anybody; he still hasn't figured out the contact settings in his phone yet. He's only just managed to get the hang of caller ID.

"I've got to take this," he says quietly. “I’ll be right back.”

It's a good thing he steps out onto the terrace: he's barely tapped the reply button when his ear is filled with sound.

“Oliver Jonas Queen, why didn't you tell me you were dating my cousin? Or call me to tell me that you were alive for that matter—I had to find out both from the Planet! I had to pull some serious
favours to even get your phone number, which honestly I think is totally disrespectful given that we've—"

Subtlety has never been Lois Lane's strong suit.

"Wait what? Your cousin? Felicity is—"

"Yes, idiot she's my cousin! You met her the summer I was in Smallville after senior year? You probably don't remember because you and Tommy were drunk out of your mind..."

Oliver has vague memories of the night in question: a tall, dark-haired boy in plaid who was less-than-impressed with him and Tommy, Lois dancing on the tabletop, and, very faintly, a blond girl hovering in the corner whose glasses kept slipping down her nose.

"I do—sort of. Look, Lois, I'm sorry I haven't been in touch, but I'm in the middle of something right now—"

"The CNRI benefit. Yeah, I know. I'm watching it on eTalk."

"Yeah— Can we talk some other time? I'll call you back, I promise."

Lois snorts. "I won't hold my breath, Starling. Anyway, I've gotta go, Clark's probably going to glare me to death if I let supper get cold. I'll call you later."

He has no doubt she will.

"And tell Felicity to answer her damn phone, will you? She's been avoiding my calls all week."

Oliver chuckles. "Sure thing, Lois. I'll tell Tommy to say hi to Carter Bowen for you, too."

"Carter Bowen is—? Oh no, Ollie, don't you dare. The last thing I want is for that asshole to think —"

Whatever Lois didn't want Carter to think was cut off by a shout in the background.

"Okay, I'm coming!" Lois shouts back. "Gotta go, Ollie, Clark is about to go all crazy on me if I don't come right this second, so I'll catch up later. Keep my cousin out of trouble!"

Oliver slips his phone back into his pocket, shaking his head. It's comforting to know that even when his whole world has shifted beneath him, Lois hasn't changed a bit.

Diggle is coming towards him, and if the expression on his face is any indication, things are not looking good.

"We have a situation," Dig says quietly before Oliver can even open his mouth to ask.

His partner doesn’t need to say anymore. Oliver gives a curt nod. “Bring the car around,” he says quietly. “I'll be waiting by the back exit.”

Felicity knows something is up when Oliver excuses himself to take the phone call. She's not sure what exactly—the discussion about Tommy and Oliver possibly knowing her cousin has more than unnerved her—but she doesn't think it's a coincidence that Diggle makes a beeline for him shortly after. Maybe it's their secret code or something.

So it’s no surprise when Oliver comes back over to join them wearing his I’m really sorry but I’m
going to have to ruin all our plans face.

“I have to go,” he says. “I’m really sorry, but something’s come up and I’m going to have to duck out for a bit. You’ll be okay here, right?”

“As long as I don’t run into your mother,” Felicity mutters.

A past of guilt crosses Oliver’s face.

“It’s fine,” she says quickly. “I can handle myself.”

(There’s no chance of running into Mrs Queen because Felicity is going with him, but Oliver doesn’t need to know that.)

Oliver smiles, relieved. “Thank you for understanding,” he says, pressing a swift kiss to her cheek. “I’ll be back to pick you up later.” He slides a glance at Tommy. “Don’t let this one tell you too many stories.”

Oliver hasn’t even left before Tommy has launched into one of said stories: some long, convoluted tale about a party he and Oliver went to in college. It tapers off abruptly when Laurel makes her way over.

“Uh, wow, you look…lovely,” Tommy says, clearly struggling for words.

Laurel laughs. “Lovely. Nice to see you’ve come up with words that don’t involve hot and mega hot.”

“You could just say thank you, you know.”

Laurel closes the space between them, placing a hand on Tommy’s lapel. “Thank you,” she says with quiet sincerity.

“You’re welcome.”

Tommy’s face is probably the closest thing to a real life imitation of the heart eyes emoji. It would be super cute if Felicity weren’t the awkward third wheel.

“Aaaand, that is my cue to leave,” she says, stepping away. “Let you two, you know, go on with your canoodling.”

Canoodling? Who even says that anymore?

Tommy chuckles nervously, and Laurel blushes, but neither of them object when Felicity makes a beeline for the side exit.

She probably shouldn’t be doing this.

The thought crosses Felicity’s mind as she slips through the back alley. Oliver and Diggle are intercepting bank robbers, which means it’s going to be dangerous: guns blazing and all that. Felicity has no experience with guns and about as much coordination as a heavily medicated elephant, which basically makes this the stupidest thing she’s ever done, but the thought of seeing Oliver in action, the thought of meeting him as the Hood, is too good to pass up. A little brush with death is good for the soul.

Besides, they can’t keep going on as they are. She works for his parents company—well,
technically his step-father’s company now, but still it’s his family name on the building—and people are going to notice if the heir apparent keeps coming into her office.

(People have already started to notice.)

Even if their relationship hadn’t become the hot topic of conversation on the evening news, they were going to need to make a change eventually. Felicity would like to maintain some pretence of professionalism, and having lunch with Oliver every other day isn’t going to do it.

This has just sped the process up a little bit.

(And okay, maybe she really wants to be able to say that she spends her nights secretly working with a masked vigilante. Maybe that is a super cool thing that she would like to be able to put on her resume. Not actually because that would probably get her arrested, but still.)

The seam of Felicity’s yoga pants catches under her foot and she curses quietly. She stopped at home long enough to change out of her beautiful but very expensive dress and into something a little more practical for vigilante hunting, but it never occurred to her that pants that are too long are not the most practical things to be wearing to a bank robbery.

According to the GPS in Oliver’s phone, he’s inside Starling National Bank across the street. The building is dark, and there’s no sign of any cars out front. Not surprising: a man trying to keep his double identity a secret is hardly going to park his Bentley in the middle of the street for anyone to see.

There is, however, a van parked in a side alley beside the bank. Felicity can make out two heads in front, which means there are two assailants—robbers? Criminals?—inside.

A shiver of excitement runs up her spine. This is just like one of those episodes of NCIS.

_Two perps inside. Two outside with the getaway vehicle. Bank robbery in process._

The bank door is open, which is odd, considering, you know, banks are places full of cash and you would think that leaving them open after dark is just inviting the robbers in.

Then again, there’s a bank robbery currently in process, so maybe locked doors aren’t actually that useful.

Felicity creeps along the darkened corridors, heart pounding in her ears. She’s stopping a crime. Or helping to stop one. She’s going to see Oliver in action, doing his Hood thing.

This is even cooler than being a detective.

All those thoughts fly out of her mind when she turns the corner.

There’s a security guard lying on the ground with a gun beside him and Oliver is being pounded on by some guy in a mask who also has a gun and Felicity grabs the security guard’s discarded weapon because reason is obviously not something she has right now.

"Drop the gun!"

It sounds so much better when they say it on TV.

Oliver’s mind goes blank at the sound of Felicity's voice.

What is she doing here?
Get out.

The thought echoes like a heartbeat.

Get Felicity out.

There is no other mission now.

Kyle Reston turns on Felicity with the gun. Oliver sees the flash of fear in her eyes and then the room erupts in chaos.

Kyle's finger has barely twitched on the trigger before Oliver is moving. The shot goes wild as he and Kyle crash to the ground on a tangle of limbs. He can't see Felicity, but she's not hurt, and if she has any sense she'll get the hell out of here before something happens that he can't protect her from.

There are footsteps coming towards them and the security guard is awake again and yelling at them to put down their weapons or he'll shoot. Oliver hears himself yell something in his own defence but all he can think of is Felicity. He can't see her so she must be safe. She has to be.

Another shot goes off, at Kyle this time, but Derek throws himself on the way and he's bleeding everywhere. Oliver does his best to stop it as the security guard runs to call 911, but there's too much of it. Reston's body convulses as the shock sets in, and Oliver can't help thinking he's seen this too many times before.

There's blood on his hands but it's not just Reston's blood, it's the blood of everyone he's killed over the last five years. His fingers start to shake, red blurs in front of his face. He's a monster. He never should have gone to see Felicity, never should have gotten mixed up with any of this in the first place...

"Oh my God. Is he—?"

Oliver lifts his head so sharply his vertebrae crack.

Felicity has crawled out from behind the desk, eyes wide behind her slightly lopsided glasses.

"He's dead," Oliver says curtly, wiping his hands on his pants. His voice sounds deep and rough, not his own but that of the mask.

"Was that— Oh my God, did I?"

"No. He would have died anyway."

He can't know that, but the guilt of taking a life is not something she should have to carry.

The security guard is going to be back any second so he grabs her arm and pulls her away.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he yells when they're safely in a back alley. "You could have gotten yourself killed!"

Felicity shoots him a withering look. "I was trying to help you. Obviously that backfired since I spent most of my time hiding behind the desk but having a gun pointed at your face is a lot scarier in real life."

Oliver takes a deep breath. His whole body is shaking, maybe from leftover adrenaline, or the fear of seeing Felicity's body on the floor like Reston's, oozing blood. He is filled with the
overwhelming urge to take Felicity into his arm and punch the wall until his knuckles bleed.

"How did you find me?" he asks, unable to keep the tremor from his voice.

Felicity chews her bottom lip, deliberating her response and he knows whatever comes out is going to be a lie.

"I have a way with computers."

She's not going to go stop helping him. He can see as much in her eyes. He's tried to keep her as far away from all this as possible but maybe the safest way is to let her in.

"I may need your help with some things," he says gruffly. "But you have to promise that you won't interfere with what I’m doing. I can't afford to be distracted."

Felicity nods, looking entirely too eager. She has no idea what she signing onto. "Yeah. Of course. I've had more than enough gun toting for my whole life probably. Science things will totally be satisfying from now on."

"Good." He gives a curt nod. "I'll be in touch."

Felicity trembles the whole way home. Whether because she's just been shot at or from adrenaline, she isn't sure.

She won’t say that Oliver was exactly happy to see her—in fact, that’s probably the last thing he was feeling. Which is totally valid, given that she almost got herself killed—and him killed for that matter, what would have happened if she’d fired the gun by mistake?—and then totally wimped out on her plan to help him.

(It’s not her proudest moment, but then again, he did try to shoot her with a real gun, which is a lot scarier than what you see on TV.)

Still, she saw Oliver doing his vigilante thing, which is pretty cool. It was pretty dark in the bank, but thinking about Oliver in that suit makes her heart hammer against her ribcage.

What she really needs is a long, hot shower to calm her nerves. Once she cleans up (not that she’s that dirty—Oliver was covered in blood) and puts on her pyjamas and makes some hot chocolate, she’ll be fine. Maybe she’ll watch a movie. Something nice and safe. Like The Lion King. Or Step Up. Anything with Channing Tatum, really.

Fate obviously has other ideas.

She’s barely made it two steps towards the bathroom when the doorbell rings.

"Hi."

Oliver smiles, but Felicity can see the shadows under his eyes and the tension in his shoulders. He’s wearing his suit again, and all traces of blood are gone. It makes everything that happened this evening seem like a bad dream.

"Hi," she says.

"I looked for you at the gala, but Tommy said you went home."

A lie, but if he's not ready to tell her, she'll wait.
“Yeah. I was tired.”

“Well, uh, I don’t want to keep you up or anything.”— Oliver combs a hand though his hair—“but I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” She really wants to close the space between them and hug him, but their lies sit between them like a wall.

Lying feels awful. Felicity really hopes they aren’t going to keep this charade up for very long because otherwise she is going to lose her mind.

Oliver seems to be thinking the same thing because he crosses the threshold and wraps his arms around her. His hold is so tight she can feel him tremble against her.

It isn’t until that moment that Felicity realises exactly how stupid this idea was. She could have gotten herself or Oliver killed, but more importantly, she distracted him from the mission. She put him in a position where he couldn’t focus on his job because she was in the way. She’s not trained for combat, obviously, and going out into the field wasn’t heroic, it was just stupid.

Oliver may not talk about what happened to him over the last five years, but the way he holds her, the way his body shakes with fear and relief, tells Felicity that he saw a lot of people die. Probably people he cared about, and ones he wanted to save.

She doesn’t need to add to that burden.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly, face pressed into his shoulder. “I should have told you I was leaving.”

*I’m sorry for compromising your investigation.*

“It’s okay.” Oliver’s voice trembles slightly. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

*Don’t do that again. I don’t think I could take it.*

“Do you want coffee or something before you go?” Felicity asks, pulling back far enough to look at him. The shadows under his eyes are a combination of exhaustion and grease, and she can see the stubble dusting his jaw.

Oliver shakes his head. “No. I—I should probably get going. My mom wasn’t exactly happy when I skipped out on the benefit earlier.”

“Right. Okay. Yeah, you should probably go talk to her about that. Before, you know, she disowns you or something.”

Oliver’s lips twitch in a sad facsimile of a smile. “Yeah.”

He kisses her, softly, like she’s the air and he’s struggling to breathe. It makes her heart feel so full of emotion (she won’t call it love, not now, not yet) for this beautiful, broken man.

“You know,” he says as he leaves, one hand on the door, “I’ve been thinking about what you said. About opening a club.”

“Yeah?”

Felicity isn’t sure where he’s going with this, but she’s willing to play along.
“I think it’s a good idea.”

She smiles. “Does that mean I get some of the cut?”

Oliver chuckles. “No. But you can pick the name.”

This is one of those things she should probably think on, especially given the tenuous truths that hang between them.

(Felicity’s never been a patient person.)

“Verdant!”

Oliver turns, halfway to the street.

“What?”

“Verdant. That’s what you should call your club. You know, because it sounds cool, and because green is a symbol of rebirth and this is your version of turning over a new leaf and— Yeah. It sounded better in my head.”

Oliver smiles. “I like it,” he says quietly. “Verdant.”

(Maybe this whole truth thing is going to go better than she thought.)

Diggle is waiting in the car when he emerges.

"Did you tell her?" he asks.

Oliver shoots Diggle a pointed look.

"No. It's not safe."

"Her helping you isn't safe either, but you seem to have no problem with that."

Oliver sighs. “I don't have much of a choice. She's not going to give up on this."

"I think you need to have a little faith, Oliver. Felicity's a big girl. She can make her own choices."

Oliver doesn’t reply. The ghosts of his past flash before his eyes as the city slips past the windows of the Bentley.

Sara, screaming as the water drags her under.

Shado, still on the grass, blood pooling from beneath her head.

Maseo, holding his dying son in his arms.

Tatsu, tears falling down her cheeks.

Slade, convulsing with fever.

He won’t let Felicity be another one.
Ghosts of Memories Past

Chapter Summary

Felicity faces her insecurities about her relationship with Oliver.

(Or the one where they go to dinner with Tommy and Laurel and it’s incredibly awkward.)

Chapter Notes

First off, let me apologise for vanishing off the face of the earth. I didn't mean to not update at all for the fall semester, but I ran out of banked chapters, fell way behind on season 4, and proceeded to drown in philosophy papers.

That being said, the best thing about Christmas (other than turkey and family and Christmas) is that I had a lot of time to get caught up not only on Arrow (the midseason finale OMG) but also catch up on updates that were long over due.

(I also watched the new Star Wars, but that's besides the point.)

I will try to keep the updates a little more frequent going into the New Year, but I cannot promise that I will not totally vanish off the face of the earth again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity knows.

She must. There’s no other reason to explain why she came after him that night at the bank—not that he hasn’t spent the last two weeks trying to find one.

It’s not like she’s been subtle about it: her rationale for opening the club, her name for the club; everything she’s said about the club, really.

Oliver also knows she’s waiting for him to make the first move. She’s already made it clear that she won’t push him to tell her, and while he appreciates it, there’s a large part of him that wishes she would.

She may never find out the truth otherwise.

“You know what I think about it,” is all Diggle says.

(Oliver does. He’s made it painfully clear over the past two weeks. Diggle also knows what Oliver thinks about it, which is why the conversation has yet to go anywhere.)

It’s not that he doesn’t want to tell her. The thought of lying to her, especially when she knows the truth, makes him feel uncomfortable, like his skin is suddenly two sizes too big, but every time he tries to think of ways to tell her, all his words seem to vanish.
The dreams that haunt his nights don’t make it any easier, either. There hasn’t been a single night since Felicity discovered his identity that Oliver hasn’t woken up in the dead of night, drenched in a cold sweat, with Felicity’s bloody corpse burned on the back of his eyelids. He’s been having these dreams for months now, but somehow the knowledge that she knows makes them all the more terrifying.

He can’t keep her safe anymore. Now that she’s working with him, helping him, she’s always going to be at risk.

Diggle says this is exactly why he should tell her. She’s going to be in danger either way.

Oliver admits it doesn’t make any sense. Telling Felicity is not going to put her in any more danger than she’s already in—she deduced it herself, and it’s not like anyone else is going to find out his secret identity.

Then again, a lot of the things he’s been feeling since he got back from the island haven’t made a whole lot of sense.

His mother’s assassination attempt provides him with the perfect distraction: Helena Bertinelli. Yes, she’s beautiful and rich and the kind of girl everyone expects him to be dating. The old Oliver would have had her in bed in three seconds, but what Oliver likes so much about Helena is that she understands. He doesn’t know the particulars of her story—and isn’t about to pressure her to share them—but she’s just as broken as he is. She’s hiding her pain from the world too, because no one can ever understand what she’s been through.

Taking her out to dinner might be taking it a little too far. Oliver tries to tell himself that he’s just playing a part, that he’s biding time until he can get to Bertinelli, but the truth is, it feels good to talk to someone without having to try and justify himself all the time or avoid talking about the things that happened to him, things he can’t even begin to describe.

He should be telling Felicity these things. She’s been nothing but supportive the whole time, and he should be talking to her about what’s bothering him.

It’s just that every time he starts to talk about what happened to him, he can see the look in her eyes, like her heart is breaking into a million pieces at the thought of all the terrible things that she is imagining he went through.

He doesn’t want sympathy. He didn’t overcome this great obstacle in his way. He’s not a hero. He did what he had to survive, nothing more.

Oliver has this irrational idea that, somehow, if he doesn’t tell Felicity that he’s the Hood, she won’t think of him as the damaged man that he is. He’s doing this for the right reasons, but they’re not reasons that anyone else can understand, especially when they come at the expense of a reunion with his family.

(It’s not that he doesn’t want to reconnect with them, he just doesn’t know how.)

He doesn’t want to see the look in her eyes, the judgement, the silent reminders that he’s just come back from the dead and shouldn’t be out there risking his life again.

Oliver isn’t proud of what he’s become: a killing machine, a master of torture and pain and things that would make you wish you were dead. It was necessary to his survival, and now that he’s back, while he may be disguising it all as a quest to right his father’s wrongs, Oliver lies in bed every night wondering if this whole crusade isn’t some just satisfaction for some sick bloodlust he’s
developed.

Maybe he really is all the things Lance thinks he is.

And if he is all those things, he doesn’t want Felicity to know.

When Oliver calls and asks her if she wants to go out to dinner at Table Salt, Felicity is surprised.

Not that Oliver is asking her out to dinner, obviously, because he’s her boyfriend, or that he’s taking her to Table Salt, because he is a very rich boyfriend, but that he wants to go to Table Salt. Felicity has never been a fan of posh restaurants—they always make her feel very much out of her league, and she’s pretty sure that Oliver would rather stick toothpicks under his fingernails than have dinner at Table Salt, which is crowded and noisy, and basically every PTSD sufferer’s nightmare.

(Felicity isn’t a psychologist—she has no idea if Oliver actually has PTSD, but based on what she’s seen and the things she imagines he had to do, it wouldn’t be a surprise.)

Not to mention, after the week she’s had (absolutely awful, in case anyone was wondering) the last thing she feels like doing is putting on one of the two nice dresses she owns that don’t scream office worker and going out to dinner at a restaurant full of rich people who will hardcore judge everything about her.

She called her mother this afternoon. It was inevitable—the number of messages on her cell and home phone were alarming—but it left Felicity feeling like thoroughly wrung-out dishcloth.

Donna, of course, wanted to know every single freaking detail of Felicity’s relationship with Oliver: how did they meet, was he really as hot as he looked in pictures, how badly the had island messed him up, what was he doing, and were his family really billionaires?

The whole thing was exhausting. Thinking about it is exhausting.

“You know, I thought this was where you’d take me on our first date,” Felicity says as Oliver navigates Friday night traffic downtown.

Oliver smiles, but the light doesn’t reach his eyes.

(Felicity’s noticed this a lot lately; she thinks it has something to do with the fact that she basically let it slip she knows his secret identity and that he still hasn’t actually told her his secret identity, but tonight is not the night to bring this up.)

“I like to surprise people every now and then.”

“Well, let me tell you, I was surprised all right. When you called and asked if I wanted to go to dinner I was thinking, you know, dinner, not some super fancy, way overpriced more-of-a-nightclub-than-a-restaurant place that probably has tiny, low calorie portions.”

Oliver taps the steering wheel nervously. “Was this a bad idea? Because we can always go somewhere else—”

“It’s fine,” Felicity says belatedly realising exactly how that would have sounded from Oliver’s perspective. “I was just, you know, rambling. As I do.”

Mostly. She’s not so sure how she feels about Table Salt yet, especially with the whole new level
that their relationship has taken—what with them being on the front page of *US Weekly* and all that—but Oliver seems to want to do this, so she’s going to go along with it.

Maybe, if they’re lucky, there will be a huge line and they can go to Big Belly Burger instead.

There is a big lineup, but Oliver doesn’t seem phased, marching to the front of the line with that charming smile he saves for the cameras on his face. Apparently their reservation bumps them to the front of the line, and Felicity feels a stab of guilt as she looks at all of the people hanging around the bar.

She feels even worse when she spots Tommy and Laurel at the front of the line. Laurel doesn’t seem upset, but Tommy looks distinctly frustrated. Felicity is surprised they’re still waiting—as far as she understands it, Tommy has more money than Oliver does.

“Look, I’m sorry,” the hostess is saying, her annoyance thinly veiled in politeness. “If you don’t have a reservation, it’s going to be a few hours at least until you can get in. We’re all full.”

“They’re with us,” Felicity says loudly, before her mind has time to catch up with her mouth.

Everyone turns to look at her. Felicity can feel the heat spreading across her cheeks.

The hostess frowns. “But Mr Queen, the reservation was for two.”

Oliver looks like he wants to protest—so does Tommy for that matter—but Felicity nudges him (they’re going to be nice, and besides, whoever said double-dates aren’t as nice as single dates?) and he flashes a smile that Felicity is sure has charmed the pants off of too many women. It certainly works on the hostess.

(Or maybe it’s the fifty dollar bill Oliver slips to her with the smile.)

Their table is small—Felicity’s first reaction is: *Really? This is a four person table?*—and surprisingly simple. Felicity was expecting silk tablecloths and fancy candles in bowls of diamonds and artsy glass statues, not a linen table cloth, a couple candles, and a bowl of roses in the centre of the table. It’s quieter and the lighting is low—very romantic, and totally opposite the super-hyped, psychedelic bar at the entrance.

“This is not what I thought Table Salt was going to be like,” Felicity mutters as Oliver pulls out a chair for her.

He smiles. “You might be able to get something that doesn’t come in a tiny, low-calorie portion.”

Oliver is right: the menu items are incredibly expensive, but also totally drool-worthy. Felicity can’t decide between the pistachio-stuffed scallops or the sweet potato ravioli—neither of them sound as delicious as the ribs (which she can get with sweet potato ravioli so win-win), but she’s eating dinner in a nice dress at a super fancy restaurant with Tommy and Laurel, so she doesn’t want to order something too messy. She asks Oliver under her breath what he thinks of ordering while Tommy scours the wine list and Laurel scrutinises her menu like it’s a deposition, but he just shrugs.

“What do you want?” he asks.

Felicity grinds her teeth to keep from groaning. “Obviously, since I’m asking your opinion, I don’t know what I want.”

Oliver smiles. “Well, how about you order the scallops and I’ll order the ribs and you can have my
ravioli? Then you don’t have to choose.”

(She does.)

Tommy orders a bottle of red wine, which disappears before they get their meals. Oliver waves for another one, not noticing the flicker of concern in Tommy’s eyes.

(First they were waiting in line, and now he’s worrying about the cost of wine. Something is up here.)

Their halfway through the second bottle of wine (and their meals which are beyond delicious—the sweet potato ravioli oh my god) when the conversation, which previously consisted of awkward discussions of Laurel and Felicity’s jobs—since, you know, neither Oliver or Tommy are employed—turns to the many things Oliver and Tommy were doing when they should have been working.

“I had forgotten that—you filled your parents’ pool with beer.” Oliver laughs. “How many kegs did that take?”

Tommy grins. “Roughly a thousand or so.”

Felicity doesn’t even want to think about how much that might have cost.

Oliver shakes his head. “Your father was so pissed I actually thought he was going to drown you in it.”

Tommy shrugs. “Yeah, well, death by beer—there’s worse ways to go, right, Felicity?”

“Well there are no good ways to die,” Felicity says, swallowing a rather large mouthful of ravioli. “It’s probably not as painful as being shot or stabbed, or burned alive—actually that one might be a lot more painful—but it takes an awful long time, doesn’t it? To drown I mean, not to be stabbed—though that can take an awful long time too depending on how and where and this is really inappropriate dinner conversation, especially since your sister, you know—”

Laurel blanches.

Shit.

“And I said something stupid. Again. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to go off like this, I just sometimes have difficulties filtering the word vomit in my brain—which is exactly what is happening right now and will end in 3… 2… 1…”

There is a long, awkward silence.

Oliver is holding his knife so tightly that it shakes.

Tommy stares at his plate, as if a new conversation topic might suddenly emerge from his steak.

Felicity takes a large gulp of wine. “So uh, how did you and Tommy meet?” she asks quietly.

Laurel forces a smile. “Actually, we’ve all known each other since—”

“We’ve all known each other since forever,” Oliver cuts in quickly.

“You three have a lot of history.” Felicity’s aim for a casual tone goes wide of the mark.
Tommy chuckles dryly. “Sometimes a little too much.”

Another awkward silence.

(Felicity is suddenly regretting offering to share a table with Tommy and Laurel. It seemed like a great idea at the time, but now that what was supposed to be a quiet, romantic dinner with her boyfriend after a hellish week has become a trip through the long and very connected past of the Three Musketeers with some painfully awkward side interjections by yours truly, it seems a lot less appealing.)

“So how’s the nightclub coming along?” Laurel asks Oliver. Her tone is painfully cheerful.

Felicity wishes she had thought to bring that up in one of her many conversations with Oliver over the last couple weeks, but it’s slipped her mind in all the excitement of being the vigilante’s new right-hand IT girl.

(Does that same something about her? More importantly, does that say something about Laurel?)

“Slower than I expected,” Oliver says wearily. “I’ve been, uh, busy.”

Felicity snorts into her glass of wine and quickly tries to disguise it as a cough. Oliver shoots her a sharp look that doesn’t quite come across as inquisitive.

Laurel smiles like she hasn’t witnessed their exchange. “Well then you must be glad to have the extra help then.”

Oliver frowns. “What do you mean?”

Tommy laughs nervously. “Laurel, I’m sure that Ollie doesn’t want to talk about work right now.”

Felicity recognises the look on Laurel’s face: it’s the same one her mom, Lois, and Chloe all get when they’re about to chastise Felicity for doing something stupid (it’s a Smoak thing, apparently). “You didn’t ask him?” she hisses.

“How about that?” Oliver whispers. He’s clearly trying to be funny. From the looks on Tommy and Laurel’s faces, the humour isn’t appreciated.

“Tommy wanted—” Laurel breaks off and glances at Tommy, who buries his face in his hands. “Tommy was going to ask you about working for you at your nightclub.”

Oliver laughs like Laurel’s just told him a great joke. His laughter dies abruptly when Felicity kicks him under the table. Tommy looks like he wants the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

“Uh, really? I’m sorry,” Oliver says, clearly trying to backpedal. “I just didn’t think you were looking for any kind of responsibility at all.”

Smooth.

(Felicity wonders if smacking him would cause too much of a scene.)

“Yeah, who’d believe that?” Tommy mutters sarcastically.

“You’ve always wanted to get into business with Tommy,” Laurel castigates. “I mean, don’t you remember when we went to Aspen and you wanted to open the ski lodge—?”
“The only thing I remember about Aspen is that your father was furious we shared a room with one bed,” Oliver replies.

Laurel giggles, cheeks flushing. “I don’t know that I’ve ever been more embarrassed in my life.”

“The only thing I remember about Aspen is that your father was furious we shared a room with one bed,” Oliver replies.

Laurel groans. “I thought the door was locked! I didn’t know he was going to have a key!”

“Speaking as someone who has walked in on people before, I can tell you that your dad was probably just as embarrassed.” Felicity isn’t sure why she’s bringing this up; it’s probably a terrible idea but she can’t sit still and listen to Oliver and Laurel swap cute sex stories. Tommy looks like he’s considering stabbing himself with his steak knife and Felicity really doesn’t do that well with blood.

Oliver chuckles. “Are you saying you’ve done it multiple times?”

“Well, there was the first year party in college—multiple times in first year, actually because my roommate was really popular with the boys on campus and really bad at remembering to lock the door—and then that time with you and Sara at the QC Christmas party, and then once over summer holidays in third year—that was doubly embarrassing because it was my mom—”

It isn’t until she notices the mute look of horror on Oliver and Laurel’s faces that she realises what she’s said.

Frack.

“I was looking for the bathroom,” she stammers, trying to make things less awkward and failing miserably. “And what I mean by that is that it’s something I shouldn’t have brought up at all because it’s totally inappropriate.”

Laurel is glaring daggers at Oliver over her wine glass. Tommy has sunk lower into his chair. Oliver swallows.

“I think I’m just, uh, going to go to the bathroom. You know, all that wine,” Felicity stammers, hoping her cheeks aren’t as red as she thinks they are. She’s definitely not okay, but Oliver either doesn’t pick up on it because he’s a man (or because he’s too busy mooning at Laurel across the table—he’s not, he’s not, why is she even thinking that? Laurel probably wants to kill him right now because of the big bomb she dropped on him) or does pick up on it and chooses not to comment because he’s a man. This was supposed to be her night out with Oliver, and she’s not going to spend it listening to him reminisce about all his sex-capades with Laurel.

(God, why did she have to use that word? Who even uses that word?)

She’s blowing this all out of proportion, probably. At least that’s what she tells herself as she
stands in front of the bathroom mirror, pretending to fix her makeup. Oliver isn’t in love with Laurel anymore—he’s dating her. And Laurel’s dating Tommy, so really there’s no need to be concerned. She’s just freaking out about nothing, as usual.

(The only thing she really should be freaking out about is the fact that she pretty much told Laurel that she walked in on Oliver and Sara sleeping together back when Laurel and Oliver were dating, but that doesn’t bother her at all.)

A few deeps breaths and some stern glances at her reflection in the mirror (she really needs to stop freaking out like this), and Felicity has gained enough composure to go back out there and finish her scallops with dignity—because they are the most delicious things she’s eaten in a long time and no way are they going to go to waste.

She spots Tommy as she leaves the bathroom and thinks he might be doing the same thing she just did—or he might just be using the bathroom like a normal person—until she spots Laurel hurrying after him.

“Tommy, why are you so upset?”

Tommy glares at her bitterly. “Why did you have to say something to Oliver about the job?”

(Felicity should definitely not be listening in on this conversation. She should slip back into the dining room and take advantage of the alone time with Oliver.)

(It’s a shame she’s never been good at doing what she’s supposed to.)

“You were supposed to talk to him!” Laurel protests.

“Well, I didn’t,” Tommy snaps, turning on his heel and heading for the door again.

“Okay, I didn’t realise, I’m sorry!” Laurel exclaims, chasing after him. “I was just trying to help.”

Tommy turns so quickly that Laurel almost runs into him. “No, you were trying to get Oliver to help.” He shakes his head. “You know, it’s typical Laurel, always running to her white knight. Oliver and Laurel. It always has been. That’s not gonna change.”

Felicity wants to leave, but her feet seem rooted to the floor.

“Oliver and I are over,” Laurel says quietly.

“Oh really? Because you seemed awfully pleased to be reliving ancient history with him.”

“What, am I supposed to pretend we didn’t have a good time when we were together?”

Tommy sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. Felicity feels as though someone has eviscerated her insides with a spoon.

“You’re supposed to be my date! This evening is supposed to be about you and me, not you and all of your happy memories with Oliver!”

“Happy memories? What, you think I enjoy listening to Oliver’s new girlfriend talk about how she walked in on Oliver and my sister sleeping together six months before he snuck off with her on his yacht and got her killed?” Laurel snaps.

Tommy laughs bitterly. “Exactly what I thought. You know, losing you is going to be harder than losing my money, so maybe we should end this before it begins.”
(He leaves Laurel standing in the middle of the bar.)

(Felicity flees.)

Felicity is too quiet on the drive home. Oliver thinks of a million different things to break the silence—all of which avoid addressing the issue at hand—but none of them actually make it out of his mouth. If Felicity weren’t staring out the window, she’d probably think there is something wrong with him; he keeps opening and closing his mouth like some kind of deranged fish.

He’ll walk her to her door and apologise. That way it won’t look like he’s totally oblivious. Or a jerk.

(Given his track record, this is a good thing to avoid.)

Felicity, however, has other ideas: Oliver has barely stopped the car before she’s out the door with a muttered, “Thanks for the dinner. Goodnight.”

Oliver watches her go miserably for a full three seconds before he goes after her.

“Hey!”

He can swear he hears Felicity mutter, “Seriously?”

“Felicity! Hey!”

He catches her just as she makes it to the door, gently taking hold of her elbow. She turns to face him, and he sees the glimmer of tears in her eyes under the porch light.

“Look, I’m sorry about tonight,” he says quietly. “We shouldn’t have gone to Table Salt—if I’d known that Tommy and Laurel were going to be there—”

“It’s a free country, Oliver,” she says quietly. “They’re allowed to have dinner wherever they want. And it’s not like they invited themselves to our table, either.”

“No, but I should have—”

“You shouldn’t have spent the whole time waxing poetic with your ex-girlfriend,” Felicity snaps. Oliver swallows. He didn’t mean to get caught up in the reminiscing, but honestly, he only mentioned that one time in Aspen and Felicity already knows that they dated—did she really think they were going to be able to all be friends and the topic was never going to come up?

She’s obviously mad about it, but he can’t for the life of him imagine why.

(He can understand that she might be a little miffed about the Aspen thing, and he’s sorry. He regretted it as soon as he said it, but there’s no reason for her to be this angry.)

“How was I supposed to know it was going to get weird like that?” He should have known, he did know, which was why he’d been hesitant to have Tommy and Laurel sit with them, but he can’t help the defensive edge that creeps into his voice.

“No, I’m sorry,” Felicity says. There’s a quiet resignation in her tone that bothers Oliver more than her anger. He’d almost rather she were snapping at him. “I shouldn’t have suggested it, I should have known, I just thought that—I don’t know what I was thinking actually, I probably wasn’t thinking, which is what usually happens—like when I brought up the whole Sara thing, which was
totally not cool and I am so sorry. So no worries. It’s fine. I’m fine. Totally fine.”

“Felicity.”

“I don’t have the greatest track record with relationships, okay?” she says, fumbling her keys out of her bag. Her voice trembles even more than her hands. “I’m not looking for another heartache to add to the list. Especially when it’s going to be documented in great detail on the cover of every magazine in the freaking country!”

(Ah. So it’s not really about Laurel at all.)

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” he says gently. He wants to pull her into his arms, but somehow, he doesn’t think it will be appreciated.

“Oh really? And you think that having dinner with the love of your life is just going to be a walk in the park?”

Love of my— What?

“Felicity—”

“No,” Felicity says with surprising intensity. “I saw the way you looked at her. That kind of love doesn’t die. You’re like Cinderella and Prince Charming, or Ariel and Eric or Nala and Simba— nobody ever said they weren’t going to be together, no matter what came between them. And you still love her, which nobody can blame you for because she’s smart and beautiful and perfect.”

This conversation is so far out of left field that Oliver has no idea what to say. Is she breaking up with him? Because she thinks he’s in love with Laurel?

“I don’t,” he says quickly, wishing he didn’t sound quite so desperate. “Felicity, I swear to you, I don’t.”

“You guys are like those perfect couples in rom-com movies. Meant to be forever and all that.”

Felicity’s fingers are shaking so badly she can’t put her key in the lock.

“Hey.” Oliver closes his fingers gently over hers. “Let’s talk about this inside, okay?” It’s almost December and the nights are starting to get cold.

(Plus, he thinks a hot chocolate will do her a world of good.)

They’re greeted by a large tabby cat who is most upset to be disturbed from his lounging on the front mat.

“That’s Robin Hood,” Felicity says as he shoots off into the apartment with a disgruntled yowl. She’s still jittery but doesn’t look like she’s going to cry anymore so Oliver thinks that the worst of the storm might have passed. He’s never been the most perceptive, particularly when it comes to women, but he’s almost positive that this isn’t as much about him and Laurel as it is about the image of him and Laurel that Felicity has in her head.

“Robin Hood?” Oliver repeats, trying to act casual. It has to be a coincidence, unless she’s suddenly gotten a cat in the last two weeks.

“Yeah.” Felicity laughs nervously. “Housewarming gift from my cousin. She thought the name was cute because he looks a little like the fox from the cartoon.”
“Oh. Uh, yeah he does.”

(It’s a coincidence. So why does he feel so relieved?)

“Do you, uh, want anything? Coffee? Hot chocolate?” Oliver shifts his weight nervously, hands in the pockets of his pants. He hates this uncertainty, the anticipation of the conversation that is inevitably coming.

Felicity flashes a small smile. “Aren’t I supposed to be asking you those questions?”

Oliver shrugs. “I don’t mind. I like cooking. It takes my mind off things.”

“Oh, uh, okay, well that’s good because I have no cooking skills at all. Like none. Other than sandwiches. I make a mean sandwich.” Felicity shucks her coat and lets her purse drop at the door. She still looks nervous. “I think there’s mix in the cupboard and mugs in the other cupboard and whipped cream in the fridge…”

Oliver smiles. “I’m sure I’ll find everything.”

Standing in Felicity’s kitchen, making hot chocolate, it’s easy to pretend the rest of the evening never happened. He has no trouble finding what he needs in her kitchen; in fact, it feels more like his kitchen than the Queen’s massive kitchen ever has.

(Maybe it’s because of all those years Raisa yelled at him for setting foot in her kitchen as a child.)

Some of the tension seems to ebb away as he works. Felicity curls up on the couch with her tablet and, though she’s still as tense as a springboard, he gets the feeling that she’s a little calmer than before.

Hot chocolate was definitely a good idea.

“This is—wow.” Felicity lifts the mug of hot chocolate and inhales. “Jesus. That is a mean hot chocolate, Mr Queen.” She frowns and inhales again. “Is that—?”

“Mint?” Oliver smiles. “I found some in the cupboards, and I thought, with the whole mint chocolate thing that it might be a nice touch.”

“It really is. Wow. You know, I could get used to this. Coming home from work to put my feet up and be served divine hot chocolate by a super hot guy.”

Oliver smirks. “Super hot, huh?”

“Yeah. Like can’t-believe-a-guy-this-hot-would-go-for-me kind of hot. Or way-too-out-of-my-league hot. The kind of guy who should be dating some hot-shot lawyer or basically someone that doesn’t have a basic programming defect that prevents them from filtering anything at all ever.”

“Felicity.” Oliver says gently. She’s sucked all the whipped cream off the top of her hot chocolate and there’s a little bit that’s stuck on her upper lip. He reaches over and slowly wipes it off with his thumb. Felicity tracks his movements with her eyes.

(His heartbeat seems suddenly louder in his ears.)

“I happen to quite like girls that have basic programming defects that prevent them from filtering anything at all ever,” he says softly. He puts his thumb in his mouth and sucks on it slowly. The whipped cream is soft and sweet against his tongue. He’s never been a huge fan of it, but the look
on Felicity’s face is well worth it.

She swallows. “But, uh, you and Laurel—”

“There is no me and Laurel,” Oliver says softly, sliding closer. The sofa cushions creak under his weight. “Me and Laurel ended a long time ago.”

“Right about the time that you slept with her sister?”

Oliver laughs. Felicity winces, cheeks flushing.

“Yeah. Right about then. Probably before then, actually.” Oliver scrubs a hand nervously over his jaw. “I wasn’t exactly prime boyfriend material back then.”

Felicity snorts. “I know. I saw you, remember? In fact, if I hadn’t saved you from your self-destructive impulses when I did you totally would have done the nasty with Sara and then things would have been a lot worse.”

Oliver flushes. “I did actually,” he admits reluctantly.

“What?” Felicity gasps. “Do you mean that I walked in on you and Sara having sex? Because that is even more awkward.”

“Oh, no. That was after. On the boat. Before it sank. And before the boat left, actually.” Oliver smiles ruefully. “I guess your good influence didn’t rub off on me as much as I thought it would.”

Felicity takes a small sip of her hot chocolate, considering.

“So you don’t love Laurel,” she says finally. “Even though she’s pretty much freaking perfect.”

“I don’t love Laurel,” Oliver says firmly. “And she’s far from perfect.”

Felicity raise her eyebrows.

“She’s not as pretty as you for one.” Oliver takes the hot chocolate from Felicity’s hands and places it on the coffee table. It’s been five years since he tried the whole seducing thing and he can only pray that he won’t make a total fool of himself.

“She doesn’t have your smile”—he takes off her glasses—“or your habit of babbling”—his lips ghost over her cheeks (her skin trembles under his touch. His whole body is quivering in anticipation)—“or your incredible taste of lipstick.”

He presses his lips against hers.

Kissing Oliver is like a religious experience.

Okay, maybe not an actual religious experience because Felicity is pretty sure that’s sacrilege or something and there’s probably a law (definitely a law) about it in the Torah somewhere, but it’s pretty damn spectacular. The things Oliver can do with his lips... Well, let’s just say that for a man who’s spent his last five years dead to the world, for all intents and purposes, he’s got some fantastic skill.

The kiss leaves her breathless and shaking. There's a constant buzz in her brain and her heart is pounding in her chest and all she can think is that she wants to see Oliver naked. Right now. Damn the paparazzi and Laurel and anyone else.
"Shirt. Off," she gasps, fumbling uselessly with the buttons.

Oliver blinks, surprised and she wants to hit him. (Honestly, where did he think this was going to go?)

"Now," she groans.

It's as though a switch had flipped somewhere in Oliver's brain: his eyes darken and he complies, undoing the buttons of his shirt with such speed that Felicity feels a little jealous. He gives up about half way and rips the whole thing over his head, buttons pinging across the room.

Felicity, totally distracted by the athletic ferocity of the man in front of her (and that chest oh my god), has forgotten all about her intention to take off her own clothes (or that she's wearing any, for that matter) until Oliver grabs the hem of her dress and tugs it over her head in one fluid motion.

(Thank god, she thinks, for stretchy fabric.)

Oliver stares at her, eyes roving up and down her body like he's never seen one before. Felicity feels the blush spread across her cheeks, hot and uncomfortable, but the heat shoots quickly to her core when Oliver raises his eyes to hers.

She's never been a big believer in the whole true love fairytale thing since the Cooper debacle. The way Oliver is looking at her now, however, like she's the sun and stars around which he orbits, like he needs her the way he needs to breathe, makes that little spark of magic flicker. Maybe this is it. Maybe he's the one.

"God, you're beautiful," he whispers.

"So are you," Felicity says breathlessly. "You know with the abs and the arms and the jaw and the scars—very sexy, by the way—and the smouldering eyes—"

(She's really glad when Oliver cuts her off with his mouth.)

Felicity isn’t sure how they make it to the bed. There’s a lot of fumbling and writhing and groaning (Oliver) and whining (Felicity) and then she’s tumbling backwards onto her bed (how does Oliver even know where her room is and does that really matter right now when he's doing things like that with his tongue?) and Oliver is standing over her, half-naked, giving her a look that makes her want to burst into flames, right here, right now.

She doesn’t burst into flames, though, which is good because if she had she wouldn’t be able to enjoy the (really delicious) sight of Oliver shedding his slacks and climbing onto the bed after her. Or the way he kisses her and literally invades her mouth with his tongue.

Her hands come up around his back of their own accord, fingers digging into his back with such intensity that Oliver hisses and complies, pressing his body closer against her.

It’s a good thing, she thinks, that her body seems to have taken control of itself because her mind is definitely not capable of any rational processes right now, not when Oliver’s mouth is making its way down her neck and his fingers are undoing the clasp of her bra and his mouth is between her breasts, nipping, sucking, and oh god it feels so good she never wants it to end—

She’s mewling like a kitten, writhing under Oliver’s mouth, fingers anxiously plucking at the waistband of his boxer briefs. They’ve both still got their shoes on (which they discover when she goes to wrap her legs around Oliver’s waist to get some much-needed friction and accidentally stabs him with her heel) and Felicity’s bra never quite made it off her (it’s lying draped over her
arm like a forgotten token), but neither of them really care (Oliver’s solution to the shoe problem is to slip them off her feet and throw them across the room, slipping his oxfords off at the same time and neither of them could care less about her bra). The most important thing right now as far as Felicity is concerned is that Oliver keeps doing whatever he’s been doing with his tongue because her nipples have never been loved in the very exquisite way that he’s lavishing them right now.

Oliver flicks his tongue across her nipple and Felicity almost comes right there because sweet Jesus it feels good and it’s been entirely too long since she’s had an orgasm that wasn’t induced by her vibrator. She’s teetering so close to the edge and Oliver still has his (very tight, very sexy) boxer briefs on and the feel of his erection pressing against her core is not enough anymore.


Oliver raises his head from her breasts slowly. His whole body is quivering, muscles so taught they stick out against his skin like ropes, and it occurs to Felicity suddenly just how long it’s been since Oliver last had sex (assuming, of course, that he didn’t sleep with anyone in the five years he was away).

(He’s surprised he hasn’t thrown her back against the pillows and fucked her senseless already. That’s what she would do after a five year dry spell.)

Instead, he hooks his fingers into the waistband of her panties and eases them slowly off, fingers brushing against her thighs the whole time.

“Your underwear,” Felicity says breathlessly. “Not mine.”

A wicked smile curls on Oliver’s lips. “So you want me to put them back on?”

“Ah, um, no,” she whispers. Her thighs are shaking. “Just—I need you inside me. Now. Before the anticipation literally kills me.”

“Anticipation? Have you been wanting this for a long time?” Oliver asks. His voice is deep, throaty, and Felicity’s hips twitch. She’s been waiting entirely too long—longer than Oliver thinks—so instead of answering, she wraps her fingers around his briefs and pulls.

Jesus.

Felicity has had a lot of fantasies about her and Oliver—a lot more know that they’re together—but her imagination has apparently been poorly adequate at capturing Oliver in all his glory.

“I, um, wow,” she says quietly because her ability to filter possibly embarrassing things is virtually non-existent during sex.

“Condoms,” Oliver growls, apparently totally oblivious to anything she might have said.

(Thank God. She’s always been chatty in bed, and quite proud of it, but some of it are things she wishes she could un-say.)

“Yup.” Oliver groans as Felicity rolls over to grab one from her nightstand, hip brushing against his cock.

Oliver rips the foil packet open with his teeth and rolls the condom on with the practiced ease of someone who does this far too often, not someone who’s spend the last five years for all intents and purposes dead.
His body coils like a spring and Felicity is ready for him to explode inside her with a rush of masculine power and it’s going to be so, so much better than anything she’s had in a long time—maybe ever—and then—

He stops, looking suddenly vulnerable.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks. His voice trembles with exertion and Felicity has to admire his self control even though she really wants to strangle him right now.

“Oliver, I swear to God, if you aren’t inside me in the next five seconds I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

He opens his mouth and if he says Are you sure? one more time, she’s going to scream so she grabs the back of his neck and drags his mouth back onto hers.

Oliver apparently gets the message because he slips his tongue in her mouth and eases himself in and sweet baby Jesus sex has never felt like this before. Felicity can’t help clenching around him because it just feels so good and then his hips jerk against hers and the power of coherent thought vanishes completely.

It’s very loud and the neighbours are definitely all going to know that she got the best sex of her life last night but as the world explodes into a million stars and Oliver collapses into her shoulder, crying her name, she finds she can’t bring herself to care.

Chapter End Notes

I've never written a sex scene before (or even a hint of a sex scene really) and I was super nervous about it but I think it turned out okay. If I'm wrong and it failed epically, please tell me and I will endeavour to improve it!

(I also won't let my boyfriend beta-read it—he's a massive Olicity fan, but he might be a little biased....)
Felicity Smoak can put up with a lot of things. Like photographers stalking her on her way to work. Or the media raising cheating allegations as soon as Oliver so much as looks at another woman.

Oliver has secrets. She gets that.

She just wishes he'd stop keeping them from her.

(Or the one where Oliver’s decision to keep his nightlife a secret comes back to bite him.)

Felicity wakes up in the morning to an empty bed and the smell of coffee.

For a moment, she wonders why the coffeepot is going when she’s only just woken up—because unless someone’s broken in or her cat has magically acquired coffee-making skills there’s no way that thing should be running itself—until she sees the array of clothes scattered all over the room and remembers last night.

Last night. Possibly—definitely—the best sex of her life.

(Because if the first time wasn’t the best, then the second time was. Or the third. Or the time in the shower.)

The memories bring a slow smile to her lips and she curls her toes into the mattress, savouring the delicious reminiscence—because really, there’s no other word for it.
“Hey, sleepyhead.”

Oliver leans against the doorjamb, arms folded across his chest and grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. “Coffee’s almost ready.”

Felicity groans. Oliver isn’t wearing a shirt—or any pants for that matter, just his really sexy black boxer briefs—and it’s really not fair that he should be so beautiful. “You might be an actual god,” she says, voice half-muffled by the pillow. “Jury’s still out on that one, but they’re leaning strongly in favour.”

Oliver chuckles. “Well, let me know what they decide. In the mean time, there’s breakfast.”

This must be a dream. She’s still asleep, and she’s going to wake up in five minutes and realise that Oliver is asleep beside her, snoring, or drooling, or doing something disguising and not freaking perfect.

“It cooks,” she mumbles to herself, because embarrassing self-talk is how she wakes herself up half the time. “This is so not fair.”

From the corner of her eye, she can see Oliver’s mouth twist into a smirk. “If I’d known you were this cute in the morning, I would’ve slept with you a long time ago.”

“Are we talking sleep sleep or sleep sleep?”

(Apparently, she still thinks this is a dream.)

“Okay. I think you need some food,” Oliver says. “You’re not making any sense.”

“No surprises there,” Felicity mutters into the pillow. Her stomach growls loudly as if to illustrate Oliver’s point, but the bed is so warm, and Oliver looks really hot in those briefs—which she very much wants to take off him right now—so leaving is the last thing she feels like doing.

But this bed is pretty comfy. So you know, I think I might stay here. You can join me if you want.”

“And let breakfast get cold?” Oliver asks, one eyebrow raised.

“I have an oven. And a microwave. We can reheat.”

Oliver’s eyes darken, and Felicity feels something warm uncurl itself in the pit of her stomach. He crosses the room in two strides and leans over her and she closes her eyes waiting for the hungry press of his lips against hers…

…and squeals when Oliver throws the blankets off her.

“Oliver!”

She tries to hit him, or grab him and drag him back on top of her—honestly, she’s not sure which—but he’s so muscular and smooth that her hands slide uselessly off his shoulders as he sweeps her into his arms.

“This is so not fair!” she groans into his shoulder. He smells like aftershave and her shower gel. She likes it a lot.

Oliver’s chuckle rumbles through his chest and makes his pecs twitch delightfully against Felicity’s stomach. “Who said anything about fair?”

Felicity realises two things as Oliver sets her down in the kitchen: one, this is not a dream, and two,
Oliver is a fantastic cook. She’s never seen eggs Benedict so artfully arranged or delicious-smelling in her whole life.

“Wow. When you said you made breakfast, I was thinking bowls of cereal or half-burnt toast, not a full-on buffet.”

Oliver rubs the back of his neck nervously. “Do you not like eggs? I can make something else if you want.”

“No—I love eggs! Not that I ever eat them because I have zero cooking skills—like zero, it’s actually embarrassing—but they’re definitely on the list of top five breakfast foods. Pretty much all breakfast foods are on that list actually, except bacon, you know, because of the whole Jewish thing.”

“You’re Jewish?”

“Yeah. My mom was never really strict about it because she was never actually Jewish—she just keeps it alive because my dad was and she wanted me to have a piece of him—but I kind of like it. I’m not kosher about everything, we never were, but I try to avoid the big things—like, you know, pork.”

Oliver frowns, tipping his head to one side like she’s a puzzle he’s desperate to figure out. He looks terribly serious, but there’s a playful glint in his eyes that tells her whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to be total bullshit. “Huh. I can kind of see it now.”

She grins. “See what? My magical Jewish powers?”

Oliver nods. “Definitely. That bacon repelling force field is especially powerful.”

His comment is so ridiculous and so out of left field that Felicity lets out a loud (very unflattering) snort of laughter.

Oliver chuckles. “You can get started,” he says, scrubbing a hand over his hair. “I’m just going to throw on some pants.”

Felicity shakes her head. “No pants necessary at this establishment. In fact, it’s preferred if you leave them off.” She gestures to herself. “I’m not wearing anything.”

Oliver smirks, but the playful light in his eyes has been replaced by something much darker than makes Felicity’s stomach do backflips. “I noticed.”

“You know…” Felicity can’t help the giddy smile that curls on her lips—Oliver gives her butterflies like she’s in the fourth grade again and she’s definitely not ashamed of it. “I think you may even have too many clothes on. If I’m going to be eating with nothing on, it’s only fair that you should do the same thing.”

(The spark in Oliver’s eyes suggests the double meaning has not been missed.)

“And waste a perfectly good breakfast?” he asks, but he’s already moving towards her and she knows that she’s won.

“We can reheat,” she whispers, fingers toying with the waistband of his briefs.

“You know,” Felicity says, mouth full of eggs, “I think this is even better reheated.”
Oliver smiles. He’s wearing a pair of old sweatpants that Felicity picked up at the gym one time by mistake, which fit surprisingly well (“Like I knew you’d be coming by,” Felicity joked) and she’s wearing his shirt from last night. Both of them look thoroughly debauched, as Thea would say.

(He’s never been happier.)

“I think you have to have actually tried it fresh in order to judge,” he replies easily.

“I think that to be this unbelievably delicious reheated they must have been worse fresh because everyone knows everything tastes worse when it’s reheated,” Felicity retorts, jabbing her fork at him for emphasis. “I’m sure there’s some really good science somewhere that backs me up.”

“Nothing about that statement makes any sense,” Oliver says calmly, spreading peanut butter on his toast. “But I’m sure there’s some science somewhere that will back that up.”

Felicity glowers at him over the edge of her coffee cup. The effect might have been threatening if it didn’t make her look so cute.

“You know, it’s a privilege that you get to be here,” she says, setting her coffee cup down and picking up her fork with an intensity that has Oliver momentarily concerned for his safety. “My morning routine is a pretty sacred thing. I don’t just break it for any old guy who I happen to have slept with. Even if said guy happens to have provided the best sex I’ve had in a long time—possibly in my whole life, actually.”

“Best sex of your life, huh?” Oliver tries not to preen too much, but he can’t help the smugness that creeps into his voice. The desire to sleep with Felicity has been burning in the pit of his stomach since he wandered into her office that first day back at QC, but he wanted to wait until the right time; when it finally came down to it, he was so nervous because it had been so long since it had really meant something that her praise is a well-needed boost to his very fragile ego.

Contrary to popular belief, Oliver Queen is hardly as confident as he seems.

Felicity rolls her eyes, but a flush spreads steadily across her cheeks. “Maybe.”

“Well, then.” Oliver folds his arms across his chest, trying hard to stop the stupidly huge grin spreading across his face. He feels like he’s fifteen years old again and Stefanie McMaster has just told him she thinks he’s cute. “We aim to please.”

Felicity holds Oliver’s gaze for three seconds before they both dissolve into laughter.

“God,” she says finally, wiping her streaming eyes on the back of her hand. Oliver hasn’t laughed so hard since—well, honestly he can’t remember when. “We aim to please? What is this, some kind of company? Like, we’ll give you a ridiculously awkward dinner that will make you want to die followed by some intensely mind-blowing sex for the low price of zero dollars? Not that you’d actually charge zero dollars because then you’d make no profit, but you know what I mean. Which is not that you should actually pursue this as a business—although you’d probably get a lot more people in your club if they thought sex was on the table. I mean being offered, not actually happening on the table—though I’ve heard that can be pretty mind-blowing too—”

“There’s going to be lots of sex in the club whether I advertise it or not,” Oliver replies pragmatically. Felicity looks relieved to have been interrupted, but he’s really doing it for his own benefit: listening to her talk about sex on a table while sitting across from him in nothing but one of his shirts was doing nothing to help his self-control. “Though I’d rather not give Detective Lance any more excuses to try and lock me up.”
“Yes. Right.” Felicity says with a seriousness that sounds strained. “Arresting is a thing we want to avoid. No felonies, please.”

“I’ll try my best,” he replies with a grin. He’s not going to make any promises—at least not ones he knows he can’t keep; after all, it’s a little hypocritical of him to be promising to stay on the right side of the law when his nighttime activities literally involve breaking it.

“Good.” She scoops up a forkful of eggs with a grin. “Because I happen to like you here. With me. In my bed.”

Oliver squares his shoulders, like he’s brushing off an insult. “Well,” he says brusquely, fighting to keep the smile off his face (he hasn’t smiled so much in God knows how long, but he doesn’t think he can stop), “nice to know I’m only around to keep your bed warm.”

Felicity blushes. “That’s not what I meant and you know it,” she mumbles, staring at her eggs. “I like having you around. In any capacity.”

“Convenient. I happen to like being around. The person I am when I’m with you— Well, let’s just say he’s a person I wish I could be more often.”

He doesn’t mean to ruin the mood by unceremoniously dumping his emotional baggage in the middle of the table, but after last night, he feels the need to try and make her understand how important she is, even if he can’t seem to find the right words.

“So be that person.” Felicity’s voice is gentle; her hand on his arm, gentler still. It’s been so long since Oliver has been touched like this, softly, kindly, that he doesn’t know how to react. His instinct is to pull away, to close himself off, but he resists. He’s not that person anymore—or he’s trying not to be, at any rate. “You don’t have to shut yourself away from the world, Oliver. There are people out there who care about as much as I do. More, probably.”

She catches sight of something and her face falls. Oliver follows her gaze to the copy of *People* thrown on the coffee table. *Laurel Lance and Oliver Queen: Back On?* the headlines reads. Underneath is a picture of him and Laurel eating lunch at her favourite bistro on the waterfront. They met up yesterday on her break because she wanted to try and talk him into hiring Tommy at Verdant. Again.

(For the record, he has no problem hiring Tommy. He’d love to work with Tommy. Tommy is the one who doesn’t seem to want to work with him.)

“You know you can’t believe any of that stuff right?” he says, gesturing to the magazine. He feels unreasonably panicked, maybe because he’s feeling relieved that the paparazzi didn’t catch him out at dinner with Helena two nights ago—lunch with Laurel is something he can explain—or maybe because things are so good that he’s terrified they’re going to end. (If there’s anything he’s learned over the last five years—his whole life, maybe—it’s things get really good right before they’re about to end.)

What he really wants to tell her, what he really should tell her, is that she wormed her way into his heart the night they met and he spent the last five years wondering what might have happened if he hadn’t vanished, or what she was doing, or what she had thought—if anything—about his disappearance. That the two things that consumed his mind during those years (other than survival) were apologising to Laurel and finding her.

If only he could find the words.
“They make their living making up bullshit about other people. It was just, uh, lunch. Laurel and I used to be really close—obviously, I mean we were dating— and, well, things didn’t exactly end very well between us before I went away and then she spent five years thinking I was dead… And then there’s this whole thing with Tommy being cut off and she’s really worried about him and I just—”

He trails off when he sees the smug grin spreading across Felicity’s face. “I must really be rubbing off on you,” she says.

“Shut up,” Oliver mutters, scratching the back of his neck, but he’s grinning too.

(They’re laughing it off now, but he can still feel the tension, after they’ve put away the dishes and had sex—again—and showered—not together, to his disappointment—and Felicity has made him a sandwich to take with him to his meeting with the architects at Verdant. They haven’t really dealt with anything, just shoved it under the rug, as he does with everything in his life, and it’s going to come back to bite them in the ass. It always does.)

At first, she tells herself it’s nothing. The media is just making up stories because it’s what they do. And, you know, since Oliver just came back from the dead and all that they’ve got five years of scandal and gossip to catch up on so it makes sense that they’d be focusing on him.

Still, it makes it hard to go about your daily life when there are pictures of you and your boyfriend —more importantly, pictures of your boyfriend with other women—on the cover of every newsstand in the city. It’s even harder to dismiss it as nothing when you can’t even go to your favourite latte joint anymore because it’s overrun with cameramen trying to get your picture.

So when she runs into someone at the gym—not bumping their shoulder on her way to the weight rack but literally plowing head on into them on her way out of the change rooms—she blames it on the preoccupation.

“I am so sorry,” she stammers, scrambling to collect her gym bag off the floor and hoping that her cheeks aren’t as red as they feel. “I wasn’t paying any attention to where I was— Oh, hi, Tommy.”

“Hey.” Tommy places a steadying hand on her arm, frowning. “You okay?”

“Um, yeah, fine. Just, uh, you know, not watching where I’m going. As usual.”

Tommy raises his eyebrows. “I know that look,” he says.

“What look? I have a look?” Actually, Felicity has several different looks, notably I’m trying really hard to look like I’m not lying, Wow, I really shouldn’t have said that, and Did I really just say that?.

“Laurel used to get that same look whenever Oliver got into some kind of trouble. Usually of the illegal kind.”

“Oh.” Of course. Of course. Felicity is very quickly learning that Laurel Lance is a ghost she cannot escape; at least, not as long as she’s dating Oliver.

Tommy must see the hesitation on her face because he frowns. “Oliver isn’t doing anything with Laurel, is he?”

(Is it bad that she feels happy not to be the only one insecure about the whole Laurel-and-Oliver thing?)
“Um, no.” Felicity is slightly relieved to admit that is not the case but it doesn’t help the larger fact that Oliver is possibly currently doing things with some other woman who looks a little bit like she might be Laurel’s darker eviler twin. Ollie obviously has a thing for brunettes, People said. Shame that Miss Smoak isn’t one. (I used to be! she wanted to shout when she read the article—not that it would have done any good, of course.) “And not anything illegal either, thank God. Five years in the middle of nowhere seems to have helped him realise that the law is something that you should try to follow most of the time. Other than that one time that he ended up in jail, but obviously that wasn’t his fault—just a misunderstanding.”

It’s not like she can tell Tommy that Oliver has gone from being arrested for DUls and misdemeanours to full-on vigilantism.

“Good.” Tommy looks visibly relieved, and then immediately guilty for feeling relieved. “Uh, I was just about to head out to grab a bite to eat and a coffee if you want to come.”

“Sure.” Caffeine is something that Felicity definitely does not need right now, given how jittery this whole Oliver-and-maybe-other-women situation has already made her, but coffee is and always will be her Achilles heel and she isn’t in the right frame of mind to summon up the willpower to decline.

(Especially when Starbucks has just started putting out their holiday drinks. She’s a sucker for those stupid red cups.)

“Look,” Tommy says once they’re tucked away at a table in the back corner of the Starbucks across the street, “I wanted to apologise for what happened at dinner last week. You went out of your way to be nice to Laurel and I, and we kind of threw it back in your face.”

He looks so embarrassed, staring into his coffee like he’s hoping the espresso shot will reach out and suck him in, that Felicity doesn’t have the heart to tell him how incredibly awkward it really was. (She’s pretty sure Tommy knows how awkward it was. He was there, living all the awkwardness with her in real technicolour.)

“It’s fine,” she says. “I mean, it’s not fine, it was pretty awful actually, but stuff like that happens. I mean, you obviously have a lot of history and stuff so it’s not fair for me to expect that it will never come up. Besides, I had my fair share of foot-in-mouth moments. I’m starting to think I might have a disease.”

Tommy smiles. It’s half-hearted, but at least he doesn’t look like he wants to die anymore, so Felicity counts it as a win. “I just don’t want you to feel like you’re not welcome.”

“Oh, so is that why you invited me out to coffee?” Felicity asks, eyebrow climbing. “Because if this is a pity party, I have enough of those on my own, thank you very much.”

He grins. Slyly, like they’re conspirators, and just like that, the Tommy Merlyn that the world knows and loves is back. “What, you mean a guy can’t ask a nice girl out to coffee?”

“It’s supposed to reassure me of your intentions? Because let me tell you, it does the exact opposite.”

Tommy clutches his chest with one hand, eyes wide. “Are you telling me that you have any doubts about my totally honourable intentions? I thought we were friends, Felicity.”

Friends don’t let friends sit through their significant others wax poetic about their freaking awesome past relationship, the catty part of her brain supplies unhelpfully.
It wasn’t his fault, the more rational part argues. He didn’t want it to happen any more than I did. Probably even less than I did. He seems way more insecure about this whole relationship thing than I am. Which is saying something, since, you know, I’m not the picture of confidence.

“Well,” she says, swiping her finger through the whipped cream on the top of her cup, “if we’re friends, that’s a whole other story. Friends can have coffee together and complain about how much they hate their jobs and how it’s so annoying that they can’t go anywhere without being stalked by photographers trying to get shots of them doing something scandal-worthy even though their life is totally ordinary.”

(Well, mostly ordinary. Hood-Oliver hasn’t asked her to do anything too crazy yet, so other than the occasional particle analysis—which is super sketchy because a) that’s not at all her area of expertise and b) it means she has to sneak into the QC R&D labs after hours, just asking to get caught by security—and database hack, she hasn’t done anything out of the ordinary.)

Tommy looks equal parts amused and concerned. “Are the press giving you a hard time?”

“Well really,” Felicity says slowly, because, while she doesn’t have a lot of experience in media-stalking, she’s pretty sure that being tailed by the occasional photographer and checking bushes and rooftops for long lenses doesn’t constitute a hard time. In fact, it’s probably totally normal. She’s willing to bet Tommy doesn’t even notice them anymore. “I mean, there are people following me a lot of the time, but it’s not like I’m being chased down the street by mobs of photographers or anything. Like Brad Pitt. He probably gets attacked every time he leaves his house—if I were him, I’d become a hermit. Take up Buddhism or something. Which is totally irrelevant. Anyway. Everyone seems to have something to say about me and I just—It’s a lot to take.”

She takes a long, calming sip of her mocha, savouring the flavours of chocolate and peppermint curling on her tongue. It’s like Christmas in a cup.

It’s perfect.

In fact, this whole afternoon would be perfect, if it weren’t for the fact that there are probably going to be reporters camped out around her house when she gets home, looking to get a shot up her skirt.

Maybe she should change her address. Or her name. Or just leave the city altogether.

“Felicity?”

“Hmm?” Her head snaps away from the artful display of Christmas mugs by the counter.

Tommy is watching her, mildly concerned.

“Have you talked to Oliver about any of this?” he asks.

Diggle said the same thing when she complained about it last week. Maybe the universe is trying to send her a sign.

Either way, she’s ignoring it.

Felicity shakes her head, staring into her mug. The barista put extra whipped cream on top; some of it clings to the rim, almost liquid. “He’s got a lot on his mind right now, and the media gives him a hard enough time as it is…”
“Felicity.” Tommy reaches out and touches her wrist, ever so gently. It’s not like when Oliver touches her—you know, skin suddenly on fire and instant blush and heart rate of a million beats per second—but it’s nice. Comforting. Like pulling on a favourite pair of sweats after a long day.

“You can’t just keep these things bottled up,” he says quietly. “It’s a big adjustment, dating someone like Oliver. I’m not saying you have to talk to Oliver about—he’s my best friend, but I know that he can be pretty hard to talk to sometimes—just that you should talk to someone.”

Felicity manages a grin. The whole reason she came out here was to distract herself from worrying about having serious conversations with Oliver so she is going to sit here and enjoy her coffee and not talk about this, thank you very much. “Are you volunteering to play therapist?” she asks.

Tommy shrugs, but his mouth quirks up into a half-smile. “If you want me to. Given the state of my own affairs, I probably shouldn’t be giving advice to anyone, but I feel like I owe you for helping me with Laurel.”

Oliver is not the only one who can make a conversation go from fun to depressing in 2.0 seconds. The difference, however, is that Oliver’s brooding is usually along the lines of ‘my life is so dangerous and I must push away every single person I want to be with for their own safety because I am a deadly masochist’, while Tommy’s is more of a ‘my life is a disaster and I have no idea how to handle it’.

“Okay, first off, I didn’t help you with anything,” Felicity says briskly, jabbing her finger at Tommy because she meant what she said earlier about pity parties. Not allowed. “I just pointed out the obvious. You know, that you like each other. I’m not responsible for what you chose to do with that information.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not exactly known for my relationship expertise,” Tommy replies. “I make Oliver look like an expert.”

Felicity snorts into her coffee.

Oliver? Relationship expert? Ha freaking ha.

“Yeah, well, I’m not some kind of relationship guru either—I literally have no idea what I’m doing with Oliver most of the time. So. You know. We’re two peas in a really lost pod.” She lifts her coffee cup in a mock toast. “To being hopeless at dating.”

Tommy smiles bitterly, tapping his cup against hers. “To sleeping on your girlfriend’s couch.”

“To— Wait? You’re sleeping on Laurel’s couch?”

He nods grimly. “My dad cut me off. Says I’m not responsible enough to be working for the company and that he’s not going to bankroll my ridiculous lifestyle anymore. So I’m sleeping on Laurel’s couch.”

“Okay, but I was less curious about the whole ‘why are you staying at Laurel’s’ thing and more about the ‘why are you sleeping on her couch’ thing. Shouldn’t you be sleeping in her bed, since, you know, you guys are…?” She waves her hands wildly, hoping that Tommy will catch her meaning, though, really, it would be impossible to miss. About as subtle as running into a brick wall, Chloe would say. “Not that it’s any of my business whether you’re shacking up or not. It’s not. At all. I have absolutely zero interest in what you and Laurel do in your spare time.”

Jeez.
If Tommy is at all embarrassed by her weird and totally unintentional interest in his sex life, he doesn’t show it. “I’m not exactly in Laurel’s best books right now,” he admits, swirling the dregs of espresso in his cup. “We— well, she wasn’t exactly happy with how I behaved myself at Table Salt.”

“She wasn’t happy—? You’re the one who shouldn’t be happy. Unless you’re talking about the fight at the bar— which I am totally not supposed to know about,” she says, catching sight of the surprised look on Tommy’s face. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, I swear, I was just coming out of the bathroom and you guys were right there, and—well, my grandma always said my curiosity was going to get me in trouble.”

Tommy sighs, running a hand over his face. “I said a lot of stuff that I shouldn’t have said that night.”

Felicity’s relief that her eavesdropping has essentially flown under the radar is massively eclipsed by the fact that Tommy looks like he could happily drown himself in the remains of her mocha. She would never let this happen on principle because peppermint mochas are precious things only available during the holiday season and not a single drop can go to waste.

She doesn’t know very much about Laurel, but she seems like she’s pretty guarded. Likes to keep her cards close to her chest instead of suffering another heartbreak. (Which is smart, given her relationship history.)

She’s definitely not qualified to be giving advice on how to date Laurel, but Tommy is obviously miserable, and he’s Oliver’s friend, if he isn’t hers, so maybe a few pointers wouldn’t hurt. You know, to steer him in the right direction. Friends don’t let other friends mope about the sad state of their relationships.

“Have you tried apologising?” she asks.

Tommy looks up from the depths of his now empty cup. He seems surprised that Felicity is offering him advice—what did he think she was going to do, sit there and let him wallow in his own misery? Not fun for either party. “What?”

“Apologising. Have you tried it? Because, in my experience, an apology goes a long way—and it’s the number one thing guys don’t think of. Oliver, for example, is the master at not apologising for anything.”

Technically, that’s not true. He has apologised for some things, but it’s usually either really obvious or he goes and hides out for a week being all broody and ‘I can’t let anyone in’ before he gets his head out of his ass and says he’s sorry.

She realises this makes him seem like a massive jerk. He isn’t, most of the time. He’s just working through a lot of issues. He probably needs a therapist.

He’s never going to get a therapist.

“No.” Tommy ducks his head sheepishly. “I, uh, haven’t. I’ve kind of been avoiding her, actually. She usually needs time to cool off.”

Felicity rolls her eyes because honestly, how is that she ends up giving relationship advice to the two densest billionaires in Starling City? She has a Master’s from MIT, for crying out loud. She’s practically a certified genius. She doesn’t have time for this.
“Okay. Well, first step: say you’re sorry. I mean, I don’t know how angry Laurel is as a person, but she definitely doesn’t need that long to cool off. And if she’s still mad, well, at least you’ve made a start.”

The hilarious part of all this is that Tommy is hanging off her every word like she’s some kind of girlfriend whisperer or something. She has just about as much relationship experience as he does; the only difference appears to be that she has common sense. Maybe it’s just a woman thing, because Oliver seems to be pretty dense about all this stuff, but John seems to have his shit together so maybe it’s just a rich, playboy thing.

“Second: we need more coffee, because I am in no way a qualified relationship expert and my advice is not free.”

Tommy laughs. It comes out half-gasping, like it was dragged out of him. “As far as rates go, you’re pretty cheap, Miss Smoak.”

Felicity grins. “Well, then, Mr Merlyn, it’s a good thing you’re broke.”

Maybe it’s too soon to make jokes about that, but Tommy laughs as he makes his way up to the counter, so maybe not.

It’s almost eight o’clock when Felicity finally leaves. Tommy offered her a ride home but she declines—she’s not that far from her apartment and after all the stuff she ate, she’d feel guilty if she didn’t get some exercise.

She’s surprised they stayed out so long. Initially, she accepted Tommy’s invitation because she was desperate for coffee and the last thing she wanted to do was go home alone and stew about the fact that she might have been wrong about Oliver this whole time, but then one coffee turned into five and Tommy was joking that he was really going to be broke after spending all his money on coffee.

“It’s a sound business investment,” Felicity retorted. “How do you think Starbucks makes all their money?”

Five coffees became dinner at Big Belly Burger because Felicity had zero interest in going home and cooking dinner and once she found out Tommy, like Oliver, had never been (how do these people live?) it was a done deal.

She’s always thought she had Tommy figured out. He was exactly what she’d imagined Oliver would be when they first met at the QC party all those years ago: a little conceited and a lot charming, with a smooth smile, a quick line, and absolutely no interest in being sincere or responsible. She should have known after meeting Oliver (and after running into Tommy several times, which is the more embarrassing thing) that there would be more to Tommy than met the eye, and she had to bite her tongue the whole time to keep from apologising for thinking he was two-dimensional.

They actually have a lot more in common than she thought. Like the whole ‘dating beautiful people who are kind of intimidating and have a really crazy history with each other’ thing.

It occurs to her about halfway through the alley that it’s pretty dark and pretty isolated and maybe she should have her phone out in case someone tries to mug her. Not that the phone will do much good if she’s being mugged—they’ll probably steal it—but it’s the best safety measure she’s got.
Maybe she should start carrying pepper spray in her purse.

Just in case—

—something literally drops out of the sky in front of her.

(Okay, so it was off the fire escape, but still, no less terrifying.)

“Felicity Smoak?”

“Jesus, Ol— Uh, you can’t do that!”

Felicity focuses on keeping her face arranged in its best look of you-just-scared-the-living-bejeezus-out-of-me and hopes that Oliver—or the Hood, or whatever—won’t notice her slip up.

“Seriously. What do you think you are—part bat? Hate to break it to you, but we’ve already got one of those guys in Gotham, so there’s no need to be literally dropping out of the sky in the dark. I think I might have peed myself a little.”

Or she can just say something like that.

“You shouldn’t be out here at night,” he snaps—or at least she thinks so because that voice he puts on always sounds a little aggressive. “It’s dangerous.”

“You’re one to talk, Mister I Spend My Nights Putting Myself In Danger Because I Have Some Kind Of Death Wish,” she retorts. She’s a grown woman. She can take unsafe shortcuts in the dark if she wants to.

(Never mind the fact that she was just thinking about the chances of getting mugged back here. She doesn’t need Oliver telling her how to take care of herself.)

“So, anyway,” Felicity says, deliberately causally. “What are you doing out here at this hour of night? Stopping bank robberies? Scaring corrupt businessmen?”

“I was following up on a lead,” Oliver replies. As usual, he’s being deliberately cagey, as if he thinks that somehow keeping her totally in the dark about whatever he’s doing is somehow going to make the fact that she’s working for him less dangerous.

_Hate to break it to you, Oliver, but ignorance is not going to prevent me from getting arrested. Or from people trying to kill me._

“And you just happened to be skulking in a fire escape in the _exact_ alley I cut through to get home. Interesting.”

Maybe she’s going a little heavy on the sarcasm, but he deserves it for literally scaring the crap out of her.

“I need your help,” he says gruffly.

Felicity rolls her eyes because _honestly_. “And here I thought you just liked jumping out at people in dark alleyways.”

She would love to see Oliver’s face right now, because he’s probably got that cute exasperated-but-also-mildly-amused frown on. Unfortunately, the hood doesn’t really show much. Which is kind of the point, but still.
Oliver reaches into his jacket/hood thing and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “I need a full background check on this man. As soon as possible. Particularly any information about his security system.”

“Um, okay,” she says, taking the paper. “Scaring more bad people into good behaviour?”

“Something like that.”

The hood, obviously, does not make him more talkative.

“Oookay,” she says slowly. “I will take a look at this”—she waves the piece of paper—“and get back to you. Anyplace I should leave the information when I’m done? You know, mailbox, hole in a wall, secret lair…?”

It’s not the first time she’s hinted that Oliver should let her see his secret base. (Officially, of course. She already knows about it, but he doesn’t know that.) So far, she hasn’t had any success, but she’s determined to stay optimistic.

“I’ll find you.”

So much for that.

“Right. Cool. I will just, uh, wait around for you to jump out at me again. In the mean time, I should probably get home. You know, because it’s late. And dark. And I have to work tomorrow.”

Felicity slips the piece of paper into her coat pocket and hunches her shoulders, bringing her coat collar closer to her neck. It was warmer this morning, and she figured she’d be home well before it got dark, so she elected to leave her scarf at home. She’s regretting that choice immensely.

She wishes—hopes—that Oliver will say something, like we’ll meet at such-and-such a time/or place or here’s a secret phone we can use to know when to meet up, but he says nothing. Disappointed (though she doesn’t really know why—it’s not like she expected him to behave any differently), she jams her hands deeper into her pockets and starts walking.

“Felicity.”

His voice stops her in her tracks. It’s the first time he’s addressed her by her first name in his vigilante persona, and the way her name sounds in that deep, raspy voice he puts on makes her shiver.

She turns slowly, fighting the hope rising in her chest. Maybe, this is the moment. Maybe, when she looks at him, she’ll see that he’s taken off his hood. Or, at the very least, that he’s decided to trust her a little bit more. (Trust her at all, really, because beyond running the occasional errand for him, he doesn’t let her in on anything.)

“Yeah?” Her voice sounds pitifully eager, even to her own ears.

“Whatever information you find, keep a copy. If you haven’t heard from me by tomorrow, send it to the police. They’ll know what to do.”

Disappointment, bitter and crushing, is overwhelmed by the fact that Felicity’s heart is doing its best to crawl out of her throat. “What do you mean, if I haven’t heard from you? What are you doing?”

She has to catch herself to keep from calling him by name.
“What has to be done.”

And just like that, he’s gone, shooting off into the rooftops like he’s in one of those dumb superhero movies (which shouldn’t be a surprise, really, because Felicity’s life has basically turned into one of said dumb movies), leaving her alone in the alley with no proof that he was ever even there except for the piece of paper folded in her pocket.

She doesn’t let herself look at the paper until she’s at home, in her pyjamas, tablet at the ready. The anticipation is thrilling, like lying in bed on Christmas morning waiting for it to be late enough to go downstairs. (Even though her mom was big on the whole Jewish tradition thing, her parents were Catholic, so there was at least a stocking to open on Christmas morning, as well as the drive to Reno for Christmas dinner—which, for some reason, child-Felicity loved, even though their car was a piece of crap and, more often than not, broke down on the way.)

She takes a deep breath, flexes her fingers, and unfolds the paper.

Frank Bertinelli.

There’s a moment, a tiny fraction of a second, where she goes through the usual ‘I have no idea who you are but you’re obviously bad if Oliver is after you’, until she realises she’s heard the name before. Not because of Oliver’s nighttime escapades, but from the news. Specifically, TMZ.com. Yesterday. Under the headline Olicity in trouble? Oliver Queen spotted dining with daughter of construction scion Frank Bertinelli.

Well, at least he’s not cheating on her.

Felicity feels a little ashamed for even thinking that he might have been. Yeah, history is kind of against him on that front, but the last five years have changed him. She knows that better than anyone. And even when he was like that, he was never really proud of it—he just believed there wasn’t any other way.

She should know better than to believe the media stories; after all, none of the stories about her are true, so why should any of the ones about Oliver be?

He’s spending time with Helena Bertinelli (who Felicity has been calling mystery brunette in her head because she refused to read any of the tabloid stories) because he’s trying to bring down her dad. Which means one of two things: either she has no idea about Oliver’s ulterior motives and thinks that he’s just being friendly, or she’s helping him take down her father.

Which means she knows about Oliver’s secret identity.

Which means he told her about it.

Even though he hasn’t told Felicity.

That hurts more than any cheating allegations ever would.

Protecting Helena is a disaster. Oliver should have backed away when he heard about the Triad, but he’s always been a glutton for punishment. (That’s what Diggle says, anyways, and Oliver’s not about to deny it.)

It’s late by the time he finally leave the foundry. He’s bone-tired and sore—there are at least four different muscles that were pulled during tonight’s adventure—but he hasn’t seen Felicity all day and all he wants to do is crawl into her arms and stay there. Possibly forever.
It doesn’t occur to him until he’s practically on her doorstep that she might already be in bed. He considers turning back, but the lights in her apartment are on, so either she’s up or she’s fallen asleep on the couch. In either case, he doesn’t think she’ll mind.

How wrong he is.

He knows something is wrong as soon as the door swings open, putting him face-to-face with Felicity’s frosty glare. She’s in her pink fleece pajamas and bunny slippers and there’s mascara smudged under her eyes. He’s either interrupted her in the middle of her face cleansing routine, or she’s been crying.

_Fuck._

He’s not sure what happened, but if the look on her face is any indication, it’s his fault.

“Now he arrives,” she mutters under her breath. There is no invitation to come in. “Of freaking course.”

Oliver frowns. “Did I—? Did we have plans tonight?”

He could have sworn his calendar was empty this morning. Not that he’s been particularly good at programming engagements into his calendar, but still. He tends to remember plans when Felicity is involved.

“Did we have plans—?” Felicity stares at him incredulously. Two large red patches spread across her cheeks. “Yeah, you could say that. I mean, I always cook dinner for myself, but I don’t usually make enough for leftovers and I definitely don’t put out a nice tablecloth and light candles when it’s just going to be me and Robin. He’d probably knock the candles over and then my dinner would not only be ruined but my apartment would be on fire.”

_Shit._

“Felicity, I completely forgot— I was caught up with some stuff at the club and I must have lost track of time.”

As far as excuses go, it’s pretty shitty and they both know it.

“It’s fine,” she replies coolly. “I’ve always wanted to be stood up. Thanks for giving me valuable life experience.”

“I—” He combs a hand through his hair frantically. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t— Have you eaten?”

Why? Why would he say that?

“The thought of sitting around waiting for you for hours, while tempting, was not tempting enough to let dinner get cold,” Felicity says sharply. And then, like she’s thinking better of it but can’t help herself: “I saved you a plate.”

Maybe everything isn’t lost, after all.

There’s an awkward silence while they wait for Oliver’s dinner to reheat. He’s seated at the kitchen table while Felicity leans against the counter, arms folded across her chest. She watches the plate spin in the microwave. He watches her.

She jumps when the timer goes off.
“I really am sorry,” Oliver says quietly as she passes him his plate. She’s made some kind of chicken casserole dish. Simple, but delicious. Raisa’s tuna casserole was one of his favourite things to eat as a kid. “I know it’s a terrible excuse, but I was busy at work.”

“It’s not a terrible excuse, it’s no excuse,” Felicity says stiffly.

There’s something going on here that Oliver hasn’t clued into yet, something else that’s setting her off.

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“Mmm.”

He doesn’t like this. Emotional confrontations have always made him uneasy, even before the island, and the fact that he doesn’t know what he’s done wrong, while not a new experience (God knows he’s been here too many times before), only makes it worse.

“Am I missing something here?” he asks slowly. “Because it feels like there’s something you’re not telling me.”

Oliver knows as soon as the words are out of his mouth that they’re a mistake. A huge mistake. If he thought he made a mess of things before, he’s just made them infinitely worse.

Felicity takes a deep breath, like she’s trying to keep herself from yelling at him. She opens her mouth, only to close it again, bottom lip clamped between her teeth.

“I’m not telling you something?” she says finally. Her tone is incredulous and dripping with muted rage.

If Oliver didn’t think they were in stormy waters, he definitely does now.

“What about you? Did you think I wasn’t going to find out about Helena Bertinelli?”

The other shoe that’s been hanging so precariously over their heads since he came back from the island drops. Deafeningly.

Oliver isn’t surprised that Felicity knows about Helena. He asked her to dig up information about Bertinelli for him two days ago, and Helena’s name was bound to come up in those files. She knows the stories in the press aren’t true, but she’s also looking for him to come clean.

They both know the truth. She just wants him to say it.

And he wants to. So badly that for a second he almost does. The words are on the tip of his tongue, and then he thinks of Sara and Shado and all the other people that have died because of the darkness, the cancer that fills him, and shoves them down.

Maybe it makes him a coward, but at least it keeps her safe.

“How is that any different from whatever you and Tommy were doing yesterday? Your picture was on at least three different magazine covers.”

He doesn’t care that she was out with Tommy (he’s glad they’re getting along; Tommy needs more friends), but he needs to stoke the flames. They’re teetering on a precipice, and if Oliver pushes them off, well—

It’s the only way.
“Oh no,” Felicity snaps, a dangerous light shining in her eyes. “No way. You do not get to play that card, mister.”

Oliver glares at her. This is the right thing to do, he tells himself. Even if it kills you. “What does that mean?”

“You think I haven’t noticed how much time you’ve been spending with her?” Felicity asks hotly. “I’m not blind, Oliver. Stupid, maybe, but my eyes work perfectly fine now that my prescription is fixed.”

“It’s not what you think.” Oliver can’t count the number of times he’s said those words to a woman, but he’s never meant them as much as he does now. “Felicity, honestly. It’s nothing.”

Two minutes ago, he might have thought it was a good idea to let her go. It’s the better option, the safer option, but now, faced with the impending demise of the one thing that’s come out of the last five years, he wants to be selfish. He needs to be selfish.

He can’t make it without her. The darkness will eat him alive.

Any anger that he might have felt before, any petty jealousy, is all gone, replaced by a desperation to make Felicity see—to make her believe—that this isn’t what she thinks it is, even though that’s exactly what it looks like.

(He made it look that way.)

“Front page of all the gossip magazines isn’t nothing, Oliver! Obviously you were together often enough to give the press ideas—they don’t just come up with these things on their own!”

Oliver raises an eyebrow.

“Well maybe they do,” she continues, “but the point is they shouldn’t have all this really compelling evidence to make a story that doesn’t sound totally made up! Maybe you’re not the man you used to be anymore, but history is hard to ignore when it’s staring you in the face.”

That stings. Oliver isn’t proud of who he used to be—he’s not particularly proud of who he is now, either—but he’s trying to be better. Felicity knows that.

“I didn’t ask you to date me,” he snaps. “You made that choice for yourself, history and all.”

He knows he shouldn’t say it, knows it’s only going to push her further away, but he can’t stop the words from pouring out of him. The dam he’s put up for so long is starting to crack and there’s a part of him that just wants to let it explode.

(Lance was right. He destroys anything he touches. Why should he destroy her?)

“So, what, you're saying that this is all my fault?” Felicity yells. Oliver's never heard her raise her voice before; for someone so small, she can make a surprising amount of noise. “That somehow because you had a history of being a dick around women I should have completely ignored the possibility that five years of being traumatised on some godforsaken island might have led to a major personality reformation?”

“What were you expecting? That I'd magically be a different person when I came back?” This is entirely true, but Oliver’s too angry to think about what he’s saying. He hasn’t let himself be angry, really angry, in so long. It feels liberating. “You said it yourself, Felicity: I'm damaged. The island didn't fix anything in me—it just made me worse! The things I had to do over there, the things I
saw—"

—were totally traumatising, probably. Or maybe you're lying and it was all some tropical paradise —how am I supposed to know when you won't tell me anything? I'm in the dark here, Oliver and it's not because I want to be, but because you keep pushing me away! I want to trust you, I really do, but it's really hard to do that when you refuse to tell me anything."

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Oliver bellows. “I’ve told you that! I can’t talk about it. So you’re either going to have to accept that, or move on with your life because I can’t have this conversation with you every single fucking time the media makes up some bullshit story about us!”

Felicity recoils like she’s been slapped. Oliver is shaking with anger and pain and the desperate fear that this is the end and Felicity is going to bail on them before they’ve even really had the chance to begin.

(He’s done what he needed to do to keep her safe. So why does it feel so awful?)

“You also said you needed to let more people into your life,” she snaps frostily. “Guess that was too much to ask, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Oliver says curtly. “Maybe it was.”

(There are tears in her eyes when he leaves. There’s a lump in his own throat the size of a Texas, but he doesn’t look back.)

Chapter End Notes

So our favourite vigilante couple are both idiots. Oliver more so, but still. Hopefully they can smarten up a little in the next chapter.

(What was it that Donna said about make-up sex?) ;)

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(What was it that Donna said about make-up sex?) ;)

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Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

The Queens’ annual Christmas party is fast approaching and Felicity is getting very nervous. Since, you know, she and Oliver are not speaking to each other. And she's probably going to meet his mother.

(Or, the one where Thea decides to play matchmaker.)

Chapter Notes

So this chapter has two of my favourite things: major angst and tooth-aching fluff. Oliver and Felicity obviously have some issues to work through with their relationship that aren't going to be easy and aren't going to be solved all at once—since, you know, Oliver's not known for being forthcoming on any particular stances—but they're working on it. Slowly. One step forward, three steps back kind of thing.

On a brighter note—Christmas! Fluff! Happy things! (No idea how long they'll last, but I've decided that I've spent enough time torturing these two for right now.)

This chapter is also in two parts, since the Christmas fluff has spiralled into a lot of deep introspection on Oliver's part that is a little out of my control. The second part will be up soon—and I actually mean that this time (not like last time when I said there was going to be an update at Christmas); it's almost done!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver has had fights with girlfriends before—by the end of his relationship with Laurel, they did nothing else—and none of them have ever been pleasant, but fighting with Felicity is particularly miserable; especially when he knows it’s his fault.

“I told you you should have told her,” Diggle says unsympathetically.

“And I told you I had my reasons not to,” Oliver snaps. He wishes that Diggle would drop this—he knows that he fucked up. He’s living the consequences of his epic Oliver-Queen-circa-2007 fuck-up every day, and it’s killing him.

(Dig, unfortunately, has not had his say yet.)

“You know she’s not mad at you about what they said in the magazines. She’s mad that she gave you a chance to be honest and you didn’t take it.”

Oliver glares at him, but says nothing. Maybe if he doesn’t respond, Dig will shut up about this and he can go back to brooding in peace.

He knows that Felicity was upset by the stories about him and Helena. She doesn’t believe them,
but she was angry and hurt that he didn’t tell her what he was doing in advance. The right thing to do would have been to tell her, the smart thing to do would have been to tell her—to keep her from getting hurt. If he had told her his secrets that night, like she wanted him to, if he had told her that he was the Hood and that he met with Helena because her father’s name was on his list and she wanted to help bring him down, she would have understood. In fact, they never would have fought in the first place. He didn’t, however, and know they aren’t speaking. He’s not even sure if they’re still together.

And yet, by letting Felicity push him away, he’s keeping her safe. The more involved she is in his life, the more danger she is in. Letting her help him with his mission was a mistake. He should never have accepted her help, even if he desperately needed it, because it paints a target on her back, bigger than the one that already exists simply because of who he is.

Maybe he never should have gotten involved with her in the first place.

Diggle shakes his head. “I don’t get you, man. Whatever makes you scared of telling Felicity the truth cannot be better than losing her.”

(It’s not, but Oliver is a coward who’s watched too many people die. He won’t watch Felicity die, even if it means cutting her out of his life.)

It only gets worse when he’s ambushed by Thea.

He’s lounging in the kitchen, minding his own business and pretending to read the newspaper to hide the fact that he’s brooding, as Thea would say, about the possibly impending end of his relationship. Raisa is busy at the stove, putting the finishing touches on the roast, humming quietly under her breath as she works. Oliver used to come down here all the time when he was younger for this exact reason: the kitchen was always warm and Raisa was always happy to see him, but was also content to just let him sit while she went about her work.

His peace is interrupted by the squeak of shoes on the tiled floor. He catches a whiff of Thea’s peach body spray; hopefully, she’s come down for a snack and not to interrogate him about the subject of his brooding, which is apparently her new favourite pastime.

(When he complained to Felicity about it, she said Thea was probably just trying to bond with him. He argued that there are lots of ways they could bond with each other that didn’t involve prying into his personal space.)

“Soo?” Thea drawls, slipping onto the stool to his left. She rests her elbows on the countertop and perches her chin on her fists, watching him expectantly. Oliver is pretty sure he knows exactly what she wants, and he has zero desire to talk about it. “When are we going to meet Mystery Girlfriend?”

Oliver grits his teeth. So much for the snack. “She’s not a mystery girlfriend, Thea,” he mutters. “Her name is Felicity. And you’ve already met her.”

“Yeah, for five seconds at a trashy party you didn’t even want me to go to. So doesn’t count. I meant when is she going to come over? You know, dinner, meet the family, make awkward small talk with Mom and Walter…”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? Do you seriously think you can hide her away forever? Does Mom even know you have—?”
“Does Mom even know what?”

Moira glides into the kitchen in a cloud of perfume that immediately transports Oliver back to his childhood. He feels like he’s five years old again, waiting for Raisa to let him like the chocolate cake batter off her spoon.

He’d much rather be five right now. Things were a lot simpler back then.

“Nothing,” he says at the same time Thea says: “Oliver has a girlfriend.”

Oliver glares at her. She just shrugs, and mouths, Sorry. Her grin is anything but.

Moira raises an eyebrow. “I saw a story about that the other day and was meaning to ask you about it, Oliver. Is that the girl you took to the benefit?”

“Yes,” Oliver says reluctantly, “and I was going to bring it up later. At the right time.” He shoots Thea a pointed look, which she ignores in favour of trying to steal some sautéed mushrooms out of the pan on the stove. Raisa swats at her hand gently.

“I’m sure you were,” Moira replies mildly. Oliver doesn’t need to look at her to see the disbelief in her eyes; they both know he wasn’t planning on introducing Felicity to the family any time soon.

It’s not that he’s ashamed of her—far from it—but with everything going on in his life right now, and the fragile state their relationship is currently in, he figured it was better just to keep them apart. The man he is with his family and the man he is with Felicity are very different people, and he’s not sure he wants to reconcile the two yet. He’s not sure he can.

“Here’s an idea,” Thea pipes up. “Why don’t you invite her to the Christmas party? I know you were probably going to do that anyway but she can stay for the weekend and have Christmas with us. Does that sound good? Because I think it sounds like an awesome plan.”

“Felicity doesn’t celebrate Christmas. She’s Jewish.”

“So? She can open Hannukah presents or something. I’m sure she’d love to be here. With you. Doing couple-y things.”

“She’s—”

He’s about to say she’s busy, but he remembers she doesn’t have any family in town—in fact, as far as he knows, she doesn’t have any family other than her mom, in Nevada, and Lois, who is supposedly her cousin (even though he has vague memories of meeting someone who might have been Felicity during a drunken night in Metropolis when he was in college he still can’t quite believe they’re related). So, in all likelihood, she was planning on spending her Christmas with him. Doing all the things Thea just described.

He thought about doing those things with her too until they stopped speaking.

“She’s more than welcome,” Moira says firmly. “I’d like to meet her.”

She has that steely look in her eye that suggests what she really wants to do is ask Felicity a lot of questions, specifically about her intentions, which is absolutely unnecessary because Felicity would never try to take advantage of him.

It’s more likely the other way around.
“I’ll, uh—I’ll ask,” Oliver says miserably. He doesn’t have the heart to make up any more excuses and he’s been dying for the chance to see Felicity anyway. Maybe if he shows up at her office with a peace offering, she won’t be so likely to tear him to shreds.

Thea narrows her eyes. “You better. And don’t think you can get away with pretending to ask and then turning up to the party solo and saying she was ‘busy’.”

“She might actually be busy,” he protests weakly. “She might be going home for the holidays.”

(She’s not. She told him so a few weeks ago.)

Thea’s eyebrows climb dramatically.

Moira smiles at them fondly. “I’ll tell Raisa to make sure there’s another room ready.”

Fighting with Oliver is awful. Not speaking to Oliver is worse.

Felicity wants to call him. Or text him. Or send him an email saying you’re a jerk and I’m still mad but I miss you so please drop by my apartment sometime and we can have fantastic sex. She wants to stop walking around Queen Consolidated hoping that he’ll pop by with a sandwich or a weird request for her to process or anything really so that she can see his face and tell him that she still thinks he’s an idiot but she misses his idiot self and would like him back in her life ASAP, please.

(The urge is especially hard to resist when she’s in line to pay for her groceries on Wednesday night and sees the magazines. Olicity on the rocks? InTouch declares, while UsWeekly goes for the far more dramatic Oliver and Felicity: Scandal! Felicity goes behind Oliver’s back with best friend Tommy Merlyn — Exclusive details inside!)

And yet, the thought of giving in, of calling Oliver like some desperate girl in a Hallmark movie makes her even more mad. He should be the one calling her. He’s the one who was keeping secrets and then yelled at her when she confronted him about it instead of just telling her the damn truth.

She knows he has reasons for keeping these things secret, but they can’t be worse fighting like this.

(Can they? Oh God, she really hopes not.)

“I don’t know what to do,” she groans, flopping back on her bed. It’s been three days since the fight with Oliver and she’s going to lose her mind if something doesn’t happen soon. An emergency Skype session with Lois and Chloe seemed like a good idea an hour ago when she was sitting on her couch eating a pint of mint chip and trying not to cry at the Bachelorette, but now that she’s told them her whole sordid tale, she’s not sure it was such a good idea after all: Chloe has her I’m not impressed face on and Lois looks like she wants to jump through the computer screen and throttle Oliver herself.

(Felicity still can’t get over the fact that they know each other.)

“There are lots of things I’d like to do,” Lois says. “Starting with giving that boy a piece of my mind.”

“No,” Felicity sits straight upright and fixes Lois with her best stern glare. “No way. You are not calling Oliver and giving him a piece of your anything. Or calling him period. That would not—that is not a good idea. At all.”

“Felicity—”
“She’s right, Lo,” Chloe says. “You can’t just march in there guns blazing and try to solve her problems. Fee’s a big girl. She can handle herself.”

“Right, like you handled all your problems in college—”

“I don’t even know why I called you,” Felicity mutters dragging a hand through her hair.

“Because we give excellent advice,” Chloe replies.

“And because we know that spending your whole night eating ice cream and watching Disney movies is not going to solve your problems,” Lois adds.

Felicity sticks her tongue out at them because she is actually four years old. “How did you know —? Okay, never mind,” she says, catching sight of the matching expressions of disbelief on Chloe and Lois’ faces. They know her better than anyone on the planet.

“Look, if you really like him that much, then you’re going to have to make the first move,” Chloe says gently. “I know it’s hard because you’re mad at him—and you have every right to be—but if you want this to work and he’s not coming to you, maybe you need to go to him.” Felicity doesn’t miss the subtext: If you think it’s worth it.

“Oliver’s a complicated guy,” Lois says. “I mean, I haven’t seen him in years, obviously, but he had his issues when I knew him. Especially when it came to girls and feelings. Because, you know, apparently all men are incapable of expressing themselves in that department.”

“And you’d know because you’re exactly like that, wouldn’t you?” Chloe asks with a grin. She and Felicity have often teased Lois about how open Clark—her super perfect, super hot farm boy/journalist husband—is with his feelings and how closed-off Lois is about hers.

“Shut up,” Lois says, though she’s grinning too. “We’re here to be helping Felicity, not talking about my emotional shortcomings.”

“Thank God.” Chloe grins. “Otherwise we’d be here all night.”

“Shut up!”

Felicity groans.

Talking to Chloe and Lois might not have been the most productive way to get advice about her relationship problems, but they do have some good advice buried underneath all the bickering. More importantly, they make her feel a whole lot better; she’s ten times lighter after she hangs up and actually sleeps through the night for the first time since she and Oliver fought, instead of waking up at three in the morning panicking about what the Star is going to say next about her relationship with Oliver.

Felicity thought she had a handle on the newfound media presence in her life. It was stressful, but it wasn’t taking over her life. She could still go to work and out with friends and to the gym, she just had to make sure she wasn’t wearing anything too crazy or doing anything that would interest any reporters that might be following her. Gone were the days of going to the grocery store in her pyjamas for an extra tub of mint chip, but she isn’t sure that’s entirely a bad thing.

Since they caught wind that her and Oliver’s relationship might be in trouble, however, it’s been a whole other kettle of fish. They crowd outside Queen Consolidated, they linger outside her house, all waiting to get a shot of her looking suitably heartbroken. They shout at her when she walks into the gym, follow her to the grocery store—to the point where she calls Tommy on Friday,
practically in tears because her front lawn is swarmed with photographers and she can’t leave. (What she really wants is to call Oliver—she punches his number in twice before realising that he’s probably doing Hood stuff and won’t answer anyway.) Since then, he’s made a point of picking her up on his way to drop Laurel off at CNRI, which hasn’t helped the media frenzy, but has helped her sanity—Tommy and Laurel both have way more experience dealing with rabid reporters.

(Seriously. They know secret entrances and everything.)

“Believe me when I say I can understand why you haven’t called Oliver yet,” Laurel says on Monday night as they’re crowded around her low living-room table eating ice cream and watching The Bachelor (Felicity, it turns out, is not the only one with an unhealthy obsession. “It started after Oliver disappeared,” Laurel explains. “Which is kind morbid, but it’s just so addictive that I can’t stop.”), “but he can be too hard on himself sometimes. If you don’t reach out to him, he may just retreat deeper into himself until no one can get to him.”

Felicity sighs, stabbing at her scoop of mint chip—Tommy, surprisingly, remembered that it was her favourite. She still can’t believe she’s here, watching terrible reality TV and talking relationships with Tommy Merlyn and Laurel Lance, who are about the last people in the world she thought she would ever be talking with about anything. They’ve been so nice to her over the past few days—unbelievably nice given that she’s Oliver’s new girlfriend and the epic disaster that was dinner at Table Salt.

“My cousin said the same thing when I talked to her,” she admits. “Well, she’s not really my cousin, because we’re not related but she and her actual cousin sort of adopted me as an honorary cousin when we were kids. You know, parents are friends from college and whatever.”

Laurel smiles. Felicity appreciates the fact the she ignored the total word vomit that came out of her mouth. “She sounds like a smart lady.”

“Yeah. Chloe’s been married for three years now, so Lois and I kind of think of her as the relationship expert.”

“I can vouch for that,” Tommy agrees, stabbing his spoon at no one in particular. “I’ve only had, like, four conversations with her, but Chloe Sullivan is a relationship guru. General life guru, actually.”

“It is so weird that you guys know each other,” Felicity mutters. She still can’t wrap her head around the fact that Lois and Tommy and Oliver went to school together, let alone the fact that she and Tommy dated or that she has Oliver’s current phone number.

Tommy grins. “Here I thought Oliver had finally found someone who wasn’t mixed up in our complicated adolescence, and she turns out to be the best friend of my first love.”

“Complicated adolescence?” Laurel snorts. “More like young adult disaster.”

Both Felicity and Tommy laugh—she and Chloe used to jokingly call Lois a Teenage Disaster when they were in high school—and the rest of the evening is full of reminiscing about the misdeeds of their youth, punctuated with comments about the ridiculous hotness of Chad Painswick, Bachelor. Felicity learns that Laurel got stopped by her father for streaking at the debate team party in junior year and that Tommy broke his arm in the eighth grade trying to prove to Oliver that he wasn’t afraid to go down a double black diamond run at Whistler. Felicity tells them both about the time she walked in on her mom and her math teacher making out in senior year, or how her roommate’s boyfriend spiked all her Sunny D with vodka in her freshman year at MIT.
“I’m really happy for you and Oliver,” Laurel says as Felicity struggles into her coat three hours later. Tommy has offered to drive her home, which will probably set off another cascade of photos on the cover of tomorrow’s magazines, but is better than trying to face the barrage of reporters outside her apartment on foot. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you—what you guys have is something that we never did—and I know he wants to get through this. He just might not know how.”

Felicity smiles sadly. “I know.”

She does. Oliver has never exactly been a whiz when it comes to relationships and his five years in exile have not helped. She knows that he’s probably hidden out in his lair, beating himself up over what happened with Helena and wondering if this isn’t for the best, if it isn’t safer this way (because it’s so like Oliver to play the martyr and try to keep her safe by pushing her away even though she’s told him this is what she wants). He’s probably stewing about it right now, weighing the merits of apologising against the dangers of what he does and the dangers of revealing his secret.

(Telling her who he is isn’t going to put her in any more danger than she’s already in, but she can understand why he would think that. He’s obviously gone through a lot of crap and probably lost a lot of people over the last five years; she can’t fault him for wanting to keep those people he does have left safe.)

She doesn’t want the relationship to end. She knows that. There is so much more to Oliver than meets the eye, so much more than she has even seen—and she’s seen a lot more than most people—and she’s not ready to give up on that yet, but Oliver is the one who needs to take the first step and apologise here. Yes, she said some things that maybe she’s not that proud of, but they wouldn’t have had this argument in the first place if he had just told her he was the Hood, so he’s the one who should be bowing and scraping and begging for her forgiveness like they do in all those rom-com movies she’s been watching to soothe her broken heart, not her.

(She wouldn’t bow and scrape either way. She’d just leave him a really long, rambling voice mail to the tune of you’re an idiot and I’m still mad but this is getting ridiculous and since you aren’t going to talk to me, I’m going to have to be the adult here.)

Laurel and Chloe have valid points. Eventually, if Oliver does nothing, she’s going to have to make the first move, or watch this relationship implode in a blaze of glory that TMZ will be sure to document in excruciating detail. As much as she hates this whole not-speaking thing, she’s willing to give him some more time to come to her on his own terms. If she hasn’t heard anything by the end of the week, she’ll go to him.

The thing she hasn’t been doing, amid all this thinking, is her work. Which is starting to become a problem, especially when her supervisor asks for information on the updates she’s supposed to have performed on the internal servers. Updates she had totally forgotten about until he asked for them. “I’ll get them done by the end of the day. Promise,” she says, praying that he isn’t going to fire her, or send her back to working on the firewall as punishment (which is not as bad as it was before but still in need of a major overhaul. And some upgrades. The stuff from R&D is cool and all that but it won’t be nearly as cool if the whole company gets hacked because they’ve been lax about cyber security).

Her supervisor fixes her with his best I am not impressed right now look, but says nothing. Felicity takes this to be a good sign.

“Thanks!” she calls over her shoulder as she scurries back to her cubicle, ready to get these updates done in record time so that she will not a) be fired or b) be performing menial IT tasks for the rest
of her career at QC…

…only to find Thea Queen perched on the edge of her desk.

“Thea!” Felicity squeals. (Embarrassingly, but it’s hardly her fault—most people would probably do the same thing when confronted with teenage girls that literally appeared out of nowhere.)

“What are you doing here?”

She hasn’t seen or spoken to Thea since Oliver’s get-out-of-jail party. Which is totally normal since, you know, Thea is way younger and has different interests and it’s not like she and Oliver spend any time hanging out at the Queen mansion or any other place where they would run in Thea anyways.

Thea pushes off the desk slowly, giving Felicity’s cubicle a once-over. “Honestly, I have no idea how you get any work done in here,” she says, frowning. “It’s so tiny.”

“Yeah, well, we can’t all live in mansions,” Felicity retorts, folding her arms across her chest. She doesn’t mean to be rude, but it’s been a rough week and she doesn’t really take kindly to people walking in and insulting her work space. So, maybe it’s not the best place to work, but it’s her place to work, and so the only one who gets to complain about any qualities it may be lacking is her.

Thea rolls her eyes, like this is a totally unimportant thing—which it kind of is. Felicity would like to move on to the more important things—like what Thea is doing here in the first place.

“I’m here to apologise on my brother’s behalf. Since he obviously hasn’t been around to do it himself.”

Really? He’s sending his kid sister to apologise for him. Felicity knows that Oliver doesn’t handle emotional stuff very well and that apologising is not on his top ten list of favourite things to do, but she didn’t think he would stoop that low.

“He didn’t ask me to come here,” Thea continues, as if she can read Felicity’s mind—she probably doesn’t need to: it’s written all over her face. “And I’m pretty sure that he’s going to come by and see you later so if you could pretend this whole thing never happened that would be great.”

“Right. Okay.” This whole thing keeps getting weirder and weirder, Felicity thinks to herself, but what else is new? Her life has been one long string of weird since Oliver reappeared.

Thea flashes a winning smile. “Great.”

“So is that, uh, it?” Felicity asks. “Because, you know, I have a job to do. A job I was actually supposed to have done by now but I didn’t do because I was too busy thinking about your brother and the things I’d like to do to him—like, angry things, not sexual things—and I shouldn’t even be telling you any of this because not only are you the daughter of my boss, you’re also my boyfriend’s younger sister and that is just weird on so many levels, so I’m going to stop. Now.”

Thea drops into Felicity’s desk chair and gives a couple experimental twirls, staring at the ceiling tiles. Felicity is too surprised to say anything about the fact that that’s her chair Thea’s claimed for her own, thank you very much.

“We both know that Oliver can be a jerk sometimes,” she says, which is the biggest understatement of the century right now. “A lot of the time. That’s, like, a given. And I’m sure that whatever he’s done falls in the massively jerk-like category, but I’m really hoping you’ll be able to temporarily overlook it so that we can have a happy family Christmas together. And I know, you’re Jewish,”
she adds when Felicity opens her mouth to protest (not at all what she was going to object to, but still valid), “but the last five Christmases have been really shitty, and I think we’d all love to have one Christmas that isn’t totally miserable.”

She’s convincing. Obviously, the Queen family have willpowers of steel to be able to resist her because otherwise Thea would definitely have that car she’s been asking for.

“I’m still not sure what this has to do with me,” Felicity says slowly because honestly, her brain is still processing the fact that Thea Queen is a) talking to her and b) trying to convince her to spend Christmas with them.

Thea sighs dramatically, like she can’t believe she’s having this conversation. “Because,” she says slowly, “Oliver is totally miserable without you and I’d like him not to be totally quiet and moody on Christmas morning.”

“Well, if Oliver is so miserable, maybe he should come and talk to me about it himself,” Felicity snaps because it’s been almost a week of total radio silence (on both fronts, which is impressive because Oliver has no idea how to do half the tech stuff he needs to do for his extracurriculars) and her nerves are getting a little frayed. She isn’t sleeping well, and is drinking way too much coffee. It’s a bad combination.

“He is. At least I told him to. I just wanted to make sure that you knew in case he chickens out.”

“Oh. Uh, okay then.”

“Okay you’ll do it?” Thea’s eyes light up like it’s Christmas already and she looks so damn hopeful that Felicity doesn’t have the heart to say no.

It isn’t until Thea’s gone and she’s back at work trying to finish her updates that she realises what she’s done.

Frack.

Lois, Chloe

Tue, Dec 18th, 20:14

Obviously, I want to make myself suffer.

Chloe

What happened?

I let Thea Queen talk me into spending Christmas with them.

Oliver and I are still not talking.
I’m going to meet his mother.

This is it. This is the end.

RIP Felicity Smoak.

Chloe

No one can make you do anything you
don’t want to.

Lois

It’s true. She’s like teenaged me but with
billions at her disposal.

Not to mention Oliver’s mom is beyond scary.

Seriously.

I think she could kill me with her eyes.

Oliver goes to see Felicity on Wednesday. It’s been a week since they fought about Helena. A
week since he’s spoken to her.

His heart is in his throat the whole elevator ride down to IT.

He’s almost praying she won’t be in her cubicle. She has no reason not to be, since he’s usually the
one who takes her out, either to lunch or to run some weird, Hood-related errand, but if she weren’t,
he could leave a note on her desk, and he wouldn’t have to talk to her. It would make things a lot
easier.

It probably wouldn’t be very appreciated.

It definitely isn’t very adult.

She’s sitting in her chair—of course she is, she works here, where else would she be? Oliver raises
his hand to knock on the edge of her cubicle at the exact moment that she turns to grab her pen.

Their eyes meet. Felicity’s gaze chills slowly, but she says nothing, simply sits frozen, pen
clutched in a white knuckled grip. Any harder and she might snap it.

She’s waiting for him to say something. He’s the one who came here looking for her, he’s the one
who hasn’t called—he should be the one to say something, but he can’t find the words. He can’t
find any words; all he can do is stare, struck by just how beautiful she is. She’s the complete
opposite of his so-called “type”, but the way she looks at him sometimes, like she can see right
through him, makes him think that he would always have loved her regardless. There are so few
people in his life that understand, especially now but then too, and to let someone like Felicity slip
through his fingers would be monumentally stupid. Even he can see that—and he’s known for
doing stupid things.

He thought, when they were fighting, that letting her go was the best thing to do. Standing in her cubicle now, trying to work up the courage to tell her just how much of a fuck-up he is, he realises that he was wrong. She’d be safer if she weren’t with him, but as she and Diggle have both pointed out, it’s her choice to make. Even if neither of them will acknowledge his secret, they both know it. It hasn’t scared her off. He doesn’t think it will.

More to the point, he needs her. It’s entirely too easy to get lost in the work that he’s doing, to lose himself in the quest for revenge and the excuse that he’s making these sacrifices to save his city. Felicity reminds him that there are other things that are important, too. His family. His friends. She’s brilliant, the kind of light he thought he’d never get back in his life, and if he can hold onto that, maybe, just maybe, he’ll get out of the darkness with some hope of a life for himself.

Amanda Waller told him that the only way out of the darkness was to go through it. He thought she was right, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe they were both wrong.

He swallows. Combs a hand through his hair. Stares at the tile pattern on the floor. All the while Felicity says nothing, waiting for him to speak.

“Look,” he says finally, “I know I’m probably the last person you want to see right now and that we agreed not to meet like this all the time, but I really need to talk to you and I figured you wouldn’t answer my calls.”

His palms are sweating. He wipes them hastily on his jeans.

“I don’t know how you would know that,” Felicity says coolly. “Since you haven’t, you know, called. Or texted. Or e-mailed. Or anything. I might even have accepted a smoke signal. Or sky writing. That’s supposed to be romantic.”

Oliver winces. He definitely deserved that. “I’m sorry,” he says quietly. “I should have told you I was meeting Helena and I shouldn’t have snapped at you about the press stories. I was just— It was a tough week.”

Felicity raises her eyebrows, arms folded across her chest. Oliver doesn’t blame her. As far as apologies go, this is pretty shitty.

“Which is no excuse. Obviously. I just— I messed up. By lying. By not calling. I should have. Not lied. And called.”

All he can do is shoot her a pleading look and hope that she will put him out of his misery, because there isn’t really anything he can think of to say right now. Other than will you come to my family’s Christmas party and stay the weekend and meet my mom? which is what Thea has sent him here to say, and which will not go over well; Felicity is already nervous enough about meeting his family, and bringing it up now would all but guarantee she’d say no.

“Well,” Felicity says finally, “as far as apologies go, that was pretty awful, but I’m beginning to get the impression that apologies are not your strong suit, so I’ll give it a pass because I really miss you and I hate not talking to you. I have literally been praying for this moment for the last week, so I’m not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Take it or leave it, as they say.”

Oliver blinks. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Your apology skills need some work, Oliver,” she replies patiently, “but I’m not mad at you. I was never really mad at you—okay, maybe I was for like a couple hours after we fought—but
really, I just want you to let me in. I know it’s hard for you, and I’m trying to accept that, but there are some thing that shouldn’t be so hard to tell me. Like, for example, being photographed having romantic candle-lit dinners with other girls.”

“In my defence, the waiter put the candle on the table, not me.”

Sometimes, Oliver wonder why he even opens his mouth.

Felicity glares at him.

“And that doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m sorry.”

“You better be,” Felicity mutters. She stares at her computer screen; Oliver wonders if he should just leave her to her work when she finally speaks:

“You were right. Kind of,” she amends when he stares at her incredulously. “I get that you have secrets; you told me as much when we started this—whatever this is.” She gestures wildly with her hands for emphasis. “And I’m fine with that, but I don’t want you to make up stupid lies about what you’ve been doing, either. If you don’t want to tell me something, then just say so—there’s no need to be all cloak and dagger and I-wasn’t-cheating-on-you-even-though-it-looks-like-I-was on me.”

“Wait. You’re not mad about what happened with Helena?”

“I’m mad that you didn’t tell me about Helena. You said it yourself, Oliver—the media makes stuff up all the time. All you had to do was say, ‘Hey, Felicity, I’m meeting up with a friend of mine with a similarly tragic past to talk about coping with all the unspeakable horrors that I went through while I was away. She happens to be freakishly beautiful, but we’re just friends.’ I wouldn’t have been thrilled about it, and I’d obviously prefer it if you talk to me, but I understand that you might not want to, and I accept that. I said you didn’t have to tell me anything until you were ready, and I meant it.”

That wasn’t why he was meeting Helena and they both know it, but Oliver recognises the olive branch for what it is. Felicity knows that he isn’t ready to share his secret with her, so she’s giving him a chance to explain what he was doing with Helena—a plausible story in case anyone asks. It is true, in a manner of speaking: he was with Helena because he’s trying to cope with what happened over the last five years—though Diggle would point out that what he’s doing can hardly be described as coping.

“I—” Oliver breaks off, shaking his head incredulously. He still can’t believe how accepting she is of the whole thing. In his experience from fights with Laurel, he figured she was still going to be pretty pissed off and he’d have to do some serious grovelling to get back in her good books. Felicity is nothing like Laurel, but even so, he never expected that she wouldn’t be mad at him at all.

She never even thought for a second that he was with Helena. Laurel would have at least considered the possibility.

Hell, anyone who knew him would have considered the possibility. Probably believed it, too, but not Felicity. She’s never doubted him, even though he’s given her plenty of reason to.

He clears the lump from his throat. “I, uh— I won’t.”

Felicity blinks, surprised. Obviously, she wasn’t expecting his response, either. “Really?”
“Yeah. I don’t like talking about what happened while I was gone and there’s a lot of stuff I might not ever talk about, but when I am ready to talk about things, I’ll tell you.”

“Okay.” She smiles, softly, eyes sparkling, and his heart does somersaults.

“So, uh—”

“Will I come to the Queen Christmas party even though, technically, I don’t celebrate Christmas?”

Oliver blinks. “Uh. Yeah. How do you know about that?”

“Thea might have stopped by my office a few days ago. She seemed concerned that you were going to chicken out and wanted to make sure that I knew about the plan in case you did.”

Of course. When Thea was little, she went out of her way to try and make everyone happy—to the point that Tommy used to joke that she’d have an aspiring career as a matchmaker. The instinct has obviously not dulled with age.

“Yeah.” He laughs nervously. “She, uh, does that sometimes. She means well, but she can be a little direct.”

“I noticed.”

Silence falls. The pen, which made it’s way behind Felicity’s ear at some point in the conversation, is back in her hand again; she twists it through her fingers like a baton. It’s red. Just like the pen she had between her teeth the day he came by her office for the first time…

Heat flares in the pit of Oliver’s stomach, and he swallows, trying to push away the memory of Felicity with that red pen between her teeth. He’s come here to apologise, not come onto her, and if he keeps thinking like this…well, let’s just say he’ll have other problems on his hands.

Felicity taps the pen on the edge of her desk. Once. Twice. Three times. Her eyes never leave his.

He doesn’t know who moves first; one minute, they’re staring at each other, the next, he’s lifting her up onto her desk and she’s frantically shoving her keyboard out of the way and they’re kissing each other like their lives depend on it. Felicity’s skirt is hiked up around her waist and her hands have disappeared underneath Oliver’s henley. His jeans are distinctly tighter than they were five minutes ago, but he could care less—all he can think about is touching Felicity. Now that he’s seen the beautiful expanse of skin hidden under those close all he wants to do is explore every inch of it. Repeatedly.

His fingers burn where they touch her thighs, like all of his nerve endings have been set ablaze, but he keeps going, climbing steadily higher until he’s toying with the edge of her panties. Felicity moans in his mouth, digging her finger nails into the back of his shoulder blades. The sensation goes straight to his cock.

It does occur to him, somewhere around the time that Felicity starts plucking at his jeans, that they’re in her cubicle and that anyone could walk in on them at any time. It wouldn’t be the first time for Oliver, but he has a distinct impression that Felicity might not be nearly as impressed.

“Nope. You are not going anywhere. Get back here.” She grabs the front of his shirt and tugs insistently.
“Do we really want to do this here?” Oliver asks breathlessly. The last thing he wants to do is stop, but he doesn’t think Felicity has considered the implications of what they’re about to do. Even if no one walks in on them, she still has to work here. Without thinking about them, you know…

“Oliver,” Felicity whispers against his lips, “I am literally going to explode if you aren’t inside me in the next five seconds.”

Well.

(This seems to be a theme with Felicity.)

Oliver grins, pushing her back against the dest. “If you insist.”

The phone rings.

“Frack!” Felicity shouts, letting her head fall back against the wall of her cubicle. The movement exposes the long, white line of her neck. Oliver swallows, throat suddenly dry. “Why does this always happen?” She must catch sight of the look on Oliver’s face, because she adds, “I mean being interrupted just when the good things are about to happen. Not while I’m trying to have sex with people in my office. Which I don’t do. Usually. Ever.”

_God, he is so in love with her._

“Ignore it?”

“I can’t,” she mutters through gritted teeth, glaring at the phone like she can somehow incinerate it with her eyes. “It’s my boss. We will continues this later, though. Tonight. With champagne. And chocolate. And I want at least three orgasms.”

Any ability Oliver might have had for coherent thought is gone. “Um. Okay. Yes.”

Felicity nods, reaching for the receiver. _Call me later_, she mouths.

Sometimes, Felicity’s job sucks. Tonight is one of those times—everyone else in the department has gone home, and yet she’s still here, beavering away on a project that isn’t even her real job.

In Walter’s defence, it’s her own fault for agreeing to help him out with this whole Tempest business in the first place. She brought this work upon herself, but how could she say no when he was giving her unrestricted access to probe deeper into the circumstance surrounding Oliver’s disappearance—something she’d been trying to piece together herself for five years with limited success? Tempest was one of the pieces she’d been missing to really get into her investigation, and she never would have known about it if Walter hadn’t approached her, so really, she should be grateful.

Besides, it’s better to be working on it after hours. She’s got enough work to do during the day, and it’s easier to be digging into all this stuff without worrying about someone popping unannounced into your cubicle.

(Like Curtis. Felicity really loves him and he’s the closest thing she has to a work BFF, but she almost had a heart attack when he walked in the other day while she was digging through Moira Queen’s personal finances. _That_ had taken some explaining.)

And, since she’s obviously not going to be having those three orgasms as promised (Oliver said he had work to do at the club, but she’s pretty sure it’s Hood business), she might as well do something productive.

She hasn’t made much head-way figuring out how the names on the list are connected to one another—apart from the fact that they’re all rich. It’s a little disheartening; she is an adept problem-solver because she hates mysteries, but this is proving to be a particularly difficult one to crack.

With a groan, she takes off her glasses, rubbing her eyes. She’s been staring at the screen for hours and hasn’t thought of a single new connection that might explain what the hell Tempest is and how these people are connected to the sinking of the Queen’s Gambit. A sign, or a lightning bolt, or whatever would be really welcome right now.

God is obviously listening: when she puts her glasses back on, her eyes fix on a single name.

Frank Bertinelli.

He’s one of the people Hood Oliver went after.

Could it be—?

It takes a couple quick cross-reference, but in a few minutes she has her answer: almost every single one of the Hood’s victims are on this list. The ones that aren’t are easily ruled out as acts of charity—Digg, obviously, had a hand in that—or are former Queen Consolidated employees.

Is this Oliver’s mission?

Does he know about Tempest?

Was he ever going to tell her?

(Probably not.)

Does he know she's looking into Tempest too? Is that why he hasn't told her the truth: because he thinks she's working against him?

No. That can't be right because why would he bring her onto his team if he thought she was the enemy? Unless...

Unless he's trying to spy on her.

“Felicity?”

The deep, gravelly, totally going to make her ovaries explode because she’s been sex-depraved since they’re fighting voice startles Felicity so badly that she nearly jumps out of her chair. She does manage to knock over the empty soup tin of pens she keeps on her desk, sending them flying all over the floor. It would have been more impressive if it hadn’t come at the expense of five years of her life.

(So much for no one popping into her cubicle without warning.)

“Frack,” she hisses, scrambling to pick them all up. “Okay, so this is better than dropping out of the sky unannounced, but can we move away from the Scare The Crap Out Of Felicity greeting and into the Make My Presence Known Instead Of Appearing Out Of Nowhere? Because my heart and
my blood pressure and my sanity in general would really appreciate that.”

The hood makes it impossible to see Oliver’s expression, but Felicity is pretty sure it’s one of mild frustration. The trademark can we stick to the important topics, Felicity look.

(On the plus side, he hasn’t looked at her computer screen, which is still merrily displaying all the names of the people he’s probably hunting. That is one thing she doesn’t want to have to explain.)

“Or not,” she continues, leaning against her desk at an angle that conveniently blocks the screen from view. “That’s fine too, but when you put me in an early grave, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Felicity.”

“Right. Yes. Moving on. What can I do for you?”

Oliver places an arrow on her desk. It’s long, and black, and kind of terrifying.

“I need you to tell me where this came from,” he rumbles.

“This isn’t one of yours?” she says immediately. “No. Of course not. Obviously. Because if it were, you’d know where it came from. Unless someone stole some of your arrows? Wait a second — Is this about that copy cat archer that’s been going around? The one who’s been killing people?”

Again, she can’t tell because of the whole shadow-hood thing, but Felicity swears that Oliver’s frowning.

“How do you know about that?”

“What, do you mean how do I know it’s not you?” Felicity asks, dropping the last of the errant pens in the soup can. “I would have thought that would be obvious. You haven’t killed anyone. This guy is killing people. Ergo, it’s not you.”

“How do you know I’m not the one killing people?”

Felicity rolls her eyes. She understands that he isn’t prepared to tell her about his secret identity, and she is perfectly happy to wait until he is, but still—she deserves a little bit of credit. She’s seen him in action. He didn’t kill those bank robbers, even though they were trying to kill him. The Hood hasn’t killed anyone at all, much less people that he already extorted; to suddenly change his tune and start killing all his past victims makes absolutely no sense.

“Unless you’ve had a serious change of heart in the last three days, I don’t think you’re the type to go out on a killing spree. You’re trying to protect this city. This guy is trying to wreck havoc.”

“The police would argue those are one and the same.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the police. And, I’m pretty sure that they might be more on your side than you think.”

“Oh really?” His tone is dripping with sarcasm.

“Yeah. It’s not official, but word is they’re going to issue a statement calling this other archer a copycat.”

“How—?”
Felicity shrugs. “I have a couple hacks in the SCPD system. I figured it was a good idea to be keeping tabs on news about you, since, you know, the police are actively pursuing you.”

“Right.” He looks almost… embarrassed. It’s hard to tell with the hood on and his face buried in shadows, but she likes to think there’s a blush glowing on those cheekbones.


“Where are you going?”

She pauses in her cubicle doorway, biting the inside of her lip to control the blush rising on her cheeks because she is not going to give Oliver the satisfaction of seeing what his growly voice does to her. On second thought, instead of turning around and letting him see the physical evidence of her growing desire, why doesn’t she just keep going? Obviously, this arrow is really important to Oliver, otherwise he wouldn’t have come to her with it, so he’s not just going to let her walk off with it; if she leaves, he’ll follow. Besides, this is her turf. No one tells her what to do on her turf because that is a slippery slope that leads to some Really Bad Choices: one minute you’re taking orders from your vigilante boyfriend, and the next, the underlings are making you fetch their coffee. Which is. Not. Acceptable.

“To the lab,” she says over her shoulder as Oliver hurries after her, boots slapping dully on the floor tiles. “because there are machines there that I can use to tell you what you want to know. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Felicity sighs patiently. This is not the first time she has had to deal with the Everyone Assumes That Technology Is All The Same plague—there are even infected people in the IT department, which is a crime, really, because they’re supposed to know that this is not how tech works. “I was top of my class at MIT, you know? Highest grades for the entire year in the Cyber Security program. On the list of top five in the history of the program. I think they have my name on a plaque somewhere—”

“Felicity,” Oliver says sharply. “Is there are point to all of this?”

“The point,” she says crisply, jabbing the feathery end of the arrow in his general direction, “is that I am an expert in cyber security. Hacking, firewalls, viruses—you name it, I can do it. That doesn’t mean that I am an expert in all aspects of science.”

“So you don’t know how to do this.”

“I have a very limited grasp of what to do because my friend Curtis is kind of an expert in this field and he likes showing me how to work all the machines. So, if you’re lucky, I’ll be able to do the science-y part that I don’t really know how to do, and then if that works, I can definitely do the rest from my computer. In the meantime,” she finishes cheerfully, “you get a free after-hours tour of the Queen Consolidated labs.”

Which you probably need, she adds to herself, because you’ve probably never been down here in your life.

“Why can’t you just run a trace on your computer?” Oliver asks. “Shouldn’t it be in a system or something?”

“Yes,” she says slowly, placing the arrow in the spectrometer and hoping that she remembers all the things Curtis showed her last week (in her defence, there was a lot of button pushing and Curtis
spits out about a thousand words a minute when he’s excited, and it’s Oliver’s fault for assuming she knows everything about science in the first place), “but since there are thousands of arrow manufacturers around the globe, it will save me hours of shifting through useless data if I know what the arrow is made of.”

“Because you can refine your search to manufacturers that make arrows like that.”

“Exactly.” Felicity grins. She feels absurdly pleased that Oliver knows this, even though the mental leap wasn’t that hard to make. It’s almost like they’re on the same wavelength—like they’re a real team.

She could get used to this.

(It’s addictive, really, which is really bad for someone like her with a weakness for bad habits—although this is a lot worse than eating the whole carton of ice cream or babbling or skipping out on the gym and going to Starbucks instead.)

“Okay. Great. How long is this going to take?”

“A few minutes, maybe?” She has no idea really, but it didn’t take that long when Curtis did it, and she’s hoping that she’s done it right. “And then the search won’t take long once I know what to look for. Maybe half an hour, tops?” She pauses, grin curling at the corners of her mouth when she thinks about Oliver’s promise to her this afternoon. “Why? You got somewhere to be?”

“Yeah,” Oliver growls, low and throaty and frack she really wishes they weren’t in the middle of something really important here, because she’d love it if he’d just lay her across the table right now.

“Right. Well. Wouldn’t want to keep the lucky lady waiting. Or man. Or whatever,” she finishes lamely. Her cheeks are on fire because really? A man? “I don’t judge.”

“Apparently.” He sounds like he’s trying not to laugh. Felicity will be really glad when Oliver’s done dancing around this whole secret thing because it will make her life a whole lot less embarrassing.

The spectrometer beeps, merrily printing sheets of readouts.

“What do they mean?” Oliver asks, peering over her shoulder at the paper.

“It means that the arrow you found is made of a carbon composite with a specific signature and when I run this signature through a search of manufacturers in the area—which she does at Curtis’ computer because it’s faster than walking all the way back to her cubicle and it will take all of five seconds to erase the search history when she’s done. “—it tells me that this was manufactured by Sagittarius labs. Who, coincidentally, are based right out of Starling City.” She looks up from the computer screen as she finishes, only to nearly jump out of her skin because Oliver is right there. There’s maybe an inch of space between them, an inch crackling with sexual tension.

Felicity’s breath catches in her throat. “Um—”

Oliver puts his hand on her shoulder. His touch is almost like a caress, like the way he lets his hand rest on the small of her back when they’re walking somewhere, or the way he combs his fingers through her hair when they’re watching a movie at her house (which they’ve only done, like, twice, but he did it both times, so it’s safe to say it will probably be a regular occurrence). For a second, she thinks this might be the moment where he’ll take off his hood and let her in on the real secret,
but then he just squeezes her shoulder gently and says, “Thank you, Felicity.”

“Uh, anytime,” she replies, keeping her attention fixed resolutely on the screen to hide her disappointment. “Happy to help, just let me know whenever you need stuff, uh, looked up or whatever—”

When she looks up from the computer screen, he’s already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Since I’ve split the chapter in two, most of the fluff (and some of the angst) are in the next chapter. Something to look forward to! (And also a reason for you all to nag me to post on time.)
A (Not So) White Christmas

Chapter Summary

The Queen family Christmas party comes with some unexpected surprises.

Chapter Notes

Behold part two of the previous chapter! I'm sorry for splitting them in two, but the chapter was rapidly passing 12K words and I still had a lot to cover.

This chapter features some holiday goodness, some angst, and Oliver getting himself in over his head (again).

Due to unforeseen complications at the wharf (by which he means tripping some explosives and barely escaping with his life), Oliver is half an hour late picking up Felicity for the Christmas party. He sent her a text message before he left the foundry to let her know that he was running behind, but his heart is still hammering in his throat when he knocks on her door. He’s keenly aware that this is not the first time he’s been late for a date, and that the last time had disastrous consequences.

This time, however, when Felicity opens the door, she’s smiling.

“I’m sorry,” he says immediately. “I got caught up—Wow.”

Felicity look stunning. Her dress is a soft, midnight blue with a shallow neckline edged with silver beads, and a skirt that just falls short of her knees. She’s swapped her glasses for contact lenses and pulled her hair back into an elegant twist and the base of her neck. A pair of diamond studs glitter softly in her ears.

Looking at her, watching the blush spread across her cheeks the longer his eyes linger on her, Oliver is struck by how fortunate he is to have Felicity in his life. The rest of the world sees her and thinks how nice it is that Oliver has settled down, found some nice girl to keep him on the straight-and-narrow, but they’ll never understand just how much she’s done for him—how she saw the best in him when no one else did, not even those who knew him best. They’ll never know how being around her makes him want to be better, makes him want to let someone in instead of pushing everyone away. She makes him strong without even knowing it, and he’ll never have the words to thank her enough.

She’s always stood by him, always supported him—even when she hardly knew him, she believed he was capable of more than just being some rich frat boy in the tabloid headlines. She saw potential in him that he’d never even seen in himself, and she refuses to give up on it—to give up on him—even after all the mistakes he’s made.

He honestly never thought in all his life he would find someone like her. He used to think that
Laurel was the woman he would spend the rest of his life with: he’d known her all his life, his parents loved her, and she seemed reasonably accepting of his massive shortcomings. Dating her was comfortable. At first, it was even great. She was fun, she was beautiful, she didn’t put up with any of his and Tommy’s antics, she was smart and successful and ambitious—everything he wasn’t. Oliver remembers being in awe of her when they were in college, marvelling at how she could stay on top of all her schoolwork and still have time for the debate team and her sorority. He never had that kind of ambition and he used to think it was so incredible that she could be so certain about what she wanted in her life when he had no idea what he was going to the next day.

(It still amazes him, to be honest.)

In the end, however, it was that ambition that drove them apart: Laurel wanted too much and he wanted too little. It was okay to fool around when they were eighteen, but after dropping out of four colleges and spending more time in court than out of it while Laurel graduated top of her class and was offered positions at the most prestigious law schools in the country, it was a problem. By the end, their relationship was built on mutual antagonism: Laurel making demands that he now realises were perfectly realistic, and Oliver doing everything in his power to destroy his own life. It felt like they were engaged in a constant game of tug-of-war, one that he was always losing—on purpose.

Felicity isn’t like that. She stands her ground, but is more forgiving than Laurel was. Her perspective on life is more nuanced; where both he and Laurel have always lived in black and white, Felicity sees the world in shades of grey. He’ll never understand how she can look at someone like him, someone so obviously filled with darkness, and see something worth loving. She should be judging him like everyone else, seeing the image that he presents to the world of a man who doesn’t care, a man who emerged from five years on an island more capricious and irresponsible than when he left. Instead, she sees through it all, right into the heart of him, to parts that have been hidden for so long even he’s forgotten they’re there. No one has ever been able to do that: not Laurel, not Tommy, not even his mother.

Felicity blushes. “You don’t look too bad yourself, Mr Queen.”

There’s about a foot of space between them. Felicity’s breath catches as he moves closer, and he can’t help the hitch in his own breathing in response. His hand cups her waist gently, thumb tracing patterns against the bare skin of her back, because God the dress is all but backless, only a thin strip of material holding the bodice together. Her eyes are fixed on his lips, pupils wide, and he doesn’t even have to think before he’s leaning in. He’s already late, but another ten or fifteen minutes will hardly make a difference…

The disappointment he feels when Felicity places a gentle finger on his lips is crushing.

“We should, uh, probably go inside if you want to do that,” she says quietly. Her cheeks are flushed, her gaze fixed on the burgundy pocket square Thea bought him for Christmas the year before he disappeared. He thought it would be a good choice for tonight, to remind them of happier times. “There’s a photographer that likes to hide in the neighbour’s azaleas sometimes.”

“Right,” Oliver says. He follows her into the apartment, cursing himself for not thinking of it. Of course there are going to be reporters lurking outside her house. Being with him has painted a target on her back, one that’s only grown in the last couple of weeks. (Laurel told him back when they were still dating that he never thinks about the repercussions of his actions on anyone other than himself.) “Of course. Sorry.”

He doesn’t read the gossip magazines, but Thea does, so he’s heard about some of the headlines after their fight. Tommy called him too, after Oliver left Felicity’s office, to tell him that he’d better
have patched things up with her because the press were putting her through hell and she shouldn’t have to put up with it.

And yet, she hasn’t said a word of it to him. Tommy told him that she called in tears last week because she couldn’t get out of her apartment and that he’s been driving her to work ever since. He heard about how Tommy and Laurel took her under their wing because the photographers wouldn’t leave her alone and she was barely keeping it together, but she never said a word when he came to see her on Wednesday.

Her strength is incredible. He and Laurel and Tommy have been dealing with the media presence in their lives for years; Felicity has only been handling it for a few weeks and she’s already tougher than any of them.

Felicity shrugs. “It’s not a big deal, but I’d rather not give him a show.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Oliver sighs, combing a hand through his hair. “Look, Felicity, I’m sorry about all of this. Tommy told me what happened last week and I—I should have been there for you.”

“It’s fine,” she says quietly, but she’s not looking at him anymore and he knows it’s anything but fine. “Tommy and Laurel helped me out.”

“They shouldn’t have had to.”

“Oliver,” she says firmly, catching his hand and lacing her fingers with his own. When her eyes meet his they’re shining fiercely. “It’s fine. What’s important is that you’re here now.”

She steps closer, resting her other hand over his heart. She’s close enough that he can see each of the delicate silver beads edging the neckline of her dress. His lips are a hair’s breadth from her forehead; he leans forward and kisses it tenderly.

“I don’t deserve you,” he says, surprised when his voice comes out hoarse and choked.

Felicity’s lips curve into a soft smile. “I know you think that,” she replies softly, with a sadness to her tone that makes his chest tighten a little. “You’re a better man than you let yourself believe, Oliver.”

Oliver swallows the lump in his throat. He wants to tell her the truth: he hides the worst of the darkness from her because he doesn’t want her to look at him like the monster he is. He should tell her that he knows he’s wrong for her and that she deserves someone who can offer more than a shadow of a heart and won’t constantly be putting her life in danger. He doesn’t, though, because he’s selfish and he’s tired of being alone, and having someone who believes in him so unwaveringly, the way she does, is more addictive than any drug.

If he were a good guy for her, he’d let her go.

“We should, uh, go,” he says gruffly, fiddling with the car keys in his pant pocket. “We’re already late.”

“Right.” Felicity plucks a small, jewelled clutch off the countertop. She glances over at him with a sly grin. “Wouldn’t want your mom to think we were skipping out on the family party or anything. You know, because of work. Or something. Not because of—”

Oliver smirks. “Not because I’ve been giving you those three orgasms?”

“You know”—Felicity places her hand on his chest, fingers slipping past the buttons on his shirt.
His abdominal muscles clench at the whisper of her fingertips against his skin—“I haven’t forgotten about those.”

"We're already late," he murmurs, cupping her hips in his hands, "so there's no rush..."

"Not for you, maybe," she says easily, slipping past him to the door, "but I'd rather not give your mom any other reasons to hate me."

Oliver takes a deep, controlled breath and suppresses a groan of frustration. He wishes in this moment, desperately, that they had more time. (He realises the irony of this situation, especially since the fact that they have no time is entirely his own fault.) All he wants to do is take Felicity back to her room and peel her out of that dress excruciatingly slowly, but she’s right—they’re already late and he is the one who insisted on the holiday party, so it’s a pretty dick move not to show. "My mom is not going to hate you."

“You don’t know that,” Felicity replies. She opens the door, letting a rush of cold, December air flood the apartment. Oliver watches the hairs rise on her arms as she reaches for her coat. “You do not know that. I, on the other hand, happen to know that a) moms don’t generally like me and b) your mom is scarily protective, which leads me to conclusion c): that your mom is not going to like me.”

“I find it hard to believe that moms don’t like you,” he says softly, unable to help the tiny smile that curls on his lips as he watches Felicity struggle to lock the door.

“Yeah, well we can’t all be Mr Charming like you, Oliver. Some of us have less endearing qualities. Like excessive word vomit.”

Her hands are shaking as she tries to stuff her keys into the clutch. She’s trying to hide it, he can tell from the determined set to her mouth, but the frantic rattle of key on key gives her away.

“Hey.” He cups her cheek with one hand, running his thumb along the line of her jaw. “My mom is going to love you.”

Felicity bites her bottom lip. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.” Oliver leans in and kisses her forehead gently. “Come on. Let’s go.”

The drive is quiet. Felicity talks almost non-stop, telling him about her work, her issues with her boss, some funny story she heard from her neighbour, but it’s pleasant—the kind of thing Oliver can nod and smile along to without needing to respond. She may be embarrassed about her babbling habit but he finds the sound of her voice incredibly soothing and loses himself easily in the cadence of her words. His grip on the steering wheel slowly relaxes as they drive, and he begins to feel the tension between his shoulders letting up for the first time in years.

He turns his head to shoulder check at a blind corner and catches sight of Felicity in profile. Her cheeks are flushed, lips curled into a half-smile as she gesticulates wildly to illustrate whatever point she’s making—something about the perils of leaving food in the break room fridge. Her eyes are sparkling and it makes something warm unfurl in the pit of Oliver’s stomach. The feeling is unfamiliar, but not unpleasant.

It isn’t until three blocks later, when Felicity absentmindedly twines her fingers with his over the gearshift, that he realises what it is: comfort. He feels comfortable with her, the kind of warmth and belonging that he hasn’t felt in longer than he can remember.

It’s nice.
Felicity’s nervousness returns in full force once they arrive. She’s tense and silent when he helps her out of the car, and she grips his fingers so tightly her knuckles whiten.

"Hey," Oliver says quietly, resting his hand on the small of her back. Her can feel her muscles quiver underneath his touch. She's nervous. Really nervous. "Are you okay?"

He didn't count on this. Meeting parents for the first time is always nerve-wracking—Oliver was nervous the first time he saw Laurel’s parents after she told them they were dating because he was half-convinced Lance would shoot him on sight—but Felicity seems genuinely frightened. He knows that his family name can be a little intimidating and his mother can come on very strong, but Felicity has no reason to be afraid. She's a top employee at the company, she's smart, she's compassionate, she's beautiful, and she makes him deliriously happy. She is every mother's dream girlfriend.

He just wishes he could convince her of that.

"Wha—? Yeah," she stammers, twisting her clutch in her hands.

"Are you sure?"

Felicity shakes her head. ‘I’m not—I’m, um, fine. This is just, uh, jitters. You know, meet the family and all that. Come on, we should go in. It’s your party and you’re already late—"

“No.” He shakes his head, frustrated. “What I mean is that— Christmas used to be a really big deal in my house. My dad would decorate the house every year and throw this huge party. It was the highlight of our year, and when I found out my family hadn’t been celebrating anymore because of me I wanted to do something about it.” He looks up at the brightly-lit garlands the decorators strung over the front door. He tried his best to describe how it used to look, but it isn’t quite the same—though he thinks that might not something decorations can fix. “I want you to be here with me, but I know the last few weeks haven’t been easy for you, so I would understand if you want to take things slowly. That’s what I’m trying to say. I’d love for you to meet my family and for us to celebrate the holidays together, but I want you to want it, too.”

She’s told him so many times that she just wants him to be honest about the things he can tell her and that she won't push him to tell her anything else until he's ready. She trusts and respects him, and the least he can do, after everything he's done to her, is return the favour.

(He wants her to be happy, too.)

Felicity smiles softly. "Thank you," she whispers, placing her hands on top of his. "I do want to meet your family. Really. I just—I'm just really nervous. You know, because you're Oliver Queen, and I'm just—"

"You're not just anything. You're Felicity Smoak, and you're worth more than I ever will be."

Felicity rolls her eyes, but her smile is wider, the panic in her eyes replaced with mild exasperation. "That was incredibly sweet and all, but we need to majorly work on your self-esteem. Okay? Both of us," she adds firmly as he opens his mouth to protest. "In the meantime, though, we should get
inside because I did not get this dressed up to stand on your doorstep. As nice a doorstep as it is."

Oliver smiles. "Okay." On impulse, he bends down and kisses her softly. "You look beautiful. I should have told you sooner."

Felicity laughs, snaking her arm in his. A pink flush spreads across her cheeks, and there it is. There’s the girl who’s slowly stealing his heart. "Okay, Mr Charmer. Lead me to the wolves."

"They're honestly not that bad," he protests.

"I will be the judge of that."

She looks so determined, jaw set, eyes shining fiercely, that Oliver can't help laughing. The glare she gives him, the one that says this is very much not funny, only makes him laugh harder. He's not laughing at her—though she'll never believe him; it's the fact that the universe has decided, for whatever reason, to give him this small ray of hope amid the chaos and darkness that fills the rest of his life. He's laughing because in this moment he's happy—happier than he's been in the last five years. It’s surreal.

"This is so not funny," Felicity hisses, digging her fingers into his arm. They've made it into the ballroom now, which is fuller than Oliver expected it to be. A string quartet is playing "Silent Night" in the corner of the room. There are a few couples dancing in the centre of the room—some of his father's old investors and their wives—but most of the guests are chatting in small groups. Tommy is lounging at the bar in a dark suit, one hand on the small of Laurel's back. She looks stunning in a red dress, hair falling in soft curls over her shoulders, smiling easily at some—probably terrible—joke Tommy's made. Oliver can see the natural ease they have with one another, something he and Laurel lost too many years ago.

Maybe it's his new perspective, or the warmth of Felicity's hand on his arm, but, for the first time since Tommy told him they were seeing each other, Oliver feels genuinely happy for him and Laurel. They both deserve to be happy—especially Laurel after everything he put her through—and Oliver feels a stab of shame for letting his pride get in the way of that.

"Hey." Felicity pinches him arm. "Earth to Oliver?"

"Yeah." He laughs. "Sorry. I was just— Thinking."

"I could see that," she says. "You’ve been doing a lot of thinking tonight."

“I’ve got a lot to think about,” he replies softly. Like the fact that this city is being terrorised by another archer, one who appears to be smarter and more skilled than Oliver and who isn’t afraid to take lives. Like the fact that he’s lying to everyone he loves about what he does in his spare time in a paltry effort to keep them safe, even if it’s at the expense of their relationship. Like the fact that his sister, despite her peppy, matchmaking attitude, might have a serious drug problem that his mother and step-father are choosing to ignore.

“Like getting us some drinks?” A teasing smile curls at the edge of Felicity’s mouth. “Because I don’t know about you, but I always say it’s not a holiday party without some eggnog.”

Oliver chuckles. “I don’t know about eggnog, but I’ll see what I can find.” He kisses her cheek softly. “I’ll be back.”

She smiles warmly and his heart flutters against his ribs. God, she’s beautiful. “I’ll be waiting.”
The Queen Christmas party is a lot better than Felicity remembers.

(Admittedly, that’s not a hard thing to do, given that the last time she was here, she was alone, in a significantly cheaper dress, and spent most of the evening in bed with Oliver, drinking expensive wine and trying her hand at life-coaching.)

This year, for example, she’s here with Oliver, instead of hiding out with him upstairs. While she treasures the memories of her drunken ramblings with pant-less Oliver, it’s nice to be able to stand with him at the bar and sip champagne like a civilised socialite.

Or it would be, if she had any idea where Oliver is. She watched him go to the bar to get drinks, saw him say something to the bartender and head out of the room.

That was ten minutes ago.

(Maybe he got freaked out by her freak out on the front steps. She can’t really blame him because she kind of went into major panic mode, and even though he handled it incredibly well, it can be a lot to take.)

(She didn’t mean to freak out, only it occurred to her as Oliver pulled up in front of his (really huge) mansion that coming here was probably a huge mistake. Especially since she’s going to finally meet Moira Queen, whom she’s been investigating for the past couple weeks at Walter’s behest and who may or may not be responsible for her husband’s death.)

She’s about to give up the ghost and get herself a glass of wine when she feels a hand on her elbow and a glass of champagne appears in front of her.

“Hi,” Oliver says breathlessly. “I’m sorry it took so long, I got roped into family photos—”

“Family— What?” Felicity clutches her glass tightly. She’s been mentally preparing herself for the prospect of meeting the rest of Oliver’s family (which is really just Moira Queen, but she’s terrifying enough on her own) for weeks now, and, apart from the mad panic at the front door, she thought she was doing pretty well. However, it’s just dawned on her that this fateful meeting is imminent, and she is in no way prepared for this. She’s a terrible liar. How is she supposed to stare into the face of a woman who might have knowingly condemned her son and husband to death and act like she has no idea?

Felicity has yet to figure that one out. And she’s rapidly running out of time because oh God they’re making their way over now and she is going to hyperventilate and die hopefully before they get here—

“Yeah, it’s a thing we used to do every year, my mom likes to hang them on the wall— Are you okay?”

Oliver, it seems, has noticed that Felicity is doing her best not to breathe. At all.

She nods, taking a huge gulp of champagne. “Fine. Just. You know. I’m about to meet your mother. And your step-father. Who is also my boss.”

He squeezes her elbow gently. “Relax. It’s going to be fine.”

Easy for you to say, she thinks to herself. You’re not the one who’s been cyber-stalking your mother for weeks— Only, what if he has been? Does he know that his mother knows about the list? Is he hunting her too?
"Mom, Walter, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend. Felicity, this is my mother and her husband, Walter."

Oliver’s voice pulls Felicity out of her panic. She blinks and, _frack_, Moira Queen is right there, in front of her, champagne in one hand, looking impeccable in a sparkling gold dress. She looks like she’s just stepped out of one of those classy old-lady magazine shoots—not like she’s involved with a shady international crime syndicate and is possibly a murderer. (Then again, no one who’s part of an international crime syndicate ever _looks_ the part—that would be too obvious.)

Moira appraises Felicity slowly. Her expression is inscrutable and it takes every inch of Felicity’s self-control not to squirm under her gaze. _Just don’t think about it_, she tells herself. _Think about anything else. Count the sparkles on that dress because yowza, that’s an eyeful._ “So you’re the mysterious girl my son refuses to talk about.”

Felicity swallows audibly. Her heart is pounding painfully hard in her chest and she wonders if anyone can hear it. Oliver, maybe, because he’s giving her sideways looks like he definitely knows that something’s up. They all know, probably; it’s not like it isn’t written all over her face. “Um. Yep. That’s me. Felicity Smoak. Woman of great mystery.”

Oliver laughs. The hand on the small of her back rubs up and down her spine soothingly. She appreciates the gesture, but it doesn’t do anything to calm the panic raging inside of her. What if Moira figures out that she knows something? What if Walter felt guilty about keeping secrets and told her? What if Walter’s in on it? “Mom, Felicity works at Queen Consolidated. Hardly a mystery.”

“Indeed,” Walter says. “IT, isn’t it? We’ve worked on a few projects together.”

Felicity nods rapidly. This is it. This is the moment where she needs to draw on all of her skills and lie. Convincingly. She hasn’t had much success with it in the past, but the fate of her job, and possibly her relationship—or her life—are riding on this moment. “Um. Yes. We have. Worked on projects together, that is. Very serious projects that are very technical.”

Right.

Well.

_That_ went well.

Oliver raises his eyebrows. Both Moira and Walter look a little taken aback, which is hardly a surprise considering Felicity has gone from quiet, polite girlfriend to raving lunatic in about two seconds.

This was such a mistake.

“‘I’m sorry,’” she says quickly, praying that someone, _something_, will save her from this disaster. She’ll be better. She’ll stop cheating on gym days and eating whole tubs of ice cream and she’ll go to synagogue at least one a month if only God will save her _right now_. “I have a really embarrassing habit of talking too much when I’m nervous. Like right now. Sorry.”

Walter smiles kindly. It’s not like he hasn’t heard this before—she totally babbled the first time he called her up to his office (though, in her defence, she thought she was being fired)—but it’s one thing to be doing it in his office or her office or anywhere at Queen Consolidated, and another altogether to be doing it in his home. At his family Christmas party. In front of his stepson, who also happens to be her boyfriend. And his wife, who she’s been investigating on his behalf.
“There’s no reason to be nervous, Miss Smoak. We’re very happy to have you here with us.”

Moira doesn’t say anything. Felicity is keenly aware that she’s being watched, even though she keeps her eyes fixed firmly on Walter’s face, because Moira’s eyes do that same laser-intensity thing that Oliver’s do when he’s looking at you closely, too. She’s being sized up by the Queen matriarch, and she hasn’t the faintest idea how she’s measuring up.

(Keep’s really want to know, honestly.)

“Please, it’s, um, Felicity. Miss Smoak is my mom.”

Felicity’s hands are shaking so hard she’s surprised she hasn’t spilled champagne all over herself. Oliver is still watching her with one of his sidelong I’m-worried-because-you’re-acting-weird-but-playing-it-cool-because-we’re-in-public looks. She flashes him the best reassuring smile she can manage. It isn’t very effective.

She almost cries with relief when Diggle steps up to Oliver’s side at that moment and says quietly, “Mrs Queen, Mr Steele, Miss Smoak—” which in and of itself is super weird because he has never called her Miss Smoak ever, other than the first time they met, after which she quickly told him to call her Felicity “—I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’m going to need to borrow Mr Queen for a minute.”

Great. So he’s not here to rescue her, he’s just here to drag Oliver away and leave her to fend for herself.

Oliver grimaces. “Sorry about this,” he mutters. He presses a swift kiss to her cheek. “I’ll be one second.”

Walter drifts away after him, making excuses about talking to a client, leaving Felicity alone with Moira.

Fan-freaking-tastic.

This is exactly what she wanted.

“So, Felicity,” Moira says, “how long have you lived in Starling City?”

Felicity swallows. She can do this. Making normal conversation is not as hard as she makes it out to be. “Um, three years. I got hired straight out of MIT. Graduating class of ’09. But I did an internship here over Christmas break when I was in sophomore year, which is, um, where Oliver and I first met.”

“Really?” Moira’s eyebrows rise and Felicity realises what a terrible idea this was.

“Um, yes,” she stammers because the word vomit always, always has to strike at the most inopportune of times. She should be staying quiet to keep from potentially blabbing about her extracurriculars, but no, her brain has decided this is a great time to just keep talking. “At this party actually. I was, um, looking for the bathroom and he, uh, showed me the way. Very gentlemanly.”

Something that might be amusement glimmers in Moira’s eyes. “That’s something very few people would say about my son at that age.”

You’ve known me for all of five minutes, and you can read me better than people who have known me all my life. That’s what Oliver said the first night they met, after she told him he was underselling himself because he thought that was what people expected of him. He’s gained more confidence in the last five years, she thinks—though she doesn’t want to think about how that came
about because she’s sure it isn’t pleasant—but he still doesn’t believe that he’s good. He doesn’t always make the best choices and he pushes away everyone who’s closest to him, but he does it because he’s trying to keep them safe. He cares about his family more than he cares about himself, and if that doesn’t make a gentleman—if that doesn’t make a good person—well, then Felicity is a terrible judge of character.

(And Felicity is an excellent judge of character. At least, she likes to think so.)

Part of the problem, she thinks, is that there aren’t enough people sticking up for Oliver in his life. People are too quick to buy the stories in the media because it’s exactly what they’d expect from someone with Oliver’s history and privilege.

From what little Felicity knows about Moira (outside of all the scary Tempest stuff because she’s trying to give her the benefit of the doubt for Oliver’s sake, if not for the sake of her own sanity), she might have been one of those people.

Felicity is not going to be one of those people.

“Then there are very few people who knew your son at that age, Mrs Queen,” she replies coolly. “If they did, they’d see that his heart’s bigger than what you see on TMZ. Not that I watched TMZ back then—or now,” she adds hastily. “I’m just saying. Media images are deceiving. I would know.”

Something strange flickers across Moira’s face. “So you must have reconnected when he returned,” she says slowly.

“Um. Yeah. He came down to the IT department while he was visiting and we, uh, ran into each other. I was surprised he even remembered me to be honest.”

“I’m not,” Moira says firmly and Felicity thinks her eyes might be playing tricks on her because Moira Queen is smiling. Warmly. Like she genuinely likes Felicity. “Oliver thinks he’s very lucky to have found someone like you, Felicity, and I’m inclined to agree.”

Felicity genuinely has no idea what to say. Not only because Moira Queen approves of her, which in and of itself is a miracle, but because it seems to genuine, which contradicts the image of Moira Queen, Possible Murderer that has been forming in Felicity’s mind over the last week.

(Does this mean she’s not a murderer? Or is she just really good at acting—because if she were a murderer, she wouldn’t want anyone to know, right?)

She’s saved from having to respond by the reappearance of Oliver. “Sorry about that,” he says smoothly, one hand sliding around Felicity’s waist and settling on her hip. His fingers fit around the curve of her hipbone like they belong there and some of the tension in Felicity’s chest uncoils. Just having Oliver around makes her feel safer, even though she’s eventually going to have to bring up the fact that she’s been digging for Walter on the side, especially considering that a) he’s looking into the list too, and b) she’s his mom.

(Some of the panic coils again and okay, maybe she shouldn’t be thinking about that. At least not yet.)

Tonight, she’s going to enjoy an evening out with Oliver and try not to embarrass herself in front of the company executives.

She catches sight of John slipping out the front door, face twisted into a grimace.
Honestly, if he’s about to run off on Hood business and leave her stuck here by herself—

“What did John want?” Moira asks. “Nothing important, I hope.” She shoots Oliver a sharp, pointed look, the kind that says he better not be disappearing again.

“Was it about the break-in?”

No one is more surprised than Felicity at the calmness of her tone. It’s not a secret that her track record with lying is bad. Very bad.

Moira’s eyebrows skyrocket. “Break-in?”

“At Verdant,” she continues swiftly because Oliver’s still got that little pucker between his eyebrows that says he’s still trying to figure out exactly where she’s going with this. “The, uh, police called about it before we left—that’s why we were late. They said it didn’t look serious, but that was a preliminary assessment, so we figured we’d just come here in case it was nothing and we were already running late—”

“I don’t think it is serious,” Oliver cuts in smoothly. He squeezes her hip gently, but she’s not sure if it’s because she’s starting to babble or because she just seriously saved his bacon. “The police think some things might have been taken, though, so they wanted me to go take a look. I won’t be long.”

(Of course.) It’s difficult to tell, because Moira has the best poker face Felicity has ever seen—and she grew up in Vegas—but Felicity is pretty sure she doesn’t believe him. Felicity wouldn’t believe him either if she were in Moira’s (really expensive) shoes: this isn’t the first time Oliver has walked out on a family engagement, and Felicity would bet the paltry beginnings of her retirement fund that it won’t be the last, either. She flashes Felicity another unbelievably warm smile. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Felicity.”


She waits for about three seconds after Moira walks away before pouncing.

“You owe me, big time,” she hisses, levelling Oliver with her best glare. “Like, so big.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” he replies quietly. “I could have taken care of it.”

“Right. Because you’re such a convincing liar.”

“Felicity—” Oliver glances around like he’s looking out for spies or something. “Can we not have this conversation right now?”

“Clearly, I’m not the only one who’s caught on to the fact that you’re a terrible liar, either—I mean, did you see your mom? She is not convinced. Like, not even a little bit—”

“Fe-li-ci-ty,” Oliver snaps through gritted teeth. He takes her elbow and steers her to the front door, away from the crowds of party-goers. “Look, I know we haven’t talked about this—”

“Talked about what? The fact that you’re abandoning me here with your whole family—who I’ve only just met, by the way—to go off and do some super secret thing you can’t tell me about?”

He opens his mouth as if to protest though they both know it’s totally true, before closing it again
with a grimace. “I’ll make it up to you,” he says finally.

“Yes, you will, because that was some serious bacon-saving, and I try to keep kosher as much as possible.”

He chuckles. “I appreciate it. Really,” he says firmly, when she raises her eyebrows. “I do, Felicity. And I’ll be back soon. I promise.” He kisses her softly. “You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

“I doubt that,” she mutters under her breath as he slips out the door. Oliver has a terrible habit of grossly underestimating the amount of time it take to get any of this Hood stuff done—she can’t think of a single time it’s ever been taken care of soon.

“Was that Oliver?”

Felicity starts so violently that she almost spills champagne all over herself. (She does spill it, but it goes all over the floor, so that doesn’t count.) She turns slowly, trying her best to look like she didn’t just lose her cool, to see Tommy and Laurel standing behind her. They both have champagne flutes and concerned expressions.

“Yeah.” Felicity’s smile feels too bright to be believable. “He had to—. Um. Something came up. At the club. You know.”

“Really?” Tommy frowns. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“It’s nothing important,” Felicity jumps in hastily. The club had seemed like the perfect excuse because, as far as Felicity knew, Moira knows very little about the specifics of Oliver’s business venture, but she hadn’t thought about what she’d say to people who were in the loop—like Tommy, who works there. “Just, um— He didn’t want to disturb you guys.”

“But he doesn’t mind leaving you alone,” Laurel says sharply.

Felicity chews the inside of her lip. Oliver and Laurel seem to have patched things up—at least, both parties have assured her that they’re friends again—but she thinks there are some wounds that are going to need a little more time to heal. And yeah, she probably looked a bit like the frightened girlfriend, left all alone without anyone she knew, but she knows Laurel and Tommy, and Oliver’s going to come back. Maybe not as quickly as she’d like, but he seems to know what he’s doing with all this Hood business, so he’ll be ok.

(She doesn’t want to think about what will happen if he isn’t.)

“It’s fine. Really,” she says, when Laurel raises her eyebrows. “I know Oliver doesn’t have the greatest track record with sticking around for things, especially since he got back, but he’s trying. Coming back to life isn’t exactly easy, especially after you’ve gotten used to spending the last five years in solitary confinement. Not that I would know, but, you know— He’ll be back.”

Laurel still doesn’t look convinced, but, thankfully, she doesn’t push. “Felicity,” she says, “that dress is beautiful.”

“Indeed.” Tommy grins suggestively. “One might even say it’s smoaking.”

Laurel groans.

“Did you just make a pun?” Felicity asks.

“What?” Tommy asks innocently. “Don’t tell me you’ve heard that one before.”
“Never,” she replies, dryly, but she can’t help grinning: Tommy looks so pleased with himself and Laurel looks like she can’t believe she’s spending her time with either of them.

Waiting for Oliver isn’t nearly as bad as she thought it would be after that. Felicity spends most of her time with Tommy and Laurel, chatting about holiday traditions and making plans for another double date—on purpose this time, because the last one was an epic disaster. She has a couple glasses of champagne, but not enough to make her tipsy, and almost doesn’t notice the fact that Oliver hasn’t come back from whatever he’s gone off to do.

Until John corners her in the foyer with a grim look on his face.

Something bad has happened, and the fact that Oliver is still nowhere to be seen makes it pretty likely that the bad thing has happened to him.

“I’m coming with you,” she says, before he even has the chance to open his mouth.

Diggle frowns. “Felicity, I’m not sure—”

Felicity glares at him. “We both know that I know his secret and I know we were both hoping he’d tell me himself so that we can all stop dancing around the whole thing like teenagers, but he’s lying in an alley or a ditch somewhere, probably dying, so I don’t think that’s going to happen. And yeah, maybe I could have said something ages ago. Maybe I should have, but I promised Oliver I wouldn’t push him to tell me anything until he was ready and I mean to keep that promise, even if things are starting to get a little ridiculous."

Diggle’s eyebrows rise.

“Okay. A lot ridiculous. I get that. But it’s more ridiculous to sit on the sidelines while he dies. Plus, we both know that I can find his location a hell of a lot faster than you can.”

John sighs. “Fine. But if there’s any danger—”

“I’ll stay in the car. Promise.” She means that; her last brush with action was more than enough to last a lifetime.

Oliver better not be dead when they get there because she is going to kill him when she gets her hands on him, and that’s a hell of a lot harder to do if he’s already dead.

The last thing Oliver remembers before unconsciousness descends is a searing pain in his back and the dim knowledge that he is probably going to die. The fire in his lungs every time he tries to breathe and the wet sucking sound that seems to be coming out of his mouth are both indicators of bad things, and the likelihood of Diggle finding him in time to get him to the hospital are pretty slim.

At least, he thinks to himself as the darkness pulls him under, Felicity is safe.

When he comes to with a gasp, body aching so much he almost wishes he were dead, his first thought is that he needs to get out of here. There are vice grips on his shoulders, forcing him back, but he can’t let them, he won’t—


It takes Oliver a minute to fight through the pain and panic and process that the face looming in front of him is Diggle’s, that the vice grips on his shoulders are his friend’s hands.
"What happened?" he rasps. His throat feels like it’s been dragged over with sandpaper.

“We backtraced your signal, cleaned you up, and got you out of there. You have a pneumothorax, three broken ribs, and a concussion, but the doctor says you’re going to be fine.”

Well, that explains the pain, but—

Oliver frowns. “We?”

Dig steps aside, but Oliver’s eyes have already zeroed in on Felicity. She’s still wearing her party dress, though there’s what looks suspiciously like a bloodstain on her skirt. Her face is white and stiff.

His first reaction is anger. He’s made his feelings about Felicity’s involvement in their nighttime activities explicitly clear. There was no way she should have been involved, and now that she has been, she’s only going to be in more danger, danger he can’t necessarily protect her from—

“Don’t even say it,” Felicity hisses before he can open his mouth. “This is not John’s fault. I insisted he take me.”

Oliver closes his eyes wearily. “Felicity—”

“No, Oliver,” she says, and he’s surprised by the fierceness in her voice. He’s been a lot worse-off than this before—though, admittedly, she doesn’t know about any of those times, and they all happened before he was rescued from the island. “You do not get to play the martyr here. It’s bad enough that you disappeared without telling me where you were going—if John hadn’t had the courtesy to tell me you were in trouble when he got your call, I’d probably still be at the Christmas party that you insisted on throwing, making small talk with old men and trying not to drink too much wine!”

Whether Oliver likes to admit it or not—and he doesn’t—she’s probably right. “Felicity—”

“I’m not finished.” She clenches her fists—at first, he thinks, to keep herself from hitting him, but he quickly realises it’s to try and stop the tremors wracking her small frame. He immediately feels a rush of guilt for what he’s put her through—he remembers all too well what it was like to stand over the lifeless bodies of Shado and Sara and Slade, which is why he didn’t want Felicity getting involved in any of this in the first place. “You could have died, Oliver. You probably would have if John and I hadn’t gotten there when we did because the place was crawling with police officers—honestly, I don’t know how you didn’t get caught before we got there—so you have no right to tell me that I shouldn’t have been there, because if you think I’m going to sit around for one second and do nothing while you’re lying in an alley somewhere dying, then you don’t know me very well.

“I am so mad at you right now,” she whispers, clutching his hand with painful intensity, “and I think what you did tonight was beyond stupid, but I don’t for a single second regret any of the things I did tonight because they helped keep you alive and I’m—” She swallows, reaching up with her free hand to wipe the tears from her eyes. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

"Yeah." Oliver swallows the lump in his throat. "I am too."

What surprises him is that he means it. He made his peace with death a long time ago, accepted that he would never have a long successful life surrounded by people he loved, because the best way—the only way—to complete this crusade is to keep everyone at a safe distance, but now, looking at Felicity's tense face, he's beginning to think that maybe he's miscalculated. His mission
is dangerous—even more so than before now that Felicity knows his secret—but maybe death isn't something he can accept anymore. Maybe, despite all he's been through, there is a light he can strive for in the darkness.

“I know we’ve both been a little bit ridiculous about this whole vigilante thing,” Felicity says quietly. "Not either of our finest moments, and I think John was ready to kill both of us but that’s all in the past now.” She smiles, tremulously, and something warm unfurls in his chest. “From now on, let’s be honest with each other, okay?”

He nods, and immediately regrets it: his head feels like it’s going to explode. Probably the concussion Diggle mentioned. “Okay.”

He wants to be so much better, if not for himself, then for her. She deserves it—hell, she deserves a lot better than him, but since Felicity has made it abundantly clear she isn’t going anywhere, he’s going to do his best to be the man she deserves.

Felicity never imagined that her first holiday season with Oliver would be spent in a hospital—and she’s imagined a lot of scenarios, from quiet evenings at home lighting her menorah and drinking wine to skiing in Aspen, which would be terrifying because sports are not her thing.

In hindsight, she probably should have thought of it, since, you know, her boyfriend is a masked vigilante, but she thought (naively, obviously) that he’d be able to keep himself out of trouble over the holidays. She figured the criminals might slow down a bit. Spend some time with their families and all that.

She should have known better.

Her plan is to camp out at the hospital. Not comfortable, but not unfamiliar, either: she spent most of her senior year in the dialysis ward at Sunrise Hospital because her mom was working double shifts to try and cover the bills and Felicity was damned if she was going to let her bubbi go through it alone. She can bully the nurses into letting her nap in a chair or something. She’s done it before.

Thea has the same idea, waving off her mother’s offers that they all spend the night at the manor with a steely determination the Moira seems to have passed on to both her children.

“It’s Christmas, Mom,” she says fiercely. “We’re spending it together.”

Felicity squeezes the younger girl’s hand so hard her knuckles whiten.

They’ve all but figured out a master plan when Oliver takes her wrist, gently, like he’s afraid of breaking her—which is monumentally stupid since he’s the one in the hospital bed.

“Go home,” he says with a soft, tired smile. “I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

Felicity glares at him. “If you think I’m taking my eyes off you for one second, mister—”

“Felicity. Hey.” His thumb traces small circles against the back of her hand. “I’m okay. It’s over. Get some rest.”

It’s hard to swallow the protest on the tip of her tongue. Oliver almost died tonight and there wasn’t anything she could do to help him (which was his own fault for not telling her what was going on, and even then there might not have been anything she could do, but still). If she leaves now and something happened to him she’d never forgive herself.
(Not that there's anything she could probably do to save him if the masked assassin—because who else would be running around with a bow and arrow impersonating another crazy dude running around with a bow and arrow—decided to come back for round two, but since when has guilt ever been rational?)

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” Oliver says gently, like he's a freaking mind-reader, though it's probably written all over her face. (Her mom always said her face was an open book—which Felicity thinks is a little unfair, even if it is true, considering Donna's is worse.) "I promise."

“It better not,” she says, fighting the lump in her throat. She shouldn’t be crying because he’s ok, but he could have died.

She doesn’t go to the Queen manor, despite Moira’s offers and Thea’s reminder that she promised to spend Christmas with them. She doesn’t want her first night at the manor to be without Oliver, not only because his house is a lot terrifying, but also because it feels wrong; Oliver invited her to his house so that they could spend the holidays together—well, Thea did, but the point is that they were supposed to celebrate as a family, and to stay over without Oliver, feels like cheating, especially when they're all going to traipse back to the hospital in the morning so that Thea can get her family Christmas. She thanks Moira and Walter for their generous offer, and promises Thea she’ll be back first thing tomorrow and that they can all open presents in Oliver’s room together.

“You better be,” Thea mutters, but she flashes Felicity a tremulous smile.

She is—she's there three hours before the nurses will let her in for visiting hours, but they take pity on her after an hour and two cups of coffee and let her go in. Oliver is asleep, but Felicity is perfectly content to sit in the chair at his bedside and drink her third cup of (not as terrible as she thought) hospital coffee. She doesn't need him to be awake, she just needs him where she can see him—alive and in one piece.

Admittedly, three cups of coffee and even less sleep is a terrible combination: within twenty minutes of sitting down she's vibrating off her seat from the caffeine and the leftover stress and the sheer magnitude of everything that's happened over the past couple weeks. Not only has she started dating a secret vigilante and had less-than-flattering pictures of herself published on the cover of at least three magazines, she's also gotten embroiled in what might be an international conspiracy involving her boyfriend's mom. Her life has somehow gone from being painfully ordinary to the stuff of a John leCarré novel.

And she still has her regular job to do on top of that.

Long story short, she hasn't been getting her eight hours a night in a long time.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor if you keep doing that."

Felicity is a little bit embarrassed at the volume of the shriek that comes out of her mouth, but in her defence, it's been a stressful forty-eight hours and she's not entirely convinced that a masked archer won't jump through the window and try to kill them, so she thinks she's earned the right to be a little frazzled.

"Geez," she says once her heart calms itself to a somewhat normal rhythm. Oliver is still looking a little peaky—though, considering what he went through it would be a bigger surprise if he weren't—but, judging by the smirk on his face, he's improving. "You're awake."

The smirk turns into a small, amused smile. "I am."
"Sorry, um, I didn't mean to wake you, I just—well, I couldn't sleep so I figured I might as well come by and visit."

Oliver's eyebrows rise. "Visiting hours don't start until eight."

The clock on the wall says 6:45.

Felicity blushes. "The nurses might have taken pity on me. Anyway, uh, you should be resting, so I'm going to get myself another coffee—"

"Another coffee?" Oliver chuckles. "Isn't that what caused the problem in the first place?"

"Hey," she says sharply. "There is no such thing as too much coffee— Well, maybe there is," she amends when she catches sight of Oliver's face, "but I have not hit that point yet."

"Are you sure?" he teases.

"Yeah. This is just me trying to stay awake because as much as I'd like to sleep, I can't close my eyes without seeing—"

She breaks off, staring at the half-empty paper cup in her hands and trying not to think about last night. Of the sirens and search lights, of Oliver, green suit soaked with so much blood that she was sure for a second he was dead. Of John's voice, urgent in her ear: *Come on, Felicity. We have to get him out of here.* She remembers thinking, as she sat in the backseat with Oliver draped across her, trying to get him out of his Hood clothes and back into the suit that John happened to have in the back of the car, that her first aid training had *not* prepared her for this.

There's still blood under her fingernails even though she's washed her hands twice in the hospital bathroom after the doctors rushed Oliver off on a gurney and left her and John behind. She never realised it was so hard to get out, but then again, she's never had someone bleeding out across her lap, either.

"Felicity."

She starts, coffee cup nearly slipping from her fingers. Oliver is watching her, expression stricken.

"It's fine," she says quickly. "What matters is that you're okay."

"It's not fine," he replies quietly, and she's surprised to hear that he's *angry*.

Oh no. They are not having this conversation again.

"I've already told you, what I do is *not up to you*. So if you want to be upset that I saved your life —"

"What? No." Oliver sighs, all the fight seeping out of him like air from a balloon. It leaves him looking tired and vulnerable, and it occurs to Felicity suddenly that *this*—cuts and bruises and broken bones—is Oliver’s *job*. She's always known, abstract, that it was, but thinking about it and actually seeing it with her own eyes are two *very* different things. (She did see him in action that one time, but that doesn't count; she was too busy worrying about *not dying* to pay much attention to what he was actually doing.)

"I'm not angry with you," he says quietly, "I'm angry with *myself*. I never wanted any of you to get hurt because of what I do, and I'm sorry."
"Well if that's the case, you've picked the wrong line of work."

Honestly, Felicity is surprised she didn’t stick her foot in her mouth sooner.

Oliver grimaces. “I am aware of that.”

"But that's the case for a lot of people, isn't it?" she continues. "One of the women I worked with at Big Belly Burger told me that I had a bright future in the food industry."

(She hated that job. Honestly, the only good thing about it was the staff discounts.)

Oliver's eyebrows rise. "You worked at Big Belly Burger?"

"Not all of us got a free ride through college."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't stick with it," he says, but there's a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth and Felicity knows he's imagining her behind the counter in one of those awful uniforms.

(Seriously. The food was the only reason she stayed. Well, that and the promise of a better life after college.)

“Because then we never would have met and you'd be dead in a gutter somewhere?" she retorts, and, okay, maybe it comes out a little harsher than she means it to, but he deserves it. This secrets game has gone long enough, and while she's done more than her fair share of aiding and abetting, he still might be dead if she hadn't figured out his secret.

Oliver sighs, and Felicity thinks that he's going to pull another one of his 'we'll talk about this another time' stunts—which is fair considering he is in the hospital recovering from serious injuries, but the fact that he's in the hospital also makes it the best time because she can corner him until she gets a straight answer. She's already rehearsing her list of reasons why now is the perfect time to talk about this when he speaks.

"I should have told you the truth that night after the benefit," he says wearily. "Dig told me it was silly to keep it from you, especially since you had chosen to get involved, but I—" He sighs. "While I was—. On the island—. I lost a lot of people that I care about over the last five years, and when I came back, I thought that if I kept my identity a secret, I would be able to keep everyone else I loved safe. I was wrong, and I'm sorry."

If Felicity were a little more tired, her mouth might be hanging open. She came here prepared for stonewalling and excuses (hence the meticulously cultivated mental list), not an apology. Not because Oliver is some do-no-wrong douchebags that made up an alarming percent of her high school population, but because he believed he was doing the right thing. Whatever happened to him over the last five years was bad enough to make him think that the best way to keep his loved ones safe was to push them away, and while Felicity doesn't agree in the slightest with that policy (and she has a hunch the rest of his family won't, either), she can understand that he believes it. She knows all too well that fear can be a powerful motivator, and Oliver is obviously afraid of losing them, even if he doesn't want to admit it.

Actions, as they say, speak louder than words.

"I understand," she says gently, taking his hand in hers. His knuckles are bruised and split open; the scabs are rough against her palm. "I don't agree with it, but who's to say I wouldn't do the same thing? Then again, I probably wouldn't be in the same situation because I would have died after three days on the island. Nature and I have never really gotten along well. Anyway, I'm glad it's all out in the open now—I think we were giving John a headache with all our cloak and dagger stuff. I
was giving myself a headache sometimes."

Oliver smiles faintly. "How did you figure it out?"

If he weren’t already concussed, Felicity might be tempted to hit him over the head. Her bubbe used to do it to her zayda anytime he said something stupid. That’s why I fell in love with her, he said. She was never afraid to let me know when I was wrong.

In all honesty, Felicity is surprised more people haven’t figured it out. So far she’s come to two conclusions: either Oliver is terrible at lying to her, or he wanted her to find out all along.

"You wrote your number on a metallurgist's receipt," she says, letting her eyebrows rise to their fullest height to show Oliver exactly how skeptical she is of his maybe not-so-innocent question. “I was already a little suspicious, and from there it wasn't hard to put two and two together. I mean, did you really think I was going to believe your coffee shop was in a bad neighbourhood? I'm a terrible liar and even I saw through that one."

Oliver chuckles and immediately winces. Felicity files that under the rapidly growing list of Things Not To Do Until Oliver Is Healed. “You're right,” he says. “It wasn’t my best.”

“It was terrible,” she says, “but I’m kind of glad, because otherwise we might not be having this conversation, and even though these last few weeks have been beyond weird, they led to us being more honest with each other.”

“Me being more honest, you mean,” Oliver replies, squeezing her hand. “You never had any reason to lie.”

Felicity thinks of Walter and Tempest and the files on Moira Queen saved on her hard drive. “While I admit that I might not be particularly skilled at the art of deception, it does not mean I don’t have a reason to lie,” she says, swallowing the guilt on the tip of her tongue. Maybe this Tempest thing will all turn out to be nothing, or maybe (more likely) it will come up through her work with Oliver, but either way, it’s better not to say anything about it until Oliver’s feeling better.

She’s still telling herself that when Thea phones in tears to tell them Walter went to the office last night and never came home.

Chapter End Notes

Bubbe and zayda are Yiddish terms for grandmother and grandfather.

Thank you to everyone who has left me reviews on the previous chapters. I have read every one of your messages even if I haven't been able to respond to them all! They really did help spur me on, even if it took me way longer than I anticipated to finish this chapter.

That being said, I am going to officially put this story on hiatus for the next little while so that I can bank some chapters. I know that next year will be a busy school year for me and I feel so bad making you guys wait so long for updates! I've struggled a little bit with the pace of this story, and want to be able to sit down and really write chapters that are strong in terms of both plot and characterisation, both of which have fallen to the wayside in favour of getting the chapter done and published. If you are all waiting
so patiently, you should get something worthwhile in return!

Thank you all again for your patience, and please do let me know what you think. :)  

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!